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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Responses of African Pentecostal Churches to African Refugees in Dusseldorf Between 2015 and 2020: A Case Study of Mission and Migration

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Abstract: This study investigated selected African Pentecostal Churches' (APCs) response to the plight of African refugees and asylum seekers in Düsseldorf between 2015 and 2020. The study explored the compassionate element of the *missio Dei* and utilised the interpretative framework of Matthew 25:31-46 as its conceptual framework. Although APCs serve as a context for reception and integration of African refugees and asylum seekers, and their leaders see themselves as missionaries sent by God to do mission in the research context, their response lacked proactivity and compassion. This was largely because APCs did not approach African refugees and asylum seekers to assist them but waited for the latter to approach them for assistance.

KEY WORDS: African Pentecostalism, Refugees, Mission, Evangelism, Gospel witness

Introduction

A broken world such as ours has no future if there is no compassion. The regularity and complexity of the contemporary social challenges such as the refugee crisis makes religious response crucial. This study investigated selected African Pentecostal Churches'

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(APCs) response to the plight of African refugees and asylum seekers in Düsseldorf between 2015 and 2020.

The study explored the compassionate element of the *missio Dei* and utilised the interpretative framework of Matthew 25:31-46 as its conceptual framework. It adopted the universal interpretative approach of the above Bible text to express the place of compassion in Christian mission due to its significance for a helpless world such as ours (Lutz, 2005; Brown, 2016).

This study comprises seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the topic under investigation and discussed the main elements of the research process. Chapter 2 explored existing literature on the topic and described the conceptual framework underpinning the research. Chapter 3 discussed the data collection and findings. Chapter 4 presented the data analysis and interpretation of Phase One. Chapter 5 presented the data analysis and interpretation of Phase Two. Chapter 6 examined the issue of identity and integration as key components from the data. Chapter 7 provided a summary, recommendations, and a conclusion.

The study provides primary data for discussions around mission, migration, and integration. To provide a general overview of the study, this paper covers the following areas: what the study is about, the purpose of the study, methods used, findings made, discussion on the findings, recommendations, areas of further research, and conclusion.

What is the Study About?

This study is about projecting the compassionate element of the *missio Dei* as a paradigm for Christian mission in the context of contemporary international migration crisis. To achieve this, it investigated the responses of selected APCs to the refugee crisis in the light of their mandate as a compassionate community.

According to available statistics, approximately one in seven people migrate daily (IOM, 2014). At the end of 2015, about sixty-five million people globally had been forced to become displaced according to the UNHCR. By 2020, the number shot up to over eighty million (Wallis, 2020). Germany received over a million refugees due to its open borders policy between 2015 and 2018. Some of the Africans amongst them migrate to Europe as refugees and asylum seekers and become members of the APCs. They generally face

challenges such as language skills, accommodation, emotional stress, employment and legal documentation (Hanciles, 2021; Bevans, 2013).

Anderson (2013) points out that APCs are the fastest growing Christian denomination. They are the largest beneficiaries of the arrival of African refugees and asylum seekers in the research context and share similar identity with them (i.e., identity as Christians, Africans, and migrants). Historically, the prayer group out of which APCs emerged in Dusseldorf was started by African refugees and asylum seekers. APCs are therefore expected to offer a compassionate response to the plight of African refugees and asylum seekers. The study therefore focused on the responses of selected APCs to the refugee crisis in the research context.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to provide primary data for informed discussions on the church's response to the plight of the poor, particularly African refugees, and asylum seekers in Düsseldorf.

In their report 'Out of the Shadows: Shining a Light on Irregular Migration', Runde, Yayboke and Gallego (2019) present the political responses thus far to the challenges of contemporary migration. The report looks at the Puebla Process for North and Central America (1996), Jordan Compact, Colombo Process (2003) and Abu Dhabi Dialogue (2008), which were meant for Asia, and a Marshall Plan to cater for Africa (2017) which recently came up during Germany's presidency of the G20. Mention is made in this report of the efforts by IOM and the UN to offer protection to refugees and irregular migrants through the Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration (2018) and Global Compact on Refugees (2016). All these political responses have yielded some results but have not fully mitigated the migration challenge.

Adedibu (2016) focused on how churches in London related to Europe's Migration and Refugee crisis. He explored the non-response of African Pentecostals in public discourse utilising the interpretative framework of Luke 10:29. This follows his observation of responses from the traditional churches like the Church of England, Roman Catholic and Methodist Church. He asked the question: who is my neighbour? This study is not looking at the issue of "non-response" of the APCs to the refugee crisis but "response"

because it considers non-response as a response. It is also not looking at the APCs' response only in public discourse but also in terms of practical assistance to the refugees.

Hämäläinen (2019), in his article 'The Significance of Refugees and Asylum Seekers to the European Pentecostal Church', indicates that following the arrival of millions of refugees in Europe, the Pentecostal European Fellowship (PEF) set out to find out how Pentecostal churches were receiving refugees in Europe. The article mentions that the PEF issued a three-pointed statement to express their concern for the refugee situation in Europe:

1. PEF encourages its members to show Christian love towards the refugees according to the example of the Good Samaritan.
2. PEF calls for prayer concerning this difficult situation.
3. PEF encourages governments and authorities to show empathy toward those who have been in danger in their countries, believing their nations will be blessed in helping those in need, while showing wisdom and justice in the whole process. (Hämäläinen, 2019:117-118)

Hämäläinen questions the practical value of this PEF statement to the refugee situation. Although he mentions a couple of donations to some refugees in Greece and North Macedonia, he bemoans the absence of a research to show the response of Pentecostals to the refugee crisis in Europe (Hämäläinen, 2019).

The International Church Convent (ICC), which is a body made up of 130 migrant churches within the Rhine-Ruhr metropolitan area in Germany, responded to the refugee crisis. They organised church services for the refugees and put their experiences as migrants at the disposal of current refugees. The responses of both the ICC and PEF are in conversation with the focus of this study; the difference here is that the focus of this study is to look in more specific terms at the response of APCs who not only share with African refugees the experience of migration and the Christian faith, but also similar cultural identity (Charbonnier et al., (eds.), 2018; Währisch-Oblau, 2009).

So far, no documentary evidence exists in the research context to show African Pentecostals' response to the refugee crisis. It is this knowledge gap which this study seeks to fill. This research therefore, addresses the knowledge gap regarding the responses of APCs to the plight of African refugees and asylum seekers in the research

context. It provides primary data for academic and non-academic discussions in the area of mission and migration. It lends support to constructive mission praxis within African Pentecostal Christianity.

Methods

As qualitative research, data was collected through semi-structured online interviews and examination of written church documents. These data collection tools were used because they are suitable for qualitative research and the Coronavirus pandemic dictated that face-to-face interaction was not permitted. Research participants for the online interviews were selected through a non-probability sampling method. This is because not every refugee or asylum seeker had a chance to be selected. As such the researcher was purposeful in selecting those who had lived in Dusseldorf at least between 2015 and 2020 (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Sarantakos, 2013).

In all, four APC leaders and twenty African refugees/asylum seekers (ten from Ghana, five from Nigeria, three from Togo, two from Cameroon, two from Zimbabwe and one each from South Sudan and Guinea) were interviewed. Out of the twenty-four participants, fifteen were males and nine females.

The data collected were analysed thematically following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's method of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis has various steps but the most popular which was adopted by the researcher follows the process of understanding the data collected, developing codes, developing themes, revising themes, defining themes, and then finally writing up (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Sarantakos, 2013; Guest et al., 2012).

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study from both the interviews and examination of written church documents were as follows.

- (i) African refugees and asylum seekers have pressing needs such as language skills, basic legal orientation, emotional therapy/counselling, accommodation, employment/financial and prayer support.

- (ii) APC leaders see themselves as missionaries sent by God to carry out mission in the research context; however, their response to the refugee crisis lacks proactivity and compassion.
- (iii) APCs serve as a context for reception and integration of African refugees and asylum seekers in the research context.
- (iv) Lack of written social action policy within APCs in Düsseldorf due to their oral orientation.
- (v) African refugees and asylum seekers confessed to the use of creative survival tactics, many of which conflict with their faith as Christians. Some of these survival tactics are marriage of convenience, pregnancy, LGBTQ+ identity, withdrawal, and creative stories.
- (vi) APCs' lack of proactivity stems from their priority in mission and negative past experiences with some African refugees and asylum seekers who received assistance in the hope that they were going to stay with the congregations, but disappeared.
- (vii) The use of identity as a tool for Christian mission, economic and social integration of African migrants in the research field was evident.
- (viii) African refugees and asylum seekers demonstrated enormous faith in God to turn their situation around.
- (ix) Volunteerism is a paradigm for mission in the research context. This is due to the seeming difficulty on the part of the APCs in gaining access to refugee camps.
- (x) Lack of public advocacy on the part of the APCs. Contrary to the expectations of many African refugees and asylum seekers, APCs did not engage in any form of public advocacy on their behalf.
- (xi) Weak relationship between the APCs and civil authorities. The APCs do not appear to have any formal channel of communication with state institutions or authorities.

Discussion of Findings

Mooney (2013) conducted a survey about viewing religion as a context for reception in a case study of Haitian immigrants in Miami, Montreal, and Paris. The survey considered the

religious landscape in terms of the history and contemporary dynamics of each of the three countries. It showed that the consensual differentiation between religion and state as is the case in the United States of America promoted incorporation or integration of immigrants. Religious institutions provided immigrants with a common meeting place, offered them social services, and helped create an identity. It concludes, “Haitians in Miami have greater indicators of symbolic and structural incorporation than in Montreal or Paris” (Mooney, 2013:100).

The survey affirmed the role of the Haitian church in assisting the integration of Haitians in Miami:

Because many Haitians who had arrived in Miami were undocumented or awaiting decisions on asylum claims, and because of racial prejudice and language difficulties, many of the poorest Haitians were afraid of directly approaching government institutions that were frequently highly bureaucratic, unfriendly towards them, and unfamiliar with Haitian culture and language. To bridge this gap, the leaders of Notre Dame and the Toussaint Centre mediated between Haitian immigrants and the government in three ways: a) political advocacy, b) social service provision, and c) community organizing (Mooney, 2013:102).

A similar attempt was made in Montreal. The Haitian religious leaders in Montreal in collaboration with the Catholic clergy through their Christian faith “sought to improve Haitians’ reception by the Quebecois government and to build a strong community to support Haitians’ incorporation” (Mooney, 2013:105).

Contrasting Mooney’s survey with my study, it does appear that migrant congregations are vital centres for reception and integration of their vulnerable compatriots. APC leaders in the face of the findings of my research suggest lack of funds, non-registration of some congregations and insincerity on the part of some African refugees and asylum seekers who in the past approached them for assistance as reasons for the lack of proactivity toward the needs of their disadvantaged kinsmen.

Although these reasons are cogent, the findings of my research prompt the question of the extent to which Pentecostals’ approach to mission which is criticised by some scholars as being heavily deficient of social action influenced the mission approach of APCs in Düsseldorf. Scholars like Harold, Amisah and Währisch-Oblau have suggested

that social issues do not naturally form part of the Pentecostal ethos (Harold, 2019; Amissah, 2020; Währisch-Oblau, 2009).

Warrington, Asamoah-Gyadu and Ma et al. on the other hand, suggest that although historically social engagements had not been a major priority of Pentecostals, there is a shift in the above position in contemporary times. Warrington in his article, 'Social Transformation in the Missions of Pentecostals: A Priority or a Bonus?' (2015) explores Pentecostal attitudes to and engagement with social issues both in the past and in contemporary times. He notes that fundamentally, Pentecostals are heavily centred on spiritual conversions rather than social and economic transformation. Their activities are limited to preaching rather than social action. In contemporary times however, many Pentecostal churches have become more involved in social activities to bring transformation to their communities. He mentions the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in Brazil as a Pentecostal church which participates in national politics and has a political party (Warrington, 2015).

Asamoah-Gyadu (2010) also notes the relationship between Pentecostalism and politics in contemporary times and suggests that Pentecostalism and politics have lately become companions. This is because in the past Pentecostals considered the world's political and economic systems as tainted. The movement, therefore, did not show a keen interest in mainstream national politics. It rather focused on creating alternative institutions. The focus was to grow a new breed of leaders with the hope that they will in future take up national positions and provide quality moral leadership. These leaders are expected to transform the spaces they occupy. The intent is to "take territories and raise champions" for the transformation of society (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010).

Ma et al. (2014) note the economic impact of the Pentecostal Movement. They assert that Pentecostalism has recently focused heavily on empowering its members economically through sermons and teachings on prosperity. The drive for upward social mobility is anchored in the "prosperity gospel" and practical seminars for poverty eradication. This new dimension is a paradigm shift for Pentecostal Christianity and has given the church a voice in economic discourse on the continent (Ma et al., 2014).

Whilst one cannot dispute the observations of these scholars, the findings of my research suggest that APCs in the research context require a revision in their approach to mission. The need for a comprehensive social action policy, creation of African migrants'

support fund and formation of humanitarian corridors to save lives cannot be overemphasised.

Recommendations

For African refugees and asylum seekers, the church is more than a religious institution. APCs represent a context for multiple functions. It is this notion of APCs' importance obtained from the data collected and analysis made that informs the recommendations. Recommendations discussed in this section are divided into three broad areas, namely: mission, migration, and integration.

Mission

- (i) Re-evaluation of mission praxis – Mission practically has both spiritual and physical content. Deducing from how APC leaders see themselves and what is happening on the ground concerning their response to the plight of African refugees, a re-evaluation of mission is needed. The researcher recommends that APCs in the research context re-evaluate their concept of mission to overcome any gaps.
- (ii) The need for a comprehensive social action policy – The practical expression of compassion toward the disadvantaged in society fulfils the demands of the *missio Dei*. Proclamation of the gospel alone is not enough to satisfy God's mission of rescuing and restoring creation. So far, the data collected showed that APCs in Düsseldorf do not have a comprehensive social action policy that advocates for the caring of both living and non-living resources of creation. The need to develop a social action policy to guide the church's social action, as well as advocate for the judicious use of the resources, is important.
- (iii) Revision of welfare schemes to give them a compassionate identity – One of the issues identified in the data collected is the lack of compassion in framing welfare schemes. In most congregations, welfare benefits are tied to a person's ability to contribute to either the congregation or the welfare scheme financially. In this way, the poor who find themselves in dire need

- but have not contributed are denied any benefit. This situation requires revision because it is un-Christian and lacks the virtue of compassion.
- (iv) Creation of volunteer groups - From the data collected and analysis made, the issue of volunteer groups became apparent. The creation of volunteer groups to offer services to the poor, or the church supporting volunteer groups outside the church to undertake social activities, proved vital. It is recommended that given the peculiarity of the context, APCs should form volunteer groups to carry out the church's social activities.
 - (v) APCs should network for aid to support refugees – As part of the church's corporate social responsibility, APCs in the research context can network with other organisations and secure food, water, and clothing for refugees within their reach. Whilst some organisations have material resources to support people on the margins, the church has the human resource and credibility required for social work.
 - (vi) Chaplaincy – Unfortunately, some African migrants have gotten involved in irregularities which have landed them behind bars or at the deportation camps. Chaplaincy is one of the key areas APC leaders can specialise to support their unfortunate kinsmen. Due to the peculiarity of the language challenge in the research area, Africans who are in prison, or at the deportation camp, and who do not speak German may find life extremely tough. Visits to such persons will provide great support. It will also reveal the areas of difficulties for appropriate response by the church. There are also instances of Africans who are admitted to hospital but do not have any relatives around to visit. Hospital chaplaincy is another area APCs can take up. Here, the focus is not only on church members but Africans in general who are admitted to the hospital. The emphasis is on Africans because of the issue of language and culture.
 - (vii) There is the need for emphasis on a theology of mission and migration within African Pentecostal theology. This projects migration issues to the centre of the theological discourse. A well-defined theology of migration will increase consciousness and elicit a theological response to migration and integration challenges. Such a theology considers the place of

refugees and migrants in God's missiological plan (Montgomery, 2012; Padilla and Phan (eds.), 2013).

- (viii) The need for a common dialogue – APCs are not the only migrant African Christian body in the research context. There are also Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Baptists, and Adventists. Through a common dialogue, all these African churches can come together and put in place mechanisms to help the vulnerable African community.

Migration

- (i) Reducing economic migration – There are root causes for the mass movement of people across the globe particularly from the south to the north. Some of the root causes for this are wars, persecutions, pandemics, political instability, climate change, and lack of economic opportunities (Padilla and Phan (eds.), 2013). Already, some APCs mobilise financial resources to undertake projects such as school buildings in Africa. This initiative should be expanded to target poverty alleviation in Africa. In this scheme, credit unions could be set up to provide soft loans for the youth through their local branches to stem the current tide of migration.
- (ii) Partnership with NGOs for poverty alleviation - Another economic impact APCs could make in Africa to reduce economic migration is to offer financial support to NGOs offering skill training to young people in deprived communities. Already, several local NGOs are striving to provide skill training to unskilled young people on the continent. Some of the areas include dressmaking, soap making, and information communication technology (ICT). However, funding is a problem for them. Through a partnership with some of them, unemployment which leads to agitation and political unrest in some communities is eliminated.
- (iii) Advocacy against illegal migration – Africans living in Europe know that many of their compatriots try to enter Europe through unapproved routes. Many of these people either die on the high seas or in the desert. There are instances where traffickers take captive some migrants, thus cutting short their dream of reaching Europe. Those who make it to Europe usually

recount their experiences in horror. APCs can be at the forefront of advocacy against illegal migration (MacGregor, 2018).

Integration

- (i) Formation of humanitarian corridors – APCs can model their responsibility regarding the integration of African refugees according to what the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy is doing. In the Italian experience, the churches initiated what they called “humanitarian corridors”. This initiative was designed to save lives when they realised that many migrants were dying on the high seas. Their efforts facilitate safe and legal access to Italy from outside the EU. They make use of the national valid humanitarian visa as contained in Article 25 of the Schengen Visa Code.
- (ii) APCs as a context for integration – APCs have to their advantage Christian identity, African identity, and experience as migrants. These circumstances of the APCs in Düsseldorf qualify them to be classified as a privileged minority group. They can therefore officially position themselves as a context for reception and integration of their kith and kin (Mooney, 2013).
- (iii) APCs as an interface between African refugees and local authorities – In Chapter 6, the argument was made that integration takes place at the local level. Therefore, integration policies must consider the perspectives of refugees to make it the task of all. This argument finds practical expression when APCs position themselves as an interface between refugees with whom they share common experiences and the local authorities. This relationship allows them to make inputs towards integration policy formulation at the local level. It also gives them the platform to argue for “community-welcome” culture initiatives in integration policies where there are none.
- (iv) APCs as an interface between African refugees and African culture – Africans are typically brought up to view life through communalistic, religious, and humanistic lenses. They may share this worldview with other cultures. Nonetheless, being communalistic creates recognition for

extended family ties, friendships, and other relationships. As such, there remains a connection among Africans. Repositioning themselves, APCs could become the platform for African cultural education and formation. This is important as some of the second and third generation of African migrants in the research area have little contact with African culture.

- (v) APCs and mass media – The mass media provides APCs with enormous opportunities to educate Africans in the research field. APCs are noted for their extensive use of the mass media to promote the gospel. However, in addition to promulgating the gospel they can also disseminate useful tidbits on integration via these communication platforms to facilitate the integration of African refugees (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010).
- (vi) Legal support – Sometimes the interviews and processes refugees and asylum seekers go through require legal coaching. Not every one of them can afford the services of a lawyer or legal aid. APCs as a matter of policy can arrange to make legal aid available to refugees and asylum seekers amongst them so that they are appropriately represented in the law court.
- (vii) Creation of African migrants' support fund – Here, the focus is on all African migrant churches in Düsseldorf. Since they do not all have the same numerical strength and economic power, it is sometimes difficult to meet the financial requests they receive. The researcher recommends that all the African migrant churches come together and create a fund purposely for alleviating the financial burden of refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal migrants of African descent.
- (viii) Church twinning – In some cases, asylum seekers are repatriated after an unsuccessful application for a legal residence. Having lost their former selves, professions, and significant contacts since their migration, returning empty-handed is a difficult ask. Some of them because of the trauma of being denied a residence permit develop mental health issues. Such persons require care and coping mechanisms to live a productive life again in their country of origin. It is for this reason that the idea of church twinning is important (Ireland (ed.), 2017).
- (ix) APCs and Reintegration Policies in Africa – There is a need for APCs to be involved in shaping reintegration policies in Africa. Whilst the EU and IOM

combine efforts to help African countries to develop comprehensive policies for reintegration, APCs can support the initiative with their wealth of experience as migrants.

Areas of Further Research

This study provides the platform for further research. Thus, further research could focus on why APCs in Düsseldorf do not take the initiative in reaching out to help new migrant arrivals, but rather wait to be approached by them. Another possible area of research could focus on the contribution of African refugees and asylum seekers to the operation of APCs in the research context or look at how refugees see themselves in the context of mission in the local congregation. Lastly, research could also be done to assess the impact of APCs on the socio-economic conditions of their home and destination countries within a defined period.

Conclusion

The study concludes that African refugees and asylum seekers have many needs and require help from well-meaning institutions including APCs. Although APCs serve as a context for reception and integration of African refugees and asylum seekers, and their leaders see themselves as missionaries sent by God to do mission in the research context, their response lacks proactivity and compassion. This is because APCs did not approach African refugees and asylum seekers to assist them but waited for the latter to approach them for assistance. APCs' lack of proactivity and compassion toward the plight of African refugees and asylum seekers is a contributing factor to the latter's adoption of unethical survival tactics.

The never-ending sight of migration challenges in the world makes religious response vital. Let me end with this quote by Bishop Rosemarie Wenner, former head of the Methodist church in Germany, "Let us meet people and not problems."

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