

Book Review: *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective.*

Gitau, Wanjiru. 2017. *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. Pp. 1–190. ISBN 978-0-8308-5103-4. Approx. 330 ZAR (21.99 USD). Paperback.

1. Introduction

While the title of the book may lead one to conclude that the content of the book defends the proliferation of megachurches in Africa, as seen globally, Wanjiru Gitau's writing presents a contextual response to the changing needs of the urban middle class in Nairobi and how one church has led the way in changing the megachurch landscape in Nairobi. Although Gitau does deal with the cultural and social elements implicit in megachurches, this book's scope goes beyond that of a mere defense of such phenomena in Africa and seeks to contribute to the overall understanding of movemental Christianity in Africa.

2. Overview

The book is divided into six chapters that build on the glocal (denoting the coalescence of local and global) influences, conditions, and innovations that led to the inception, growth, development, and multiplication of the Mavuno church within Kenya, as well as its influence regionally within Africa and globally. The book deals with topics of liminality and bold leadership (Chapter 1); the specific plight of Kenyan—and African—Millennials (Chapter 2); a contextual and missional response by a Kenyan church as presented in the Mavuno Marathon (Chapter 3); leadership in an era of change (Chapter 4); the impact of the Mavuno case study glocally (Chapter 5); and how African Christianity relates to modern concepts and concerns (Chapter 6).

3. A Contextual Approach to Global Trends in Africa

The book reminds readers of the important fact that modern denominations and churches are the by-product of historical movements, revivals, and revitalizations that are fuelled by the Holy Spirit. Set in Africa, Gitau's work carefully details the unfolding narrative of movemental Christianity's growth in Africa, where millennials are flooding into churches and embracing the Gospel, when their counterparts in the West are either indifferent (or opposed) to what has become known as the evangelical megachurch phenomenon. The author does not make a special case for the megachurch model specifically but showcases how this can play an important role in societal transformation.

What makes this work important is the way Gitau frames the liminality of the growth and development of Africa's megachurches and how colonialism, post-colonial reality, and a sense of cultural or worldview dissonance shapes the current religious and cultural landscape in Africa.

Part of understanding the overall success of Mavuno (and countless other megachurches throughout Africa's cities) lies in a deepening understanding of the African cultural, political, and global culture that is causing many millennial Africans to question the fundamental worldview they embrace in a world of discontinuous change. Themes of modernization and globalization are consistent features in the book and are helpful to build a holistic understanding of the influences of the Mavuno movement globally. Gitau argues that the megachurches in the Global South help rewrite the map of reality with the Gospel as their primary compass. She states that "megachurches in the Global South emerge and thrive because they help this demographic make sense of the world by addressing their social, psychological, and spiritual crossroads" (p. 10). Megachurch models serve as bridges between the traditional/missionary African experience of Christianity that is steeped in liturgy, traditional forms of religious practice, hymns, and a Christianity that matches the aspirations and "struggle" of a transitory generation in an era of both discontinuous change and incalculable opportunity. It is the drama, relevance, and boldness of this form of "Pentecostal" faith that ignites the hearts of scores of Africa's people across what was once dubbed the "dark continent," and is now emerging as a bright light for the Christian Faith in the twenty-first century. This story is one of crisis and opportunity, and although its locus is Mavuno Church (Nairobi, Kenya), the contextual principles may serve other African interlocutors as the church should always find herself—in the words of the missiologist David Bosch—between danger and opportunity.¹

¹ The phrase "danger and opportunity" is used by David Bosch to describe the evident missiological paradigm shifts he was witnessing at the time of writing his magnum opus, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* in 1991. This is a helpful way to describe the mindset of the leaders that drove the Mavuno movement.

Like many African nations, Gitau asserts that the prevailing global monoculture of the 1990s had a profound impact on the cultural perceptions and aspirations of African Millennials. "Hegemonic cultural influence then led to a loosening of previously held certainties and attachments that formed social bonds. Everything coming from the outside appeared to be superior and more desirable, especially to the young people" (p. 42). Western hedonism and the embracing of its antecedent culture, language, and dress, became the norm, leading to a new era of consumerism and an expanding leadership vacuum. This set the scene for the innovative, contextual, and glocal Mavuno model.

Gitau describes the process of what led to the success of the Mavuno movement (known as the Mavuno Marathon), a systematic and practical tool that is meant to take the need for transformation of the "whole person in the ordinary life cycle seriously" (p. 70). It is no surprise to me that their pipeline of discipleship has resulted in cumulative change in Nairobi as leaders intentionally crafted a workable, process-oriented plan that targeted the unreached in Nairobi and ensured that the consistency and tenacity of their approach engaged those who were estranged from church, and those who were enthralled with a secular mindset. The strategic approach they deployed, rather than simply an attractional church model, moves people through the pipeline of their discipleship process, engaging, connecting, equipping, re-orienting, and releasing disciples for societal transformation. The Mavuno movement does not seek to create Christian converts with a Eurocentric, traditional form of religion, like the mission-oriented churches, nor does it seek to embrace an African traditional worldview preserving African heritage while not seeking holistic biblical fidelity. Mavuno's success is demonstrated in the dynamic way it engages the existing gap in Kenya's (and Africa's) emergent culture. This is a central feature and important contribution of the book. Mavuno's leadership has

demonstrated, with practical proficiency, the relevance of Christianity to the whole of life for the modern African, addressing issues of identity, heritage, and legacy as fearless influencers of society (pp. 86–87). The assimilation and contextualization of glocal trends, theology, and praxis strengthened the approach to ministry.

One of the most encouraging chapters of Gitau's work relates to that of Mavuno's legacy as creators of fearless influencers of society. She cites Mark Shaw, who observes the intimate connections between the growth of Christianity in the Global South and its roots in the broader evangelical movements of eighteenth-century evangelical Christianity. These movements arise as "charismatic people movements that transform their cultural world by translating Christian truth and transferring the power of the gospel to new generations" (Shaw 2010 *Global Awakening*, 29). Shaw also shows that in most of these revivals or global awakenings there is an evident spiritual revival with a wider pattern of revitalizing influences in the wider world. Such is the approach of the Mavuno narrative to Kenyan culture and through its glocal vision. A good example of the influence of the Mavuno mission is its relationship with Mariners Church in Irvine, CA (p. 139). Through its interactions with the movement in Kenya, the senior leadership of this church has adopted and adapted elements into their own culture and vision that have led to increasing levels of success and have affirmed the global impact of movements originating in the Global South.

The concept of what has been termed "redemption and lift"² is helpfully unpacked in a discussion on how, in Africa, becoming a Christian potentially sets one up to be prosperous within one's own cultural and social context (p. 149). Gitau argues that the evangelical focus on the redemption of the soul and the personal, cultural, and societal "lift" has not adequately

² A phrase popularized by Missiologist Donald McGavrin in understanding church growth principles.

prepared Christians to deal with the positive consequences of material progress in Africa. She speaks boldly and clearly around this topic, which is of great relevance to the next milieu in the unfolding narrative of African Christianity. I agree with Gitau when she states: "What is needed is an ethical vision of success generated through all the products (the city, technology) and process (capitalist market, modern politics) of modernization in all their constructive (human progress, prosperity) and shadow (alienation, meaninglessness, marginalization of the most vulnerable) sides" (pp. 148–152).

Gitau's final chapter deals with the emergence and significance of megachurch Christianity and its relevance. Starting off with a focus on revival/awakening history, Gitau asserts: "When the old maps of reality have failed, young and upcoming revivalists preached a new light that unblocked immense creative energies in new generations" (p. 153). Global examples of this principle are given as in figures like John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield to demonstrate an important principle: in the face of emerging new worlds, in times of great uncertainty and increasing change, leaders often use unconventional means to lead people to experience the Gospel afresh (p. 154). Gitau has demonstrated that this is the locus of the Mavuno movement and irrespective of leader or context, the prevailing mindset is described within the intersection of generational transition, destabilizing social change, and the need to translate the Gospel into a changing and changed reality.

4. Strengths

The book is relatively easy to read; and the footnotes, figures, and diagrams make it easier to assimilate the concepts being presented throughout the material. The author presents a coherent argument that is well-structured and connects global and local (glocal) facts and information in a compelling way.

Gitau persuasively presents the model (as participant observer) which serves as a modern-day map to engage the unique cultural moment Africa is presented with in the era of post-Colonialism. Gitau's work is the opposite side of the same coin as the West deals with post-Modernism. The book is timely and pragmatic in approach.

It is encouraging to read about how innovation on the African Continent is shaping practice and how the influence of a Kenyan church has grown throughout Africa and abroad. This shows how truly polycentric Christian expression and innovation have become.

5. Weaknesses

Gitau does not adequately address the elephant in the room when it comes to African megachurches, Neo-Pentecostalism. The author does look at African Independent Churches and their reaction to cultural changes; but she does not adequately deal with the proliferation of the Neo-Pentecostal awakening and its implications, dangers, and opportunities.

Although the author does draw a distinction between the numerical and cultural change aspects that megachurches are well-known for globally, she also points out that a conviction to evangelize (likened to that of the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century) are important driving forces in the Mavuno narrative. What is somewhat missing is a broader analysis of the concept, influence, and inherent dangers African megachurches present in general throughout Africa. In her presentation of the Mavuno model, Gitau does not critically engage the veracity of megachurches and their effect.

Gitau does briefly touch on the Prosperity Gospel, and its uncharacteristic relationship with mainstream theology. However, this section needs deeper reflection as its effects are far spread throughout the African religious landscape and emerging African Christian consciousness.

Are all megachurch expressions contextual responses to global trends? How does this model translate continentally as it contextualizes and contends for the Christian faith in areas of religious conflict with other religions?

The influence of church growth theory and other contemporary influences that may have been learned from senior pastor Muriithi Wanjau's time at Fuller prior to starting the Mavuno Church are not adequately credited in the book. The ideas and innovation spoken of resonate with other global movements and streams. Perhaps the author's unconscious bias as a participant observer prevented her from speaking into these more specifically.

6. Conclusion

Gitau's work is of great importance to the church in Africa as we face the realities unfolding in a post-Covid world. In many senses, we are still in an era of ambiguity, change, and development. Gitau's framework presents a holistic and scalable approach that may challenge this generation of African leaders in the church to rethink their approach to Christian ministry in Africa's burgeoning cities.

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