

African-initiated Pentecostal churches are on the rise in the UK – what role do they seek to play in wider society?

*Pentecostals traditionally see social issues in spiritual terms. Here, **Leslie Fesenmyer** details how a Pentecostal lunch programme in East London has gone against this trend and how migrant-led churches are helping to reinvigorate Protestantism.*



African-initiated Pentecostal churches are on the rise in the United Kingdom. Image: Dulwich on View

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African-initiated Pentecostal churches are on the rise in the United Kingdom, particularly in London. In an era of ongoing austerity, the British government and councils have called on local communities and organisations, including faith-based institutions, to help meet social welfare needs. Although African-initiated Pentecostal churches ostensibly have a role in British civil society, Pentecostals are generally thought to eschew civic engagement activities and social action. As part of a larger [project on migration, religion, and belonging](#), I have been exploring what role if, any, they seek to play in the wider society.

African Pentecostal churches in London

The African Pentecostals with whom I work in London are largely from Kenya. When I first began conducting research among migrant Kenyans in 2009, a London-based [website](#) listed ‘31 Kenyan churches in the United Kingdom’. 17 of these churches, many of which have fewer than 50 members, are in Greater London, with the majority located in East London. This picture is reflective of wider [trends](#): between 2005 and 2012, Pentecostal churches showed a 30% increase in attendance, accounting for just over half (52%) of all churchgoers in London.

Self-betterment as social improvement



Pentecostals consider themselves ‘people of the book’ who focus on living their lives according to the Word of God. In becoming born-again, they attempt to ‘break’ with old habits and old relationships, which are thought to hold them back, and adopt a new code of moral conduct that prohibits drinking, lying, and cheating, among other behaviours. Church services emphasise self-betterment through study and work, prayer and fasting, self-scrutiny and bible study.

As God’s children, these Pentecostals see themselves as having a responsibility to re-enchant the world whereby becoming a better Christian can be considered a form of civic engagement. By seeking to conduct themselves in morally upstanding ways, they believe they will ‘inspire’ others to want to know the God who helps them to thrive and eventually to get saved.

Praying, fasting, and... serving lunch

The born-again Christians I work with do not see social and spiritual welfare as separate such that they understand the problems facing Britain to be spiritual ones, stemming from the country having left the Kingdom of God. These problems range from infidelity, divorce, single parenthood and family breakdown, to drinking, youth gangs and crime. Understanding what are commonly thought of as social issues in spiritual terms shapes how they seek to ameliorate them, namely, through such practices as prayer, fasting, and bible study.

However, more than a year ago, one church in East London started a lunch programme that is open to everyone – a decidedly more familiar type of social action. The church serves lunch six days each week to an average of 25-30 ‘clients’ daily. The programme is staffed by members who give their time to shop, prepare and cook the food, serve, and clean the kitchen and dining area after each meal. Members act as chef, kitchen assistants, servers, and cleaners, with the roles breaking down along gendered lines whereby women primarily handle the food preparation, while men serve the meals. And, members proudly fund the programme through tithes and donations, rather than rely on money from the local council or other sources.

Interestingly, many clients are originally from Eastern Europe, having come to London to take advantage of the construction boom in the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics. Some church members express a sense of affinity with the people they serve because of their shared experience as migrants to the United Kingdom. In acknowledging how hard it can be to live in London, members see themselves as being fortunate (enough) to be able to help others, good fortune which they attribute to their belief in God.

Beyond saying a prayer at the start of the lunch service, I have observed little overt proselytizing. Rather, it is thought to occur via the kind of inspiration I mentioned earlier, as well as through the men’s phenomenological experience of being in a holy space. Members comment on the way that some men arrive early and sit quietly in the main hall, which they interpret as the men’s desire to experience the peace that came with being in God’s sanctuary. If ‘God’s time is the best time’, then Pentecostal thought easily accommodates the view that these men are already on the path to conversion through regularly dining at the church, though the path may be a long one.

Pragmatic, not theological, concerns

Despite the Pentecostal disinclination to engage in social action in order to focus on ‘winning souls’, these Pentecostals raise pragmatic issues as key barriers. Many work long, often anti-social, hours; they lack ready access to space where they can hold activities; and they have limited financial resources to launch larger scale, ongoing initiatives. Though the church that serves lunch has space it can regularly use, it too faces worker shortages, as members balance family, work, and church commitments.

Mobilising for what kind of change?



These born-again Christians are arguably engaged in (religious) movement building. Accordingly, they aim to meet people where they are and introduce them to God. Rather than trying to reform society though, they want to (re-)create a godly one. While there is no blueprint for what such a society would look like, the impetus to do so far surpasses, for example, the amelioration of hunger.

Together with African-initiated **transnational Pentecostal networks** and **megachurches**, as well as other **evangelical movements** in Britain, these small churches are helping to reinvigorate Protestantism, a **not entirely welcome turn of events** from some perspectives. At this point, it is hard to imagine an American-style 'Bible Belt' developing in the UK, but it will be interesting to follow how these migrant-led churches develop and whether they coalesce with other efforts to make (born-again) Christianity a more explicit part of British society.

About the author



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