Importing God: The Mission of the Ghanaian Adventist Church and Other Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands

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Considering global trends of secularization and religious resurgence, it is unmistakable that the center of Christianity is moving from Europe and North America to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This shift affects not only the nature of church life, but also the nature of mission and missionaries. A young, large, and zealous mission force is emerging that flows from ‘the South’ all over the world. Koreans evangelize in Russia, Nigerians in the Philippines, and Brazilians in Mozambique. A noteworthy segment of this flow is the mission work of non-Western Christians in the West. This phenomenon has sparked the (not undisputed) term ‘reversed mission’, which expresses the idea that the ones who used to be conceptualized as the senders of mission are now conceptualized as the receivers of mission. Few studies however have investigated the realities that this term refers to. This study is intended as a contribution to fill this void.

In this study, non-Western immigrant churches in the country of the Netherlands were taken as a particular case by which to understand ‘reversed mission’. On a population of nearly 17 million residents, the Netherlands has more than half a million non-Western Christians and about 1,000 immigrant churches. They add colour to the already complex religious landscape of this country, where high levels of secularization are
combined with growing interest in alternative forms of spirituality and a booming body of immigrant Muslim believers.

Christian immigrant churches in the Netherlands are highly diverse in ethnic and theological background – a diversity that was expressed in the selection of specific communities for this research. The primary case study was the church of the Ghanaian Seventh-day Adventists in Amsterdam. In addition, fourteen other immigrant churches were studied, varying from Japanese Evangelicals to Serbian Orthodox to Iraqi Catholics, etc. The churches and their evangelistic goals, activities, and results were studied by means of cultural anthropological methods: participation, observation, and semi-structured interviews.

It was found that, in line with the idea of ‘reversed mission’, most immigrant Christians in the Netherlands had the desire to reach the native secularized Dutch. Often they were shocked that the Netherlands was not as Christian as they, on the basis of Europe’s historical role in world missions, had expected. Immigrant Christians critiqued the country’s apparent lack of Christian morals. Nevertheless, most immigrant churches focused their evangelism on fellow immigrants. Specific immigrant groups were targeted by deliberately selecting them as recipients of promotional materials, adapting the content of evangelistic tools and topics to them, using particular tongues and cultural symbols, ministering through immigrant networks, etc. However, some mission practices were directed to native Dutch. Some churches attempted to build bridges by teaching evangelism-minded church members about Dutch culture or by working together with Dutch Christians. Others invited Dutch acquaintances to church events or used spiritual techniques such as prayer and fasting. As for the results of immigrant churches’ mission activities, most converts in the churches were immigrants, some of whom switched denominations or even religions in order to fellowship in a culturally familiar setting. However, there was a minority of native Dutch converts in many churches. The Dutch were especially attracted to the innovative social and religious tenets of immigrant churches, such as their strong sense of community and knowledge of evil spirits. Orthodox churches, with their highly experiential liturgies, were especially appealing to the Dutch.

The gap between the strong wish to reach native Dutch people and the much weaker actual attempt and success to reach the Dutch was explained by several factors. On the one hand, immigrant Christians felt severely limited by their marginal status in Dutch society. In discussing their wish to re-evangelize the Netherlands, they pointed to the complications of their limited command of the Dutch language, racial discrimination, class differences, and a variety of group-specific prejudices. On the other hand, the focus on evangelizing fellow immigrants paradoxically had the ad-
vantage of enhancing the position of immigrant churches in various social domains. Evangelizing immigrants helped the churches to establish themselves locally: they capitalized on their strength to offer a cultural home to immigrants, who were often looking for precisely that. Moreover, by evangelizing immigrants, immigrant churches positioned themselves in the best way in the prevailing inter-church and inter-religious competition within immigrant groups. Further, surprisingly, the ‘ethnic’ nature of the mission of immigrant churches in some ways attracted the native Dutch. This was evident from Dutch people’s appreciation of the novel social and religious practices of immigrant churches. Finally, immigrant churches that were part of global denominations acquired a meaningful and important place within this organizational structure by focusing on the evangelism of groups that they were uniquely equipped for—groups that their brothers and sisters in faith found difficult to reach.

Generalizing from the Dutch context, I conclude that the phenomenon of ‘reversed mission’ is still little developed but can surely be detected in some ways. Though the overall mission focus of immigrant churches in the Netherlands was on fellow immigrants, they desired to reach the native Dutch and in some cases attempted and even succeeded in doing so. Whether the further integration of non-Western Christian immigrants in the West will lead to a stronger mission movement to reach ‘natives’, which is something that many immigrant Christians hope, remains to be seen.