

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

Baptist churches in Africa (34)

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Longwe, Hany
Publisher	Regnum Books International
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-06-23 00:07:48
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166289

(34) BAPTIST CHURCHES IN AFRICA

Hany Longwe

The Baptist Union is a denomination where the local church is paramount. They do not speak of themselves as 'The Baptist Church', but rather as members of a local congregation or convention, and so on. They prefer to speak of themselves as convention, union, fellowship, assembly, association or churches, for example: Baptist Convention of Angola, Baptist Union of Gambia, Baptist Fellowship of Zambia, African Baptist Assembly, Association of Baptist Churches in Rwanda and Free Baptist Churches of Burundi. This is in reference to local Baptist churches that are characterized mainly by their emphasis upon voluntary association, congregational form of local churches or congregational form of church government and religious liberty.

History of Baptists in Africa

In 1792 black British Baptist ex-soldiers from Nova Scotia in Canada established the oldest Baptist congregation in Africa, the Regent Road Baptist Church, in Freetown, Sierra Leone. In 1822 Lott Carey, along with six other freed slaves from the USA, planted a second congregation in West Africa, Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia, Liberia. In spite of their modest early beginnings, Baptist work grew, not only in West Africa but also on the continent as a whole, albeit that the growth was slow.

Nigeria is the third country where Baptists developed the denomination in West Africa before World War I. In 1850, Thomas Bowen, a Southern Baptist Convention (USA) missionary, arrived at Badagry from where he proceeded inland to Abeokuta with the aim of reaching Ighoho. Two years later he was able to establish work there among the Yoruba.¹ The Yoruba spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to other parts of Nigeria and West Africa. The Nigerian Baptist Convention boasts of having 10,000 churches across the country, while the Mambilla Baptist Convention has 261. This makes Nigeria the most productive Baptist field in Africa.² Baptists are found in every country in West Africa except for Mauritania.

In 1843, the first Baptists arrived in Equatorial Africa. This West Indies Baptist Mission, many of whose members were freed Jamaican slaves who wanted to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to their African homeland, began work on the island of Fernando Po.³ However the Spanish terminated the work in 1845. The first Baptist church in Cameroon was formed in 1849. German colonial rulers made it difficult for missionaries to work together, which led some local Baptists to work independently.⁴ By 2012 there were over 1,532 Baptist congregations in Cameroon.

In 1880, American Baptists established themselves in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the decision of the Livingstone Inland Mission these Baptists took over all the mission stations on the Congo River and then began to develop new stations of their own. In 1886 the black American Baptist missionaries arrived to further Baptist work in the Congo.⁵ The Norwegian Baptists entered northern Congo and were followed by the American Mennonite Baptists in 1919 or 1920. There are over 5,300 Baptist churches in the Democratic Republic of Congo according to Baptist World Alliance statistics.

¹ Baptist World Alliance Heritage and Identity Commission, "Who are the Baptists? – Africa," www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/hst-afr.htm.

² Baptist World Alliance – Statistics, <https://www.bwanet.org/about-us2/statistics>.

³ Hildebrandt, *History of the Church*, 132.

⁴ Hildebrandt, *History of the Church*, 163.

⁵ Hildebrandt, *History of the Church*, 168.

In 1921, an independent Baptist mission from the USA entered Central African Republic and it was followed by another from Sweden. Central African Republic is now home to over 750 Baptist churches.

Baptists had a weak start in South Africa and a late entry in East Africa. In 1823 English Baptists established the first Baptist congregation in the Republic of South Africa among English settlers. Later in the century, German settlers also formed their own Baptist churches. In 1887 the mainly white churches formed the Baptist Union of South Africa. The Union also included the early African Baptist churches established by the work of the German Baptists and the National Black American Baptists. They were later incorporated into the Union as separate associations called the Banthu Baptist Church. About 1888, work began among the people of mixed race, and in 1903 among people of Asian origin. The Union later included the Afrikaanse Baptist Kerk, the Indian Baptist Mission and the National Indian Baptist Association. In 1987 the black Baptist Convention withdrew its associational status from the Baptist Union to form an independent group called the Baptist Convention of South Africa.⁶ In 2004 there were five bodies of Baptists in the Republic of South Africa: Baptist Convention (then Banthu Baptist Church), Baptist Union, Baptist Mission, Baptist Association and Afrikaanse Baptiste Kerk. There are over 820 Baptist churches throughout the Republic of South Africa.

In 1818, in an attempt to enter the Congo, Baptists from England arrived in Angola. The comparative weakness of the Roman Catholic mission and Portuguese colonial rule in the interior provided the opportunity for the Baptists to be the first Protestant denomination to open many stations in the northern part of Angola from 1878.⁷ Today, Angola has nearly 600 Baptist congregations.

The English Baptist Joseph Booth began Baptist work in Malawi. Booth was instrumental in establishing three Baptist missions in Malawi: the Baptist Industrial Mission in 1895, the Providence Industrial Mission in 1900, and the Seventh Day Plainfield Mission in 1901.⁸ Southern Baptists of America influenced the establishment and government registration of the Baptist Convention of Malawi in 1970.⁹ There are approximately 2,600 Baptist churches in Malawi.

Although Baptists entered Mozambique in 1921, it was only in 1968 that the United Baptist Church, now the largest Protestant body in the nation, emerged. Baptists are also present in Zambia with nearly 3,000 churches and in Zimbabwe with just over 480 churches. There is a sizeable community of over 55 Baptist churches on the island of Madagascar.

In East Africa, Baptists were first in Burundi in 1928 and Rwanda in 1939. In 1956, they were in Kenya and Tanzania, from where they established work in other neighbouring countries. In 1950, Baptist work began in Ethiopia, which now has over fifty churches. There are approximately 2,500 churches in Uganda, 3,000 churches in Kenya and over 3,300 in Tanzania.

Baptists have a small presence in Egypt. An Egyptian, Seddick W. Girgis, was instrumental in establishing a community of Baptists that numbered 500 by the end of 2010.¹⁰ Only recently have Baptists increased their presence in South Sudan, mainly through assistance from Uganda, Kenya and the USA. In spite of the political situation, the Baptist Convention of South Sudan has approximately 1,000 members. Nevertheless, Baptist presence and activities are still very weak in the rest of North Africa, where Islam now dominates where in ancient times Christianity flourished. Despite the strong efforts of goodwill from other religions, denominations and other institutions over many decades, the denial of freedom to practise

⁶ Louise Kretzschmar, *Privatization of the Christian Faith: Mission, Social Ethics and the South African Baptists*. Legon: Legon Theological Studies Series (1998), 28.

⁷ Steven Paas, *The Faith Moves South: A History of the Church in Africa*, Zomba: Kachere Series (2006), 83.

⁸ Hany Longwe, *Christians by Grace – Baptists by Choice: A History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi*. Mzuzu: Mzuni Press; Zomba: Kachere Series (2011), 30.

⁹ Longwe, *Christians by Grace*, 68.

¹⁰ “Who are the Baptists? – Africa”, www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/hst-afr.htm.

religion is prevalent in this part of Africa as in many other parts of the world.¹¹ This has affected not only Baptists, but all religious witness, whether Christian or otherwise.

In many African countries, Baptists are in the minority, and in a few, they exist only as individuals but not as congregations. The saying 'To be a Baptist is to be a missionary' has been demonstrated in many ways and illustrated by the fact that Baptist witness in many areas in Africa was started by laypeople who had moved out on their own to settle, trade or work in other areas. Baptists are zealous for evangelistic outreach and to a great extent the growth of Baptist work in Africa can be attributed to this passion.¹² Like other Baptists, African Baptists have certain common features that stem from their historical background and theological heritage.

Baptist Distinctiveness

Baptists in Africa express some evidence of Anabaptist influence in spirit and thought blended with a moderate Calvinism. Although the Anabaptist movement may have been nothing more than an episode in sixteenth-century Germany, no other reformation movement so symbolized the break between the medieval and the modern worlds. Its influence outweighed the number of its adherents. Their rejection of the Constantinian state and church relationship, their emphasis on believer's baptism, their belief in religious and civic liberty, and their stress on mission and social ethics more significantly influenced the Baptist tradition than did the Separatists in which African Baptists are rooted.¹³

If properly understood, the Anabaptist concept of church, with all its ramifications, provides a clue to the essence of Anabaptism. The implementation of the believers' church is what separated Anabaptists from the Magisterial Reformers. Since then, several developments have occurred among Baptist churches. Baptists find guidelines for the church and Christian life in the New Testament alone. They do not see any justification of state churches even in the Old Testament. They acknowledge the legitimacy of the state as God-given but deny its jurisdiction in matters of religion. People should not be coerced to join the church. Baptists insist that the state must recognize both its limitations and responsibilities. Although there are variations of interpretations, Baptists believe that the demand for religious liberty is nothing less than a biblical principle inherent in the gospel.¹⁴

The foundation of Baptist ecclesiology is congregational polity. The local church is fully the church, the body of Christ, and not a branch of a national association. The local churches are competent to determine a strategy of missions in their locality, and to appoint their ministers and other officers. The meeting of the whole local church remains the first authority for all decision making. Nonetheless, the congregational government has been marred and distorted by an individualism that insists on the independence of the local congregation rather than practising its interdependence. In interdependence, co-operation and the combination of talents and gifts is stressed. This is seen in the New Testament and in the seventeenth-century English Baptist churches where constant movement of apostles, preachers, messages of encouragement and letters between the churches testified to interdependence. The positive aspects of congregational government are that it prevents the misuse of power by the church leaders, propagates the growth of maturity and responsibility on the part of the members, and affirms the principle of freedom in Christ. However, when congregational government is misunderstood, it can retard progress and promote

¹¹ Tony Cupit, "Religious Freedom and the Baptist Perspective," www.bwanet.org/Ministries/Human%20Rights/rfreedom.htm.

¹² B. Uche Enyioha, "Baptist Presence in Africa", in *All Africa Baptist Theological Educators' Conference*, Ibadan: All Africa Baptist Fellowship (2000), 69. See also Longwe, *Christians by Grace*, 73-238.

¹³ Kretzschmar, *Privatization of the Christian Faith*, 333.

¹⁴ Earl E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan (1996), 299.

the exploitation and oppression of the leadership. This happens when the congregations choose to disregard the position and responsibility placed on the leadership.¹⁵

Beyond the local church, Baptists organize themselves into voluntary associations. Early Baptists met for fellowship, evangelistic co-operation, and clarification of their belief and practice. These associations later developed into national organizations. Each local church or congregation is free in its policies, and indeed duty-bound by the concerns of the gospel, to enter into covenant relationship with other Christians, both locally, nationally and internationally to support mission work.

Being a church also means a coming together of people who have personally confessed their sins and acknowledged Jesus as Saviour and Lord of their life, received baptism, and continued the life of discipleship of being learners of God's Word. Baptists believe that baptism is a commitment to follow Christ and that a call to repentance and a 'born again' experience is at the heart of Christ's call to discipleship. The church is composed of believers who are priestly, meaning that they relate to and act for God.

According to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers that Baptists cherish, no minister is mediator between God and people. Baptists have always believed that the vertical relationship also implies a horizontal expression of all believers being priests and servants to one another. As a result, there is no distinction in terms of function between the clergy and laity. This means that the individual ultimately must answer only to God and not to human authority, without overlooking the shared nature of the Christian priesthood. The priesthood of all believers has as much to do with the individual believer as it has with the church, with Christ as the great high priest. Like all other Baptists worldwide, Baptists in Africa, being marked by such diversities of cultures, racial identities, and ways of expressing theological convictions, have difficulty agreeing on the precise language for describing the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Since the individual ultimately must answer only to God, Baptists also believe in freedom of conscience in defence of religious freedom, that is, no authority or religion can force anyone to believe. Soul liberty is at the centre of their understanding of human nature before God, and at the same time soul liberty is the force that affirms the principles of Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone and Scripture alone. This liberty allows not only Baptists, but also other individuals, to make choices about faith and commitment, unfettered by outside agencies. Baptists are a diverse people with no overarching rule demanding common thought or practice of such freedom. Yet there is unity among them because freedom from both outside and inside orders has meant freedom to develop in each situation a style of being a church that they believe best serves the interests of the Kingdom of God.

Contribution to Social Witness

Baptists in Africa have generally been lukewarm on social and political issues mainly due to the Baptist tenet of separation of church and state, which has sometimes been carried to extremes. They have not been fully active in matters of social, economic or political empowerment of people although these areas of concern cannot be totally divorced from Christianity. The total indifference displayed by Baptists in Africa on the issues that impinge on the lives of the people cannot be part of authentic Baptist heritage. They have not been in the forefront of the fight against apartheid and such issues as corruption, prostitution and women and child abuse. That has not left a good image of Baptists in Africa. They have failed to serve as effective agents of change.¹⁶ Some reasons why Baptists have had a lesser role in social reform than other

¹⁵ Louise Kretzschmar, "Authentic Baptist Leadership in Africa", in *All Africa Baptist Theological Educators' Conference*, Ibadan: All Africa Baptist Fellowship (2000), 43-44.

¹⁶ Enyioha, "Baptist Presence in Africa," 71.

denominations include: evangelism priority, separation of church and state, individualism and the theological liberalism of much of the social gospel.¹⁷

North of the Zambezi River, sub-Saharan Africa's encounter with Christianity has been different from that of the people south of the Zambezi and especially south of the Limpopo where apartheid imposed racial divisions. Baptists in these two regions of the sub-Sahara have at times responded by variously participating in social revolt, withdrawing from social involvement and being part of the nonconformist movements. At the same time they have not been spared from constant temptations to abuse their faith to satisfy political and economic interests. Since many of their adherents are uncritical, uninformed and intellectually and theologically poor, Baptist churches experience at first hand these temptations of abuse of power within their own ranks. However some Baptists have drawn on their rich theological heritage to escape from the limitations of their background or group interests and develop new religious perceptions and structures. This is appropriate for the promotion and facilitation of social well-being of all peoples of Africa.¹⁸

One of the limitations to Baptists' meaningful contributions to social witness, apart from their numbers in different countries, is the congregational structures of church government. Though Baptists, while insisting on local autonomy, do have a national 'convention', this is a comparatively weak structure, with very limited possibilities of leadership speaking for the church. The Executive Committee can make statements as the Executive Committee, but the 'resolutions or statements are not binding'. In Baptist churches therefore, social involvement more often takes an individual rather than a corporate form, with the local congregation's support if the initiative is viewed as a corporate responsibility. Because of their very strong doctrine of separation of church and state, Baptist churches are usually not keen on public comment on social and political issues.¹⁹

Religious freedom and freedom of conscience force individual Baptists or groups to challenge personally the social issues at hand. They have had to work through other organizations to achieve reform. Many join special interest groups to confront moral problems. This method appeals to Baptists because they can choose the areas in which to make their contribution. Yet they have often had problems in these groups because, in an organization composed of member denominations rather than individuals, the corporate body may take a stand contrary to the position of an individual.²⁰

Some leaders have created meeting spaces within their church buildings and homes for those fighting for social changes. They support groups that are fighting for an end to any form of oppression. Their homes can become nerve centres for the exchange of information and for counselling those oppressed. The individual Baptists or groups help with prayer, advice and practical assistance, and give assistance to those who suffer by bringing them into touch with relevant bodies such as the Red Cross and legal aid institutions. In the case of Baptists, the individual attitude is a typical Baptist attitude. It is not the national leadership who is supposed to act, but individuals who are committed to their faith based on the whole biblical message and are willing to take up a minority position. Many uncritical and uninformed Baptist members may be more willing to go along with the *status quo*. This does not make many Baptist adherents leaders for social change or willing supporters for action against social oppression.²¹

However, several Baptist national leaders have been leaders for social change, with or without the support of their local churches. They have done this as individuals, not under instructions from the conventions or unions. Though some church members may question the individuals' actions, and others

¹⁷ Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People: The History of Seventh Day Baptists*, Nashville Broadman (1992), 33-34.

¹⁸ All Africa Baptist Fellowship, Mission Statement, www.aabfellowship.org/aabf/index.php/items/3-vision-mission

¹⁹ Klaus Fiedler, "The 'Smaller' Churches and the Big Government," in *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, eds. Matembo S. Nzunda and Kenneth Ross, Gweru: Mambo-Kachere (1997), 158-159.

²⁰ Don A. Sanford, *A Choosing People*, 331.

²¹ Fiedler, "The 'Smaller' Churches and the Big Government," 162-163.

may not be happy with the positions taken, at the end the congregations have supported the leaders' actions. Because of the Baptist understanding of congregational church government, the congregation's support may be more relevant. The Baptist leader either accepts or refuses any position in the social movement.²²

In times of national and international disasters, Baptists in Africa have been involved in all kinds of relief work. They have distributed food items to people in need, especially during drought. They have been involved not only in providing relief items, but also in disseminating practical information needed during endemic outbreaks such as Ebola. Baptist churches in the area have had televised public service announcements nationwide on the outbreak, and local evangelists have distributed pamphlets to outlying villages. Like other concerned Christians, they have prayed, gathered and handed out food items and financial support to some of the victims. With the help of overseas partners, Baptists have supported the government's efforts in the fight against such pandemics as Ebola.²³

In an attempt to address the HIV/AIDS problem, many African Baptists have introduced 'True Love Waits' programmes to bring people together and spread the message of biblical purity to school and college youths and communities. 'True Love Waits' encourages the young to abstain from sexual intercourse until they marry. Through the efforts of trained leaders in churches and communities touched by the problem of sexual activity among the young, 'True Love Waits' can fight HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases as well as unplanned pregnancies and a number of emotional, social, psychological and spiritual problems by helping young people change their attitudes and behaviour regarding sexual expression. The programme uses a proven verbally-based, culturally appropriate teaching approach to carry the message. In Uganda, the programme is said to have contributed to the reduction of the HIV/AIDS infection rate.

Baptists as Managers under God

Baptists believe and teach that God owns everything including a person's right to existence. Therefore, human beings are just stewards or managers of God's property. One day they will have to report on how they have used that which has been entrusted to them. For one reason or another, people have not managed resources well: as a result there are many poor and marginalized people throughout the world, many of whom are in Africa. Every Baptist is called to serve the poor and marginalized. Since God is concerned, every individual should be concerned about life holistically.

Many Baptists in Africa are female and they follow the paths that have been laid down for them. Although some seek out broader forms of witness and Christian service, Baptist women in Africa generally hold meetings and Bible studies and participate in evangelistic work. They hold sewing and cooking classes through which they seek out new members. Women are also engaged in welfare work and visit the sick and troubled. The social witness is not fostered by the church leadership, and it is not even noticed.²⁴

Women's services dictated in part by culture and skills taught by the church agencies have frequently been of use only in a subordinate and domestic role. The training has concentrated on subjects like cooking, sewing, nursing and homemaking. Female elders play an active role as congregational advisers, settling disputes and supervising morals among women and girls. Even before the church era, women played the leadership roles like midwives, village elders, clan chiefs, religious leaders and mediators in family, village and clan disputes. The subordination of women to men in the home, church, school and

²² Fiedler, "The 'Smaller' Churches and the Big Government," 164.

²³ Baptist Press, "Ebola Kills 6 in Baptist Woman's Family," www.bpnews.net/bpnews?id=43477.

²⁴ Kretzschmar, *Privatization of the Christian Faith*, 250-251.

society in general has been interpreted as the will of God. Though they live on the margin of life, they minister to others, male and female.

Early missionaries developed programmes for medical care of the people. Baptists have built hospitals, medical care centres, facilities for nutrition programmes, maternity homes and HIV/AIDS programmes. In some countries they have mobile clinics on land, lakes and rivers. They have also used the programmes as practical ways of witnessing for Christ.

Another early input of Baptists was the introduction of literacy classes in local churches. Later they built primary and secondary schools, then theological training institutions. Baptists have used their educational institutions as means of witnessing especially to young people. Only recently have Baptists introduced universities.

All Africa Baptist Fellowship

Many Baptist churches in Africa are members of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship (AABF), one of the six regions of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), existing as an expression of the cohesion of Baptists in the Lord Jesus Christ. AABF has more than 50 member bodies in five sub-regions: North Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, East Africa and South Africa. Each of these has fellowships for youth, women and men.

Baptist growth in Africa can be attributed to their zeal for evangelistic outreach. Together they have done very well in providing medical care, but have not been outspoken on social witness.

Bibliography

- All Africa Baptist Fellowship, Mission Statement, www.aabfellowship.org/aabf/index.php/items/3-vision-mission (accessed 4 December, 2014).
- Baptist Press, 'Ebola Kills 6 in Baptist Woman's Family': www.bpnews.net/bpnews?id=43477 (accessed 3 October, 2014).
- Baptist World Alliance Heritage and Identity Commission, 'Who are the Baptists? – Africa': www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/hst-afr.htm (accessed 4 December, 2014).
- Baptist World Alliance – Statistics, <https://www.bwanet.org/about-us2/statistics> (accessed 4 December, 2014).
- Cairns, Earl E. *Christianity through the Centuries*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.
- Cupit, Tony. 'Religious Freedom and the Baptist Perspective': www.bwanet.org/Ministries/Human%20Rights/rfreedom.htm (accessed 12 December, 2014).
- Enyioha, B. Uche, 'Baptist Presence in Africa', in *All Africa Baptist Theological Educators' Conference*, Ibadan: All Africa Baptist Fellowship, 2000.
- Fiedler, Klaus, 'The "Smaller" Churches and the Big Government', in *Church, Law and Political Transition in Malawi 1992-94*, eds. Matembo S. Nzunda and Kenneth Ross, Gweru: Mambo-Kachere, 1997.
- Hildebrandt, Jonathan. *History of the Church in Africa: A Survey*, rev. Achimota: African Christian Press, 1990.
- Kretzschmar, Louise. 'Authentic Baptist Leadership in Africa', in *All Africa Baptist Theological Educators' Conference*, Ibadan: All Africa Baptist Fellowship, 2000.
- Kretzschmar, Louise. *Privatization of the Christian Faith: Mission, Social Ethics and the South African Baptists*. Legon: Legon Theological Studies Series, 1998.
- Longwe, Hany. *Christians by Grace – Baptists by Choice: A History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi*. Mzuzu: Mzuni Press; Zomba: Kachere Series, 2011.
- Paas, Steven. *The Faith Moves South: A History of the Church in Africa*. Zomba: Kachere Series, 2006.