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Migration and mission: A literature analysis of the contribution of migrants to missions

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Migration is a common human phenomenon responsible for many socio-cultural, political and economic dynamics. It has been utilised in various ways to serve diverse purposes. It has also been a veritable means of actualising the Great Commission mandate in church history. Western countries used migration to spread missionaries worldwide by sending personnel to explore, study and Christianise foreign lands. With the decline of Christianity in the former Christian empire of the West and the advancement of globalisation, Christians in former heathen lands are now migrating to the West and carrying the burden to re-Christianise the West, which is termed Reverse Mission. The article utilises literature to elucidate the concept of Migration and Missions. It reveals how migration from the Global South to the Global North can be capitalised on to re-missionise the West. The article argues that migrant Christians involved in Reverse Missions should employ cultural intelligence to intentionally seek ways to minister the gospel in the socio-cultural contexts of Western natives, thereby moving beyond ministering only to migrant communities in Western lands.

Contribution: The article argues that African people relocating to the West can use this opportunity to take the gospel back to its source.

Keywords: migration; Reverse Mission; cross-cultural; multicultural; intercultural; cultural intelligence; Gospel.

Introduction

Migration is an ancient phenomenon that provides humans with the opportunity to explore their world, interact with diverse cultures, seek better living conditions and spread their religion. The spread of the Christian faith in the scriptures and history is tied to migration, as mandated by Christ in the Great Commission and reemphasised in the Book of Acts of the Apostles 1:8, where the gospel is meant to move from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. Europe and North America sent migrant missionaries to non-Christian lands to preach Christ and convert them to Christianity between the 16th and early 20th centuries. However, certain developments in their homelands led to the decline of Christianity, chief among them secularisation. Missional churches that sent missionaries all over the world were dead or dying, and their structures were being used for secular purposes or being sold to non-Christians because of a lack of worshippers.

However, with the advancement of globalisation, migration has become easier since the mid-twentieth century, and people from developing nations can now move from their countries to the West in search of better opportunities. Christians among them were shocked to see churches abandoned, used or sold for secular purposes. They were miffed at how many Westerners have no commitment or affiliation with Christianity, which led some of them to begin to share their faith to stem the decline and gave birth to what is known as Reverse Mission. This article utilises a literature review to elucidate the concept of migration and reverse missions, establishing a nexus on how migration can be leveraged for the effectiveness of Reverse Missions by Global South migrant Christians, in general, and Africans in particular and the central research question is: 'to what extent is contemporary migration from the Global South to the Global North a strategic vehicle for intentional reverse missions'.

Concept of migration

Migration is a continuous phenomenon worldwide; people constantly move from one place to another in search of better living conditions, to conduct business, expand their influence or escape natural or artificial calamities. Migration is an integral part of human history. It is defined as the movement of people that involves a change in the customary residence across an administrative

border, such as a village, town, district or country. It could be immigration (the entry of people into a receiving area) or emigration (the flow of people out of a country). Additionally, there are two types of migration: internal migration, which occurs when people move within their country, and international migration, which involves living outside one's country for at least 1 year (Tsegay 2023:1–10). Moving from place to place is considered one of the oldest human activities, occasioned by diverse reasons.

Furthermore, Da Silva (2015:235–236) observes that migration has been a dominant social experience in human development, both in the past and the present. People often move from one place to another for social, political or economic reasons. The word diaspora describes such people, referring to any group that is dispersed, either voluntarily or forcibly, from its homeland to live in a foreign land. In recent times, globalisation has enabled migration easily by groups and individuals in search of business interests, movement of expatriates, global trade, further studies or research in foreign lands. He also notes that the main factors responsible for migration are labour, economics, war and family. Ybarrola (2012:82) corroborates Da Silva's claims that migration is primarily driven by globalisation processes that have brought about advanced and accessible communication, the flow of capital across borders, affordability and ease of travel. This phenomenon has given rise to anthropological study of diaspora, transnationalism and their relationship to the socio-cultural contexts of the immigrants who identify with each other to form migrant communities. It is therefore established that migration occurs because of many factors and that regardless of the factors, socio-cultural contexts are extended from home countries to the foreign lands where people from the same socio-cultural contexts find it easy and comfortable to form separate communities from their hosts to preserve their identities and preserve their communal values.

According to the International Organisation for Migration's World Migration Report 2020, there are almost 272 million international migrants globally, two-thirds of whom are labour migrants. It was noted that international migration is becoming increasingly difficult to predict because of political instability, economic crisis or conflicts. The movements of people show majority of them moving from developing countries to larger economies with reasons mainly related to work, family and study; however, there are cases of some being displaced because of reasons such as conflicts, persecution and disaster (McAulliffe & Khadria 2019:19). Hofmann et al. (2020:8) note that migrant decisions are determined mainly by economic, political, security, cultural, social and network factors or a combination of some factors listed above. These decisions are weighed by considering safety at home, the desired destination, potential opportunities for a better future, cultural and linguistic similarity and a migrant-friendly climate in destination countries. Burgess (2019:248) notes that socio-economic reasons and poor educational standards in their home countries are responsible for the growing migrant communities in the West, as seen in the cases of Nigerians and Ghanaians in Britain. It should be noted that while movement from the West to other parts is considered voluntary, explorational, expansionist and adventurous, movement of people from third-world countries, mainly in Africa and the Caribbean, to the West is primarily a flight from poverty, political instability, poor infrastructure and dearth of opportunities plaguing their homelands.

Conceptual clarifications for reverse missions

Reverse missions could be labelled a product of migration, where Christians migrating from non-Western countries to the West in search of better opportunities also feel concerned about the decline of Christianity in the West, which championed Christian missions across the globe between the 16th and 19th centuries, and decided to re-evangelise them. The modern missionary movement started in the West, and thus the flow of missionaries has been from there to the South. However, scholars like Andrew Walls, Werner Kahl and Philip Jenkins have recognised the shift of Christianity from the Global North to the Global South, where emerging missionary movements are taking the gospel back to the secular West, a phenomenon known as Reverse Mission or Mission in Reverse. Quoting from Hun Kim, Da Silva (2015:233) notes, 'Reverse mission is when non-Western churches return with the gospel to societies that initially brought the gospel to them'. Additionally, citing Rebecca Catto, he notes that countries traditionally regarded as receivers of Missions are now engaging in mission work in countries usually considered senders of Missions. The phenomenon of Reverse Mission disrupts the conventional missionary paradigms. It fosters a dynamic exchange of cultures, ideologies and experiences as non-Western missionaries move with their distinctive perspectives on the Christian faith, which they share through the gospel, sometimes leading to cultural clashes that can be resolved through mutual learning, dialogue and collaboration with Western Christians (Mukaria 2025:106). There has been a shift from representative Christianity to secularisation since the fall of Christendom. Western nations, which were seen as former Christian nations, have abandoned religion and embraced Western humanism that relegated the influence of Christians and churches in their scheme of things, which non-Western migrant Christians found appalling and are trying to reverse.

Furthermore, Morier-Genoud (2018:170) cites Ojo as defining Reverse Mission as sending missionaries to Europe and North America by churches and Christians, particularly from Africa, Asia and Latin America, which were formerly considered mission fields by Catholic and Protestant missions. Moe (2022:223–224) also defines 'Reverse Mission' as non-Western Christians migrating to the West to re-evangelise them. He further notes that some scholars see it as a rhetoric, as they argue that there has been no mission success in converting Westerners, and that most migrant Christians only reach out to their fellow citizens in the foreign land.

Moe, however, responds to the argument by noting that Reverse Mission is not only about converting Westerners but also about the flow or direction of missions, which has shifted from non-Western countries to the West. As there has been a radical increase in the number of Christians in places regarded as traditionally heathen lands and a drastic decrease in the number of Christians in the West, regarded as Christendom, there is substantial migration from the Global South to the Global North; naturally, mission will gravitate back to the Global North as Christians move with their faith along with them.

Furthermore, Dedji (2024:2–10) notes that the concept of 'Reverse Mission' was propounded by missiologists Jan Jongeneel and Gerrit Noort, who wrote articles describing the practice of missions among migrant communities in the Netherlands. He also notes that reverse mission operates in nine contexts. Firstly, migrant communities were seen as reaching out cross-culturally to their hosts within their respective cultural contexts. Secondly, they reach out cross-culturally to other diaspora people in their contexts, missionally. Thirdly, they engage in cross-cultural intra-church mission by the diaspora. Fourthly, they launch a cross-cultural mission that extends beyond the diaspora, reaching other foreign lands. The fifth context is a cross-cultural diaspora return mission, which sponsors a Mission from a foreign land to return to their native lands. The sixth is having an intercultural, collaborative Mission by the diaspora, where migrants work with people from other cultural backgrounds. The seventh is the intercultural, intra-church collaborative mission by the diaspora, the eighth is the intercultural collaborative diaspora return mission, and the ninth is the intercultural collaborative mission beyond the diaspora. These contexts reveal several ways in which Reverse Missions operate, particularly among diaspora communities in the West.

However, De Oliveira (2021:1–2) examines broader contexts of Reverse Mission that goes beyond diaspora activities by noting that the term has been used in different ways to describe varying missional situations like: (1) taking the gospel back to the colonisers by the colonised; (2) black taking mission to the whites; (3) Western missionaries returning to their countries to educate their people about mission fields; (4) migrant communities educating their Western hosts about the adverse effects of Western policy back at home; and (5) individuals converted in the West and returning home to promote the gospel among his people. He notes that the term's uses suggest a reversal of roles that obfuscate its real meaning, leading some scholars to question its validity. He, however, agrees with Adogame's definition, which characterises it as the unconscious missionary approach of churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America to re-Christianise the West. This article also agrees with De Oliveira's submission; however, it adds a caveat: mission efforts by non-Western Christians in the West are not unconscious. It is a deliberate response to the decline of Christianity in the West and an attempt to reclaim and restore it to its rightful place in Christendom, a tradition it has been associated with for more than a millennium.

Interface between migration and reverse missions

It has been noted that migration and Christian Mission often move hand in hand, dating back to the early church, when it was dispersed because of persecution. Ola (2017:17), citing Kwiyani, notes that the spread of Christianity has always been associated with migration. In the Book of Acts of the Apostles, many people involved in ministry lived in places where they were not born. Some migrated voluntarily, while others followed their leaders or instructions from a higher authority; others migrated as refugees because of persecution. Also, Stephen's speech was full of themes of migration and how they served God's mission and purpose; also, the dispersion of Christians from Jerusalem because of persecution was a case of migration being utilised for missions (Stenschke 2016:132–136). The disciples in Jerusalem fled to various places in search of peace and security. They moved not just their family but also their faith and culture. They lived as refugees and formed migrant communities, as well as gospel preachers like Philip, as mentioned in Acts 8. Thus, the spread of Christianity across the globe owes much to migration, whether voluntary or forced (Anim 2019:133). Also, migration brings people from closed countries to places where they can be easily reached with the gospel. Additionally, it brings Christians from their traditional domain into the secularised Western world, where they can share their faith and support the church's ministry in the places where they have migrated (Stenschke 2016:148). Without a doubt, migration has always been a beneficial phenomenon for advancing the gospel from one place to another, whether voluntary or forced.

Migration and reverse missions

Furthermore, Da Silva observes that many recent mission developments originate with migrants from the Caribbean and Africa who bring their cultures, religions and expectations to their new residence. He further notes that Christians have generally been considered mobile, pursuing better opportunities to actualise their aspirations while taking their faith with them and attempting to share it wherever they are, giving rise to Reverse Mission. Although some scholars question the phenomenon of Reverse Missions, whether it is a result of migrational movements or an intentional plan by churches in the Global South to send missionaries to re-Christianise the West or both? Da Silva further responds to such arguments through his research, suggesting that both reasons are responsible for the phenomenon, as some Christians and churches are intentionally involved in Reverse Missions by planting churches and relocating staff from their homelands. At the same time, some Christians engage in missions as an addendum to their primary purpose of migration (Da Silva 2015:234–235). Thus, migrational pressures are a current burning issue on a global scale, which Christians need to capitalise on by sensitising Christian migrants, particularly from the Global South to the

secularised Global North, to the need to be more intentional about fulfilling the Great Commission, seeing their migration as an opportunity to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, just as it was brought to them.

Prospects and challenges of reverse missions for African Migrant Christians

In post-colonial Africa, there has been much displacement of persons because of political instability and economic hardship, which makes people seek a better life outside the continent, particularly the West, and the Christians among them practise their faith as they move. It was also observed that African churches planted in the West also help provide hope and support to immigrants from the African continent (Anim 2019:133). African Christians are notable for migrating worldwide, including to the West, and for carrying and sharing their faith. The first documented Reverse Mission by a migrant was the establishment of Summer Chapel in Peckham, London, in 1901 by Ghanaian Businessman Brem Wilson, who migrated to England. However, it should be noted that there is a difference between how Europeans brought the gospel to Africa and how Africans are returning the mission efforts. While Europeans travelled to Africa in a coordinated pattern through church and missionary societies, most African Christians migrated to the West primarily because of economic pressures, not for missionary work. However, some people may not regard African migrants as missionaries, because they do not know that they are playing significant roles in Christian missions (Basupi 2021:3). Meanwhile, Freeman (2021:48) observes that despite the efforts of the non-Western churches to re-evangelise the West, it has been seen that they are primarily ministering to African diaspora living in the West, which connotes that there had been no much success in re-evangelising the Westerners probably because of cultural differences that would necessitate African missionary in the West to understudy their culture and present the gospel to them in appropriate and acceptable ways. The onus is therefore on African Churches on the home continent to embrace Reverse Mission and begin to consciously prepare their members aspiring to migrate to the West to see mission as equally important as their quest for a better life and prepare them to minister to the Westerners.

Also, Okereafor (2024:15–16) acknowledges the efforts of African Christians in Reverse Missions by identifying some strategies used by Nigerian migrant Christians doing 'Reverse Missions', which are: evangelistic methods and practices like preaching, lively worship and visible displays of faith, establishment of churches and religious communities and use of information technology and media. He also enumerated some challenges migrant Christians are facing, such as cultural and linguistic impediments, legal and institutional hurdles and resistance from host communities. These approaches are promising, but they need to be adapted to Western cultural contexts. Therefore, Bwanhot and Bwanhot (2021:8), seasoned African missionaries in the United States, advise Africans serving as missionaries in the West to be conscious of God's calling on them to serve as missionaries, be prayerful, learn and adapt to their new cultures, prepare for a multicultural environment, stay focused and be prepared for racial discrimination. Ngugi (2021:9), another African Christian in the West involved in missions, added that African Christians in the West should recognise the great missionary privilege before them, despite the challenges of racial prejudice, cultural differences and secularisation. They should prepare and equip themselves with prayer, humility, cross-cultural training and a hopeful attitude. It is the turn of African Christians to bear the burden of fulfilling the Great Commission. The situation is similar to that of Jewish Christians tasked with spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth. They did not engage the mandate from a position of strength to develop or advance any people group; instead, they approached the work as a vulnerable group, yet they were able to spread the Christian faith to the world at that time. In engaging in Reverse Missions, African Christians should also be prepared to influence the Western world for Christ.

Moreover, Burgess (2019:243, 248, 249) observes that the presence of African Christian migrant communities in the West represents a phenomenal development in world Christianity over the last three decades. This phenomenon has led to the establishment of African churches that dot the landscapes of major Western cities, adding to the multiculturalism that has become prevalent in the West since the Second World War. In tracing the missional movements of African megachurches to the West, he notes that the first wave of African Church planting in Britain began with the establishment of Aladura-type churches in the 1960s to cater to members who were migrating to the country. The second wave started in the 1980s, driven by economic hardships at home, which led to the establishment of neo-Pentecostal churches to care for their members abroad. The third wave is considered a recent development, primarily characterised by individual African Christians moving to the West to establish their churches. The waves show transnational links in the missionising process of making the West realise its need for God because of entrenched secularisation. However, there seems to be an antithetical situation in Reverse Missions that Africans need to be wary of. While many traditional Western churches are declining, African churches are flourishing, expanding and filling gaps left by Western church decline, with few Western converts among them. This situation makes Christianity in the Western nations be regarded as a marginal and migrant religion. Therefore, Africans should rise above the obstacles and challenges of ministering to Western natives and intentionally reach out to them.

Furthermore, Mukaria (2025:110) notes that just as Western Missionaries fell into the trap of paternalistic missions, non-Western missionaries in the West could also fall into the same trap, even with the best intentions, which can be avoided if migrant missionaries take time to understand their host culture and present the gospel to them in the most appropriate way. Prill (2023:25–26) then advocates for all missionaries, exceptionally, African migrant missionaries to be equipped with the cross-cultural training that will help

them reach the Westerners instead of just growing African congregations through the development of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), which starts from their local church, developing right motive and motivations towards missions, building their Spiritual maturity, exposing them to the idea of a missionary calling. They are also expected to be acquainted with the immediate context of their new environment, engage in short-term missions, learn under an established missionary, undergo formal multicultural missionary training, receive on-the-field training and continue cross-cultural ministry training. Therefore, African migrant Christians involved in Reverse Mission must not allow Christianity in the West to be dichotomised into African Christianity, given a third-world colouration, and Western traditional Christianity. African Churches in the homelands and those in the diaspora must be intentional in partnering with Western churches and learning their hosts' cultural contexts, which will help them to use the gospel to address the menace of racism and secularisation instead of recusing from it. Consequently, Kwiyani (2021) throws a challenge to African Christians by stating that:

> Whatever God is doing in Africa is beginning to overflow to other continents. God's gifts to the African church are for Africa and the entire Body of Christ in all six continents. Gifts such as prayer, community, and communal living, along with an African understanding of the Spirit, are desperately needed in Europe. It will take a great deal of prayers to pull down the strongholds of secularisation that have almost dismissed Christianity in Europe. (p. 5)

Therefore, African Christian diaspora population championing Reverse Mission in the West should see their migration to the West as a Divine arrangement to reclaim Europe for Christ and re-establish Christianity as the dominant faith in the West to reciprocate the Western mission efforts of taking Africa out of the darkness of paganism, by labouring to bring the Westerners out of the darkness of secularism and racism.

Conclusion

Migration is a consistent human socio-cultural, political and economic phenomenon with multiple causes, reasons and for different purposes. While modernism facilitated migration from the Global North to the Global South for expansionist and Christian missionary purposes, globalisation has opened doors for people from third-world nations to explore the world in search of greater opportunities. Migrant Christians from the Global South (particularly Africa) to the Global North should also make Christian Missions part of their primary purpose for migration. Their migration should be seen as a Divine arrangement to make Christ known, where the people who were former Christian Mission champions are rapidly sliding into Apostasy. They should be like the dispersed Jewish Christians who, in their vulnerable position, turned the world to Christ as they migrated from place to place. This opportunity for a Reverse Mission should be taken seriously and pursued proactively, ensuring that Christianity is not wiped out in the West and that the light of Christ continues to shine among Westerners. This mandate calls for African Churches at home, African migrant Christians, African Churches in the West and western churches to partner and unite their missional efforts in re-entrenching Christianity as the dominant faith in the West.

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