

REVISITING AND RECONTEXTUALIZING AN AFRICAN NAZARENE ECCLESIOLOGY

Constantino Magaya, Africa South Field Education Coordinator

Introduction

The word 'ecclesiology' is understood to have been derived from two Greek words, which mean 'assembly' and 'word'. When combined they mean 'the study of the church'.¹ Ecclesiology can then be the study of the Church, or the assembly of believers who belong to God.² It is suggested that ecclesiology in its first print first appeared in a quarterly journal in 1837, in an article that was written by an anonymous writer who defined it as:

Ecclesiology is a science which may treat of the proper construction and operations of the Church, or Communion, or Society of Christians; and which may regard men as they are members of that society, whether members of the Christian Church in the widest acceptation of the term, or members of some branch or communion of that Church, located in some separate kingdom, and governed according to its internal forms of constitution and discipline.³

The etymology of the word "ecclesiology" is summed up by the Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian Thought:

'Ecclesiology' is a term that has changed its meaning in recent theology. Formerly the science of the building and decoration of the churches, promoted by the Cambridge Camden Society, the Ecclesiological Society and the journal *The Ecclesiologist*, ecclesiology now stands for the study of the nature of the Christian Church.⁴

In 2010 the Church of the Nazarene included a question for its 2012 Global Theology Conference stating: 'Where are we?' a simple question that often requires a lot of self-searching, especially in its ecclesiology.⁵ In the current situation, the question remains where there has been the rise of Pentecostalism, the Charismatic movements, and Independent churches. While acknowledging Catholic and African Protestant ecclesiologies, a clearer picture of a Nazarene ecclesiology surfaces through revisiting and recontextualizing African Nazarene ecclesiology.

For instance, Dr. Kalemba Mwambazambi attempts to classify what African Protestant ecclesiology looks like and gives a picture of what the study may be looking for when it comes to African Protestant ecclesiology.

¹ H.T.K. Ishola, *Ecclesiology*. Abuja: National Open University of Nigeria, 2021, 9.

² Ishola, 2021.

³ Anonymous. "Ecclesiology." *The British Critic Quarterly Theological Review and Ecclesiastical Record*, London: J.G. and F. Rivington, 1837.

⁴ Alister E. McGrath, "Ecclesiology." *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

⁵ Global Clergy Development, "Critical Issues in Ecclesiology Call for Papers," *Didache* 10:1 (Summer 2010) available online at <https://didache.nazarene.org/index.php/volume-10-1/801-call-for-papers-4-6-10-final/file>

African Protestant ecclesiology does not encompass an easily captured and objective body of ideas, practices or values that can be serenely contemplated and analyzed. It is more like an interior structural force that is best understood from the vantage point of contemporary African existence. This structuring force places the entire African past within the dynamic construct of African identity, African cultures and African traditions, all of which are being assailed with the influence of globalization.⁶

One of the major questions that Mwambazambi attempts to answer is "What does African Protestant ecclesiology contribute to the understanding of the role of the Protestant and African Independent Churches (AICs) in Africa at present?"⁷ In the process of dealing with that question, Mwambazambi says that most protestant ecclesiologies in Africa need to be revisited and recontextualized, as they have failed in many areas of church life.

This paper addresses ecclesiology from the point of view of the nature of the Christian Church. The writing seeks to gain a better understanding and perception of the Church of the Nazarene in Africa, and its mission "to make Christlike disciples in the nations."⁸ The exploration occurs in the context of the current expressions of Pentecostalism and religious pluralism. The research provides a brief history of the Church of the Nazarene, the protestant churches' background and their influence in the African ecclesiology and attempt to look at what the Church of the Nazarene in African ecclesiology might look like, and its effects on the fast-changing African dynamics in missions. Being aware of where the Church of the Nazarene in Africa came from will help to know how the denomination will move forward.

Background of the Study

The Church of the Nazarene in Africa started more than a century ago, in Swaziland around 1907 (now Eswatini). The Church of the Nazarene started growing and migrating to other countries outside the USA like London, Great Britain, Africa, Korea, and other parts of the globe.⁹ The first Nazarene school in Africa was established in Eswatini, in 1907 and so was the expansion of the Church in Africa through provision of schools and other amenities like dispensaries. The Church of the Nazarene expanded its wings, entering more African countries, including South Africa, where the Church started in 1919. Some of those who were the fruits of this work of God became instrumental in spreading the gospel to countries like Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The churches of the Nazarene around these countries did not quickly grow, but starting in the early 1990s, there has been some significant growth.¹⁰

Ecclesiology involves different doctrines of the Church that include Trinitarian doctrine, Soteriology, Christology, Eschatology, and touch on Governance in the Church. It also includes

⁶ Kalembe Mwambazambi, "A Missiological Reflection on African Ecclesiology" *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32(1), Art. #482, 8 pages. doi:10.4102/ve.v32i1.482, 2011.

⁷ Mwambazambi, 2011.

⁸ *Manual: Church of the Nazarene, 2023-2027.*

⁹ <https://researcharchives.wits.ac.za/church-of-nazarene-records>, visited, 15 June 2025.

¹⁰ *Manual Church of the Nazarene, The Historical Statement, 2023-2027.*

how a given congregation or denomination worships. The Church of the Nazarene in Africa must have an ecclesiology which helps anyone to understand the direction the Church is taking.

The way a church worships and propagates its worship in a given community provides an insight into what its ecclesiology looks like. The subject of their preaching and teaching plays a very important part in understanding their ecclesiology. William M. Greathouse, a Wesleyan theologian and a former General Superintendent, once wrote,

My task is made extremely difficult, however, not only by my own limited observation of what is actually going on throughout our movement in this matter of worship, but also by the fact that I recognize there are many different models of worship styles among us, even in the same city. We must allow variations in forms and styles of worship to recognize the widely differing cultural needs in any given community. However – and this is most important – there are certainly some norms by which to evaluate whether or not true worship is taking place where we are or under our ministry.¹¹

It was a duty to address the crisis in the Nazarene worship then. His context was the Church of the Nazarene in the United States. In his discussions, he acknowledges that context is important, whilst there is a great possibility of worshipping differently while belonging to the same denomination in the same area. Worship, which is not just the music but all that encompasses the service, plays a pivotal role in shaping a church's ecclesiology. This situation is what the Church encountered as it entered different countries.

As the Church entered each country, there were certain things that were very different, which still determine why the worship practices may be different. Africa, as a continent, has so many tribes and very different cultural practices that, in some way, make it difficult to have a clear ecclesiology for the Church of the Nazarene in Africa. Mwambazambi concurs with this position. He says,

Any profound reflection upon the Christian mission and the Church's role in the transformation of Africa, must seriously engage with the various ecclesiologies of the 21st century to develop an empathetic Christian mission model that inspires and transforms the existing models of Christian mission, the tension between African traditional church leaders and the Protestant Church.¹²

This tension has often manifested itself through the youth in local congregations or a denomination. There is usually a tag-of-war when it comes to certain changes that need to happen. Some are for the change, whilst others resist the change. The result is that change may be forced or will happen, as others still resist. Sometimes change comes without anyone expecting it. The Church of the Nazarene in Africa, some years back, did not allow dancing in a worship service. This stayed for some time, but when the tide of change came, naturally, the Church found itself dancing to the music of worship. Now, any Nazarene church that tries to

¹¹ William M. Greathouse, “The Present Crisis in Nazarene Worship.” *Grace & Peace: Ministry in a Connected Culture*. Grace & Peace Summer 2013, Issue 9. A quarterly magazine of the USA/Canada Region, Church of the Nazarene, 2013.

¹² Mwambazambi, 2011.

resist this change will find itself becoming obsolete. Engagement with African ecclesiologies is important for the Church to be ready for positive and productive change.

The current state of the Church in Africa

A question that is of paramount importance that Mwambazambi dealt with is, 'What does Africa look like today, and what does this require of the church and mission?'¹³ He suggested that there was a need to do a survey of the Catholic, Protestant, and African Independent Churches. According to Mwambazambi, this survey would prove useful for the current community because the three groups from an African perspective, are to be considered by African missiologists as mission of the Church and evangelization of Africa.¹⁴ Today, the Church has various influences, and therefore the need to carefully rethink, and reinvent what could be considered a biblically sound African ecclesiology. Theology from a given denomination plays an important role. The Church of the Nazarene in Africa is faced with some challenges of identity, where worship and lifestyle give witness that one has become a witness of Jesus Christ, both in word and in practice. One of the common statements is that African reconstruction can be truly done if Africans themselves take charge, if they want to see change. This reconstruction through African actions and life, according to Mwambazambi, is the creative power that is so vital for the rebirth and reinvention of Africa within the larger world order.¹⁵

Pongo says that Globalisation is a product of the developed world, and this is done without any reference to the will of God and considers Africans to be simply consumers.¹⁶ African ecclesiologies exist in an environment where there is a need to connect with the world at large. Africans have their own experiences, whilst the world shows its influence, from a socio-economic point of view. The socio-economic situation in Africa has a great influence on the rebuilding of an African ecclesiology. How do Africans understand God in a world where they seem to be lacking every time, unlike other parts of the world? Does God really stay as part of the life, the worship, and all that pertains to African life? Is God present among Africans in their daily activities, especially when one looks at the many atrocities and troubles Africa experiences? One musician (Amai Charamba, a Zimbabwean musician) sang and said, "People are saying, Africa is a permanent place for poverty and civil war!" But she then quotes Psalm 68:31, "Princes shall come out of Egypt. Ethiopia shall hurry to stretch out her hands to God" (Amplified). Africans can also totally depend on God as they are not destined to remain poor and fighting.

How can these challenges be dealt with?

These are important questions that need to be asked if there are going to be some serious and meaningful strategies for an informed ecclesiology. How can these challenges be mitigated? The teaching of the right doctrine in the churches. The true doctrine of the Church of the Nazarene needs to be known, and Nazarene Christians need to be taught how to live and act according to God's word, while at the same time they learn through practical ways of following Jesus.

¹³ Mwambazambi, 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mwambazambi, 2011.

¹⁶ Pongo, *Theology in Africa and its Implications*, Ngumu, Mbuji-Mayi, 2005.

The message and practical life are supposed to be in harmony. One may not assume that everything should be the same, but what is really missing is the core practices and worship styles influenced by certain doctrine and teaching in the Church. The centrality of African ecclesiologies is Christ and the Bible. These should be held supreme in the worship of God. Whilst the focus is correct, it only gets misty when other forms of practices take centre-stage and then seem to be more important than the preaching and teaching from the Bible that centres on Christ. In fact, Pongo affirms, "Jesus as African ancestor, as the centre, as the point of departure."¹⁷

In a book that has been edited by Mary N. Getui, Emmanuel Adow Obeng writes an article titled 'Synthetic and Praxis Models in African Theology'. He talks about the synthetic model and the praxis model. He says the synthetic model is coming from the word 'synthetic', normally used as an adjective which means "artificial".¹⁸ Something that is fake or man-made. Here, it is used as a description of a theological approach, with a sense of integration, blending of theological ideas from different cultures into a coherent whole. Obeng further says that what characterizes a synthetic model is that "it takes cognizance of and tries to preserve the importance of the biblical message and the heritage of traditional doctrinal formulation, but also acknowledges the importance of other cultures in theology."¹⁹

Obeng also makes a comparison of the rite of passage and the Christian baptism as symbols of setting aside childhood and taking on a new personality. With this comparison, he says both baptism and initiation rites are, in a sense, rites of incorporation into a community. Therefore, "A synthetic approach accesses these similar ideas and any others to articulate a theology of incorporation."²⁰ The Bible teaches about dying to the old self and starting a new life in Christ. This new life in Christ needs proper ecclesiology where one practices every day how to be a faithful child of God. This begs for the Church in Africa to define its ecclesiology in a way that is more practical and clearer for one to explain how they will be living this new life.

The praxis model, according to Obeng, is "Individual thought, and actions give precedence over actions based on invocation of external authority."²¹ He also adds and says that our thoughts and beliefs are to be translated into action with the aim of changing the world positively.²² Bevens makes reference to how Karl Marx used this idea of praxis to bring revolutionary change among the people who were having social and economic challenges.²³ In theology, ministers translate ideas from being merely ideas into theological actions.

¹⁷ Pongo, 2005.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Adow Obeng, *Theological Method and Aspects of Worship in African Christianity*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1998, 43.

¹⁹ Obeng, 1998, 44.

²⁰ Ibid, 45.

²¹ Ibid, 47.

²² Ibid, 48.

²³ Stephen B. Bevens, 'What are Third World Theologies? Theologies of the Third World: Convergencies and Differences. Concilium Vol. 199 No 5, 1992.

A Suggested Church of the Nazarene Ecclesiology in Africa

This part of the writing focuses on a few selected areas that may help to determine what may be assumed as the perspective of the Church of the Nazarene in African ecclesiology. Some of those areas include the practice of the Wesleyan theology, preparation for a worship service, and a corporate worship service.

Prominent theologians in the Church of the Nazarene like H. Ray Dunning suggests a "norm" for Wesleyan systematic theology based on justification by faith and sanctification by faith in the context of prevenient grace.²⁴ To put into practice that theology, means any reflection must include, good theology, one that remains reliable and biblical. Human life should reflect God's activities, and be immersed in God's grace, which shows the deep love of God and his mercy. Klaus Arnold writes:

Theological quintessence of Wesleyanism helps us to understand that from a Wesleyan viewpoint, "practical" is defined by whatever agrees with right belief (orthodoxy), right practice (orthopraxis), and genuine experience of the presence of God (orthopathy). Practical theology is therefore always concerned with, and focused on, the renewal in the image of God (Christlikeness).²⁵

Arnold mentions seven principles of practical Wesleyan theology. It is proper in this paper to acknowledge that Arnold's seven principles spell out what a true follower of Jesus Christ looks like. He says practical Wesleyanism is transformational, it is holistic, incarnational, communal, fruitful, missional, and eschatological.²⁶

A true African Nazarene ecclesiology should look like these seven principles by Arnold, where Christianity is practical. The end result is that focus is not on how they worship, but on the product when they have lived their lives. It is true that African cultures are diverse, and therefore, people worship in light of their cultural diversity. Every culture has its influence on worship practice. The Church needs to be the Church even in the face of all the challenges people may find themselves. Arnold concludes that in a time when issues of "theological faithfulness" to the Wesleyan holiness tradition may be questioned, a time when there are concerns about "identity", need for growth, and expansion; there is need to keep in mind one's theological heritage and its principles.²⁷

The Church of the Nazarene in some parts of Africa still struggles with the practical aspect. There are a number of issues still in the grey. Some of them have to do with the food to eat and not to eat, what to drink and what not to drink. Some of the teachings are not really derived from church doctrine, and therefore are in danger of not being doctrinally sound. There is sometimes

²⁴ H, Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1988, p. 47.

²⁵ Klaus Arnold, "Wesleyan Theology: A Practical Theology." *Didache: A Faithful Teaching*, 2007. https://nazarc.whdl.org/sites/default/files/resource/12733768/Didache_V06_N02_4a_EN_GTC02_Arnold.pdf?language=en, 2007.

²⁶ Ibid, 2007.

²⁷ Arnold, 2007.

a cloud of confusion among the worshippers as some of the leaders bring imported teachings or practices that are contrary to what the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene instructs. Principles like those of Arnold could be helpful in directing and informing the church leaders on their focus to help in the practice of Wesleyan theology, thereby producing faithful and committed Christians.

There are also Churches of the Nazarene that are so aware of their existence and how they can make an impact in their community. A church that seeks to be practical in terms of meeting the needs of its people and community. Kayelitsha Church of the Nazarene in South Africa during COVID 19 had a way to meet the needs of the people as part of their ecclesiology. It also shows its missional aspect of the church's core values. The researcher of the case of Kayelitsha says,

The church helped to provide for the spatially oppressed and provided resources without restriction based on capital power. What is interesting is that the spatial dynamic offers a contextual view of the concept of 'missional church'. The church in the case study was inclusive of God's children even if they live on the periphery's of one of the world's global cities.²⁸

The mission of this church was one of going out, building bridges toward the lost and needy, in the context of where the church was in.

One African author notes that when one talks about African theology, he/she should not see it as heir to the system of values that belong to the theologians who are foreign to Africa. Rather the theologian should try to bring Christ into this African universe.²⁹ The statement also invokes issues of what to do with Christian doctrines which have been worked out exegetically from the Scriptures before the arrival of the African theologian. The biggest observation surfaces as one sees more of Westernised Christianity among African believers. Therefore, a lot of opportunity for contextualization occurs for the African theologian. Scripture needs to be heard and interpreted in the context of the African believer, to reciprocate the grace provided in the Bible, but in light of one's culture. Samuel Ngewa says,

Unless the meaning of the biblical text has been researched and then the text applied in the African setting in light of its original meaning, African theology will be 'sterile, bankrupt, and unworthy of the African tradition nourished by Tertullian, Cyprian, Tyconius and Augustine.³⁰

African culture will influence African theology, but mostly in light of the Bible, the Word of God. In African ecclesiology, especially from a Wesleyan theology perspective, a true Christian's

²⁸N. Ntandoyenkosi, N. Mlambo, and Henry Mbaya, "The Church of Nazarene in Khayelitsha: Developing a missional spatial consciousness with special reference to COVID-19." *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies*, ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422, 7 March 2024.

²⁹ S. Nomenyo, "Theology in the Life of the Churches" in *African Challenge*. Nairobi, Transafrica Publishers, 1975, 69.

³⁰ Samuel Ngewa, "The Validity of Meaning and African Christian Theology". *Issues in African Christian Theology*, 1998, 53.

life will be influenced by God's Word. The Church in Africa needs to move away from a Christianity of speech alone to one that is practical in everyday life.

By example, worship services provide one area of great concern. Probably, there is a need for most of the pastors and worship leaders to revisit how they understand worship. William Temple defined worship,

Worship is the quickening of the conscience by the holiness of God; it is the nourishment of the mind by the truth of God; it is the purifying of our imagination by the beauty of God; it is the opening of the heart to the love of God; it is the surrender of the will to the purpose of God – and all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which human nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin.³¹

This description of worship can be applied in any part of the world where true devotion is given to God. Worship services are not given time to prepare and make them meaningful. The songs to be sung may not be known, sometimes the singing is endless, or maybe choruses with one phrase that may not be really ministering to the needy hearts of the people and bringing them before the throne of God. The music, the teaching, the message, should all point to God in a well-designed manner that gets to the people and attracts the worshipper toward God!

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³¹ James R. Spruce, *Come Let us Worship*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1986, 9.

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