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**CHRISTIAN MISSIONS IN MALAWI:
A SPIRITUAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

**Chrześcijańskie misje w Malawi:
perspektywa duchowa i społeczno-kulturowa**

Abstract: This article explores and examines the nature, history, challenges, and opportunities of Christian Missions, particularly evangelical Christianity in Malawi which has historically emphasized sound biblical teaching, disciple making, church planting and missionary sending. This is explored from a spiritual and socio-cultural perspective in contrast with Christopaganism, Traditional African Religion (TAR), Globalization & Western Mission Withdrawal, Ecumenical Movements, Pentecostalism, Syncretism and neo-prophetic movements. It highlights the dual role of missions as a vehicle for the spread of the Christian faith and as an instrument of social transformation. The historical contribution of early missionaries, the impact on education and health, as well as contemporary challenges and opportunities for the Church, are dis-

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Together, they minister to hundreds of believers through pastoral work, evangelism, and discipleship including Church management and administration. Bishop Khobidi is also a father of four (4) children and is deeply passionate about missions, youth empowerment, and community transformation through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Bishop Khobidi holds a PhD in Theology and a Bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies and Ministry, and has undergone extensive training in Christian leadership. Throughout his ministry, Bishop Khobidi has interacted with foreign missionaries, pastors, and church leaders, and has travelled extensively in Africa, training pastors and making presentations on Christian Missions in various Christian forums and conferences. He is currently the Presiding Bishop of the African Nations Council of Bishops (ANCOB) in Malawi, and has planted numerous Churches in Malawi and Mozambique.

Bishop Khobidi is also founder of SOA Bible Training College, which aims to contribute to quality church leadership in the Body of Christ today. Through his ministry Evans continues to inspire and equip believers to fulfill the Great Commission, and his commitment to Christian Missions has had a lasting impact on the Church in Malawi and beyond.

cussed. The specific objectives of this article are to (1) examine the historical background of Christian Missions in Malawi, (2) analyze the spiritual and socio-cultural challenges faced by Christian Missions, (3) discuss the growth of Christianity in Malawi, and (4) identify opportunities for future mission work. A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing a literature review and case study analysis to gather data. The findings suggest that Christian missions have made a significant impact on Malawian society, but face challenges such as cultural barriers and limited resources. Thus, the article recommends prioritizing theological education, leadership development, and contextualization of the Gospel. The study concludes that Christian Missions in Malawi have the potential to continue growing and making a positive impact on society that is replete with traditional religions, but must adapt to the changing cultural and spiritual landscape.

Key words: Christian Missions, Evangelicals, Pentecostalism, Syncretism, Christopaganism, Traditional African Religion (TAR) Malawi, Socio-Cultural Perspective, Church History, Community Transformation, Spiritual Renewal, Evangelical Christianity, Globalization, Western Mission Withdrawal, Evangelization, Contextualization, neo-prophetic movements, Ecumenical Movements.

Abstrakt: Artykuł analizuje naturę, historię, wyzwania oraz możliwości misji chrześcijańskich, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem chrześcijaństwa ewangelikalnego w Malawi, które historycznie akcentowało zdrową naukę biblijną, czynienie uczniów, zakładanie kościołów i wysyłanie misjonarzy. Zagadnienia te zostały przedstawione z perspektywy duchowej i społeczno-kulturowej, w kontrze do chrystopoganizmu, tradycyjnej religii afrykańskiej (TAR), globalizacji i wycofywania się misji zachodnich, ruchów ekumenicznych, pentekostalizmu, synkretyzmu i nurtów neo-proroczych.

Artykuł ukazuje podwójną rolę misji jako narzędzia szerzenia wiary chrześcijańskiej oraz środka przemiany społecznej. Omówiony został wkład wczesnych misjonarzy w edukację i opiekę zdrowotną, a także współczesne wyzwania i szanse stojące przed Kościołem.

Główne cele artykułu obejmują:

- 1) przedstawienie tła historycznego misji chrześcijańskich w Malawi,
- 2) analizę duchowych i społeczno-kulturowych wyzwań stojących przed misjami,
- 3) omówienie rozwoju chrześcijaństwa w Malawi,
- 4) identyfikację przyszłych możliwości dla pracy misyjnej.

Badanie miało charakter jakościowy, oparte na przeglądzie literatury oraz analizie studiów przypadków. Wyniki wskazują, że misje chrześcijańskie wywarły znaczący wpływ na społeczeństwo Malawi, jednak zmagają się z takimi wyzwaniami jak bariery kulturowe i ograniczone zasoby. Artykuł zaleca priorytetowe traktowanie edukacji teologicznej, rozwoju przywództwa oraz kontekstualizacji Ewangelii.

W podsumowaniu stwierdzono, że misje chrześcijańskie w Malawi mają duży potencjał dalszego wzrostu i pozytywnego oddziaływania w społeczeństwie, które nadal jest głęboko zakorzenione w tradycyjnych religiach, jednak, aby skutecznie działać, muszą dostosować się do zmieniającego się krajobrazu kulturowego i duchowego.

Słowa kluczowe: misje chrześcijańskie, ewangelicy, pentekostalizm, synkretyzm, chrystopoganizm, tradycyjna religia afrykańska (TAR) Malawi, perspektywa społeczno-kulturowa, historia Kościoła, transformacja społeczności, odnowa duchowa, chrześcijaństwo ewangeliczne, globalizacja, wycofanie się misji zachodnich, ewangelizacja, kontekstualizacja, ruchy neoprorocze, ruchy ekumeniczne.

Introduction

The sole purpose of this article is to: explore the factors that lead to declining Christian Missions in Mainline denominations, Pentecostal circles and TAR; reflect on the historical foundations of Christian Missions in Malawi; examine the dual spiritual and socio-cultural dimensions of Missions; analyze the challenges and opportunities facing Christian missions in contemporary Malawi; and provide practical recommendations for strengthening missions in ways that are spiritually vibrant and socially alert.

Malawi, often called “The Warm Heart of Africa”, has a rich history of Christian Missionary Engagement. Since the arrival of missionaries in the 19th Century, Christianity has played a significant role in shaping Malawi’s spiritual identity, educational systems, healthcare services, and cultural orientation. Historically, Christianity was introduced to Malawi by European missionaries in the 19th Century. The Church of Scotland and other denominations established missions and churches, which contributed to the spread of Christianity and Western education. Today, Christianity is one of the dominant religions in Malawi, with many denominations and churches represented.

Today, Christianity remains the dominant religion in the country, which lies to the southeasterly part of Africa with a rich cultural heritage growing and a growing Christian population. Malawi is predominantly Christian nation, with 77.3% of the population identifying as Christian and 13.8% as Muslim according to the 2018 Population and Housing Census¹. Post-independence and especially after the transition to multi-party democracy

¹ U.S. Department of State, *2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Malawi*, Washington 2023.

in 1994, religious life diversified as Pentecostal and Charismatic streams flourished in the liberalized space². The role of Christian missions, however, goes beyond evangelism and church planting. Missions in Malawi must be understood in their broader socio-cultural dimensions -touching on education, healthcare, advocacy for justice, economic empowerment, and the preservation of values that shape communities.

However, observers note that evangelism and systematic Church planting-hallmarks of missionary Christianity – have slowed in both mainline denominations and Traditional African Religion (TAR). At the same time, the rise of prophetic Pentecostalism has reshaped the public imagination of “Mission”, thereby raising concerns about spectacle, prosperity emphasis, and syncretism³.

Background: Historical Perspectives of Christian Church and Missionary Efforts in Malawi

The missionary enterprise in Malawi dates back to the mid-1800s, most notably through the work of Dr. David Livingstone, the Scottish missionary and explorer. His vision to open Africa to “Christianity, Commerce and Civilization” paved the way for missions from the Church of Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church, and other Protestant denominations.

Key Missionary contributions included:

- **Education:** establishment of schools such as Livingstonia and Blantyre Missions, which laid the foundation for Malawi’s education system.
- **Healthcare:** Mission hospitals, including St Luke’s and Mulanje Mission, became vital centres of health service delivery.
- **Bible Translation:** Missionaries translated the Bible into local languages, particularly Chichewa, enabling access to Scripture.
- **Social Reforms:** Missions actively opposed slave trade and promoted human dignity, literacy, and the value of community.

² J. McCauley, *Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa*, in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, Oxford 2019.

³ C. Banda, *Is Africa Godforsaken? Neo-Pentecostal prophetism on human agency*, „Verbum et Ecclesia”, 44(2023), no. 1, <https://verbumeteclesia.org.za/index.php/ve/search/search?simpleQuery=Banda&searchField=query> [15.09.2025]; K. Tagwirei, *Serving the Needy from the Greedy: Reviewing Diakonia in African Neo-Pentecostalism*, „In die Skriflig/In Luce Verb”, 57(2023), no. 1, <https://indieskriflig.org.za/index.php/skriflig/article/view/2981/7941> [15.09.2025].

Today, the legacy of these efforts continues, though the nature of mission work has evolved to reflect both local leadership and global partnerships.

Evangelism and Church Planting in Malawi After Independence and Democracy

Theological education and leadership development are essential for the growth and sustainability of the Church in Malawi. Many theological institutions and Bible colleges have been established to train pastors, evangelists and Church leaders.

Mainline Denominations, Evangelicals and Pentecostal Churches

Malawi is home to a diverse range of Christian denominations, including mainline denominations, Evangelicals, and Pentecostal Churches. Each of these traditions has its own unique strengths and weaknesses, and they often work together to promote Christian Unity and cooperations.

Additionally, despite its remarkable successes, the Christian Mission in Malawi faces several challenges:

1. **Poverty and economic strain.**

With a majority of Malawians living below the poverty line, the Church is constantly confronted with social and material needs alongside spiritual ones.

2. **Cultural Dynamics.**

Christianity often interacts with traditional beliefs, customs, and practices, and practices that sometimes conflict with biblical principles.

3. **Youth and Securitization.**

The growing influence of Secularism and modern lifestyles among young people presents both an opportunity and a challenge for missions.

4. **Sustainability of Mission Work.**

Many churches remain heavily dependent on foreign mission support, raising the question of sustainability and self-reliance.

The Christian Missions' Challenge: Why Mainline Denominations Downplayed Evangelism and Church Planting

Christian missions in Malawi face various spiritual and socio-cultural challenges, including the influence of poverty, cultural practices that

conflict with Christian values, and African Traditional Religions which notably reflect 'Christo-paganism' in their faith and practice. Actually, many Malawians continue to practice traditional rituals and ceremonies which can make it challenging for Christian missionaries to contextualize the Gospel.

Christian Missions in Malawi face various constraints, including limited resources, cultural barriers, and competition from other Christian denominations. However, there are also many possibilities and opportunities for growth and development, mainly in the areas of discipleship, evangelism, and community development or community concern ministries.

Ideally, institutional professionalization, and donor alignment has led mainline denominations to downplay evangelism and church planting in Malawi. Typically, after independence and especially the 1990s, mainline denominations invested heavily in schools, hospitals, and social services, aligning with donor priorities such as HIV and AIDS, governance, and humanitarian relief⁴. This shift professionalized their mission but diverted resources from pioneer evangelism.

Additionally, Ecumenical and Social Justice Priorities have resulted in mainline denominations sidelining Christian missions. Mainline churches were actually key actors in civic education and democratic transition in 1994⁵. This tendency reinforced public theology and advocacy roles but reduced focus on expansionist church planting.

Furthermore, urbanization and migration led to mainline denominations slowing down on evangelism and church planting. In this vein, rapid urbanization in Blantyre and Lilongwe cities and in all districts in Malawi. This forced churches to concentrate on congregational care and social projects rather than rural church planting⁶.

Finally, leadership Pipelines and Theology, contributed significantly to the slowing down of evangelism and church planting by mainline churches. This entailed lengthy ordination processes which slowed entrepreneurial planting compared to Pentecostal entrepreneurs, while ecumenical ethics discouraged "sheep stealing" in areas already served by other churches.

⁴ P. Gundani, *Church-state relations in South Africa, Zambia and Malawi in light of the fall of the Berlin Wall*, „HTS Theological Studies”, 74(2018), no. 3, <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/4852/11101> [15.09.2025].

⁵ J.W. Hofmeyr, *Mainline churches in the public space, 1975–2000*, in: *African Christianity: an African story*, ed. O. Uke Kalu, Trenton 2007.

⁶ McCauley, *Politics of Pentecostalism in Africa*.

Comparatively, Traditional African Religion (TAR) downplayed evangelism and church planting as well as. TAR is not structured as a proselytizing religion but functions as a lived cosmology rooted in kinship, land, and ritual specialists⁷. Religious pluralism and “dual belonging” are common, where individuals attend church while consulting traditional healers⁸. Thus, Traditional African Religion put a lot of emphasis on ritual continuity over conversionary outreach, explaining its lack of mission-style church planting. The TAR model resonates with Christopaganism and Syncretism in the decline of missions. The term Christopaganism is polemical, but scholars prefer the concept of syncretism-where cultural practices alter or dilute core Christian teaching⁹. In Malawi, syncretism appears in practices such as reliance on anointed objects, prosperity rituals, and continued fear of witchcraft¹⁰. These dynamics weaken mission by undermining biblical sufficiency and shifting trust towards ritual pluralism.

Moreover, Prophetic Pentecostalism and the Distraction from Biblical Missions exacerbated the slowing of evangelism and church planting perpetuated by mainline denominations and TAR. Virtually, neo-prophetic Pentecostalism in Malawi puts stress on deliverance, miracles, seer revelations, and the use of anointed objects. While empowering to some, these practices risk shifting authority from Scripture and the local Church to the *personality* of prophets¹¹. Resources are oftentimes consumed by spectacle and prosperity claims rather than discipleship and holistic community missions¹².

Despite these challenges, Christianity continues to grow in Malawi, with many churches experiencing rapid growth, particularly evangelicals and Pentecostal Churches such as the Baptists and Assemblies of God. In fact, the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements have been particularly successful in reaching out to the poor and marginalized. On the other

⁷ E. van der Meer, *The Problem of Witchcraft in Malawi*, „Evangelical Missions Quarterly”, 47(2011), no. 1, p. 78–85.

⁸ T.K. Nyasulu, *Witchcraft accusation and church discipline in Malawi*, „On Knowing Humanity Journal”, 4(2020), no. 1, p. 122–128.

⁹ A.S. Moreau, *Syncretism*, in: *Evangelical dictionary of world missions*, ed. idem, Grand Rapids 2000, p. 924–926.

¹⁰ Nyasulu, *Witchcraft accusation*.

¹¹ Banda, *Is Africa Godforsaken?*

¹² Tagwirei, *Serving the Needy from the Greedy*.

hand, the mainline denominations such as the Presbyterians, Anglicans and the Catholics have stagnated in Church planting and evangelistic outreaches and they rarely give priority to developing and sending home missionaries.

The Causes of the Current Shift of Evangelicals in Sound Teaching, Disciple Making, Church Planting and Missionary Sending

Several intertwined factors explain why Evangelicals now de-emphasize Christian Missions. It really gets to the core of current shift in Christian missions in Malawi and across Africa. The visible decline in the vibrancy of Evangelicals in sound doctrinal stance and missionary sending has led to the shift in focus from discipleship to experience. Initially, earlier evangelical movements emphasized systematic Bible teaching, doctrinal soundness, and discipleship training. Later on, the rise of Pentecostal and charismatic expressions has shifted attention to experience-based faith-healing, prophecy, miracles, prosperity-often at the expense of deep Bible study and disciple making. Moreover, this leads to spiritual excitement without doctrinal depth, weakening long-term church growth and missionary style.

Predominantly, institutionalization and denominational fatigue has weakened Evangelicals vibrancy in Christian Missions. Indeed, Evangelical Churches that were once mission-driven movements have matured into established institutions with bureaucratic structures. Besides resources are now spent on administration, infrastructure, and internal programs rather than outward evangelism. In fact, some leaders have become more guardians of tradition than pioneers of the new mission frontiers. In addition, socio-economic pressures have diminished Evangelicals vibrancy in Christian Missions. In this context, economic hardships in Malawi (and much of Africa) has compelled many evangelical churches to focus on survival and social needs (schools, feeding programs, poverty relief). Ordinarily younger Christians are often more attracted to churches promising quick material breakthroughs than those emphasizing long-term discipleship.

In the interim, Christian Missions in Malawi have witnessed the rise and fall of the “Prophetic Movement”. The growth of prophets and “men of God”. Has diverted attention from classical evangelical

mission strategies. Instead of training members to be evangelists or missionaries, churches focus on attracting crowds to prophetic services. Eventually, this undermines the traditional missionary-sending culture of evangelicals.

Globalization and Western Mission Withdrawal

In the past, Western Evangelical Missions heavily supported church planting, discipleship training, and missionary sending in Malawi. However, since independence and especially post-democracy, many western missions have withdrawn funding and personnel, expecting local churches to take ownership. Unfortunately, many evangelical churches in Malawi lack the financial and organizational strength to sustain vibrant missionary work on their own. There is the theological drift and Christopaganism element. Syncretism (mixing Christianity with traditional religion) and Christopaganism (blending Christianity with unbiblical practices) have ostensibly weakened evangelical distinctives. On the contrary, instead of Gospel preaching and training disciple, certain churches have compromised to accommodate cultural beliefs. Consequently, this dilutes the urgency and clarity of Christian Missions in Malawi. The ultimate challenge is the leadership gaps and generational disconnect. The first generations of evangelicals were missionary pioneers/leaders, Bible translators, and disciple-makers. But many current leaders are more administrators, prosperity preachers, or motivational speakers than evangelists or teachers. Therefore, there is a generational gap-younger Christians are not being trained in missions, so the passion is not passed on.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Christian Missions in Malawi, have been central to the country's transformation -spiritually, socially, and culturally. While historical missionary efforts established schools, hospitals and churches, today's missions must adapt to the evolving realities of poverty, youth engagement, cultural diversity, and global secular influences. The task is not only to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, but also to embody it through acts of compassion, justice, and community empowerment. In conclusion, Christian Missions in Malawi have made significant impact

on the country's spiritual and socio-cultural landscape. To continue this growth, it is essential to prioritize theological education, leadership development and contextualization of the Gospel. Christian Missionaries must also engage with African Traditional Religions in a respectful and sensitive manner.

Conversely, the decline of evangelism and church planting in Malawi's post-independence and post-democracy era stems from structural shifts in mainline denominations, the embedded cosmology of TAR, and the diversionary focus of prophetic movements. While Pentecostalism has expanded numerically, its prophetic streams sometimes displace holistic and scripturally balanced mission. Syncretic pressures-whether labeled Christopaganism or simply contextual compromise-further complicate the mission mandate. For Malawi's future, renewed emphasis on Biblical discipleship, accountable leadership, and holistic mission is essential.

Recommendation

Basing on the above discussions and conclusion, it is strongly recommended as follows:

- Strengthen Discipleship and Evangelism: Missions must remain rooted in the Great Commission, ensuring that faith is nurtured alongside social interventions.
- Promote Self-Reliance: Churches should build capacity for financial independence through local resource mobilization and entrepreneurial approach.
- Contextualize the Gospel: Mission work should engage local cultures with sensitivity while remaining faithful to biblical truth.
- Empower Youth and Families: Special focus should be given to raising young leaders who can carry the mission forward.
- Strengthen partnerships: collaboration between local churches, international partners, and community organizations is key for holistic mission impact.
- Theological Institutions should prioritize contextualization and cultural sensitivity in their training programs.
- Church leaders should engage in ongoing discipleship and mentorship programs to equip believers for ministry.
- *Christian Missionaries should seek to understand and respect African Traditional Religions, while also sharing the Gospel of the Kingdom of God in a clear and sensitive manner.*

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