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## Christianity in Malawi (74)

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(74) CHRISTIANITY IN MALAWI

Isabel Apawo Phiri, Gertrude Kapuma and Chimwemwe Harawa

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	11,732,000	79.4%	18,811,000	81.3%	3.2%
Independents	2,135,000	14.5%	3,600,000	15.6%	3.5%
African initiated	1,771,000	12.0%			
Orthodox	3,500	0.0%	3,500	0.0%	0.0%
Protestants	4,646,000	31.5%	7,550,000	32.6%	3.3%
Reformed, Presbyterian	1,643,000	11.1%			
Pentecostal	1,203,000	8.1%			
Adventist	532,000	3.6%			
Baptist	532,000	3.6%			
Anglicans	288,000	1.9%			
Evangelical churches	151,000	1.0%			
Holiness	86,900	0.6%			
Lutheran	80,000	0.5%			
Roman Catholics	4,692,000	31.8%	8,116,000	35.1%	3.7%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	3,183,000	21.6%	5,500,000	23.8%	3.7%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	2,647,000	17.9%	4,356,000	18.8%	3.4%
Muslims	1,981,000	13.4%	3,195,000	13.8%	3.2%
adherents of traditional African religions	949,000	6.4%	950,000	4.1%	0.0%
Baha'is	34,600	0.2%	55,000	0.2%	3.1%
Hindus	32,100	0.2%	50,000	0.2%	3.0%
Sikhs	750	0.0%	1,400	0.0%	4.2%
adherents of new religious movements	580	0.0%	800	0.0%	2.2%
Jews	270	0.0%	300	0.0%	0.7%
people professing no religion	39,900	0.3%	70,500	0.3%	3.9%
<b>Total population</b>	<b>14,770,000</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>23,134,000</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>3.0%</b>

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

**Introduction**

According to the 2008 Population and Housing census, there were about thirteen million people in Malawi, of whom about 83% were Christians, 13% Muslims, 2% belonged to other religions, and 2% did not

belong to any religion at all.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, these statistics do not acknowledge the existence of African indigenous religions which influence the way Christianity and Islam is practised in Malawi. The purpose of this article is to give a brief survey of the growth of Christianity, from the time it was introduced before the formation of the British Central Africa Protectorate in 1891, which was renamed the Nyasaland Protectorate in 1907, and further renamed Malawi in 1964.

### Historical churches

Christianity was brought to Malawi by various missionaries as a result of the missionary work of David Livingstone, who visited the area in 1859. After his death, missionaries from various backgrounds established pioneer churches in Malawi between 1861 and 1901. The historical churches can be divided into two groups: the so-called mainline churches and the smaller churches. The mainline churches include the following:

**The Anglican Church** was introduced into Malawi through the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) in 1861. The UMCA was formed as a direct response to the call of David Livingstone for the introduction of Christianity and commerce into Central Africa to combat the Arab slave trade. But after three years of missionary work in the Shire Highlands, the station was abandoned due to conflict with local leaders. Nevertheless, the missionaries returned in 1879.<sup>2</sup> The church is now part of **the Church of the Province of Central Africa**, a member of the World Council of Churches, with fifteen dioceses in Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Four of those dioceses are in Malawi, namely, Lake Malawi, Northern Malawi, Southern Malawi and Southern Malawi – Upper Shire.

**The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian** is found in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe with five synods. Three of the synods are located in Malawi and are called Livingstonia Synod, Blantyre Synod and Nkhoma Synod. These synods were founded by three different missionary groups. In 1875, the Free Church of Scotland established the Livingstonia Mission in the North of Malawi. The Blantyre Mission in the South was established by the Church of Scotland in 1876. The Nkhoma Mission was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church Mission in 1889 in the Central Region of Malawi. The Livingstonia Mission joined with the Blantyre Mission in 1924 to form the CCAP, and in 1926, Nkhoma joined.<sup>3</sup> The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Malawi is a Reformed Christian church in Malawi but not part of the CCAP. Statistics show that the CCAP is the largest Protestant denomination in Malawi. The Blantyre Synod was accepted as a member of the World Council of Churches in July 2014.

**The Catholic Church in Malawi** came through the missionary work, initially of the White Fathers who first arrived in Malawi in 1889 but, due to sickness and difficult working conditions, they abandoned the mission. When they returned in 1901, they established mission stations in Central Malawi. The Montfort Fathers followed and established missions in Southern Malawi. The Catholic Church in Malawi has two archdioceses in Lilongwe and Blantyre, and six in Chikwawa, Mangochi, Zomba, Dedza, Karonga and Mzuzu. Today, the Catholics are the largest Christian denomination in Malawi with over two million members – around a third of the Christians and a fifth of the total population. Their fast growth in Malawi is attributed to tolerance of the local culture, unlike the Protestant missionary groups.

<sup>1</sup> Population and Housing Census 2008, Main Report (Zomba: National Statistics Office, September 2009), 13.

Some books put Islam around 35-45% of the population. See Valiant Moosa, *The History of Muslims in Malawi, Before and after Christianity to Modern Times* (Blantyre: Fattani, 2005), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gelfand, *Lakeside Pioneers: The Universities Mission to Central Africa and the Beginnings of Missionary Enterprise* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> John Weller and Jane Linden, *Mainstream Christianity to 1980 in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 118-119.

The second category of the smaller historical churches was fostered by the British missionary Joseph Booth. Booth is linked with the establishment of the following churches: the Zambezi Industrial Mission (1892), the Nyasa Industrial Mission (1893), the Baptist Industrial Mission of Scotland (1898), the Seventh Day Adventist – Plainfield (1900), the South African General Mission (1901), and the Seventh Day Adventists Mission (1902).<sup>4</sup>

Booth is also associated with assisting Malawians to found churches such as the Providence Industrial Mission (PIM) by the Rev. John Chilembwe in 1900, the Watch Tower Movement in 1908 by Elliot Kamwana, and a series of Seventh Day Adventist missions in northern Malawi by Charles Domingo. In addition, there are other churches founded by Malawians, either who had studied in mission schools or who had gone to work in the mines in South Africa. Some of the churches include the Children of God (*Ana a Mulungu*) founded by Wilfred Gudu, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) which came to Malawi through Hanock Phiri in 1924, and the African National Church founded by Simon K Mkandawire, Paddy Nyasulu, Robert S Mhango and Levi Mumba in 1929.

In the 1930s, Pentecostal churches under various denominations such as the Assemblies of God, the Apostolic Faith Mission, and the Pentecostal Holiness, among others, began to enter the country. Pentecostalism emphasises the work of the Holy Spirit and a personal relationship with God.

The latest on the scene are the charismatic churches, such as Agape (1982), Faith of God (1984), Living Waters (1985), All for Jesus (1993), Flames of Victory (1993), Calvary Family Church (1994), The Vineyard (1994), New Christian Life, Fountain of Victory, Pentecostal Holiness, Bushiri Ministries and many others. At times, the categorisation of the Pentecostal and charismatic churches is very difficult, because some denominations show characteristics of both. By 2004, there were 211 Pentecostal and charismatic denominations in Malawi.<sup>5</sup> They concentrate on revivals, prayer, and healing or prosperity teaching.

Six per cent of Malawians belong to a Baptist church, of which there are many in Malawi. The majority of them belong to the following categories: the African Baptist Assembly, Malawi, Inc. with 787 congregations and 72,800 members, the Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA) with about 1,300 municipalities and approximately 150,000 members, and the Evangelical Baptist Church of Malawi with about 300 churches and 19,000 members.<sup>6</sup>

Other important historic Protestant churches with a recent history include the following: a) The United Methodist Church in Malawi was begun in 1987 through the mission outreach of the neighbouring Zimbabwe Annual Conference.<sup>7</sup> The church was started by the Rev. Alufeyo Mpulula in Lilongwe at Gaga Village. The Rev. Daniel Mhone became the superintendent when it was declared a Provisional Annual Conference.<sup>8</sup> b) The Lutheran Church in Central Africa came to Blantyre in 1963. Missionary work expanded from the Southern Region of Malawi to the Central Region. It is a member of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC), a worldwide organisation of the Confessional Lutheran Church bodies.<sup>9</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malawi was founded on 21st November 1982 by lay people who had become Lutherans while working in the neighbouring countries of Tanzania and Zimbabwe. It is

<sup>4</sup> For further information see also Harry Langworthy, *“Africa for the African:” The Life of Joseph Booth* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Report on UNESCO workshop on Monotheistic Religions in Malawi held at Grace Bandawe Conference Centre in Blantyre (19-20 October 2007), 29.

<sup>6</sup> [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptisten\\_in\\_Malawi](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptisten_in_Malawi) (accessed 29 July 2015); Hany Longwe, *Christians by Grace – Baptists by Choice. A History of the Baptist Convention of Malawi, Zomba and Luwingu* (Zomba: Kachere Series) 2012.

<sup>7</sup> See more at: [www.umcmission.org/Explore-Our-Work/Africa/Malawi#sthash.MGLQQbIK.dpuf](http://www.umcmission.org/Explore-Our-Work/Africa/Malawi#sthash.MGLQQbIK.dpuf).

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Rev Robert Mdoka, February 2015.

<sup>9</sup> [En.wikipedia.org/wiki/lutheranchurch\\_of\\_central\\_africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/lutheranchurch_of_central_africa) (accessed 29th July 2015).

now led by Bishop Joseph Bvumbwe.<sup>10</sup> c) The Brethren Church in Malawi began as an outreach ministry of Zimbabwe in 1983. Its current leader is Bishop Ephraim Disi. They have 55 congregations with a membership of 4,800 and 6,720 affiliates.<sup>11</sup>

### Christianity and Development

Scholars of religion have noted the impact and significance of Christianity in Malawi and have written about its influence on the social, economic and political life of the nation.<sup>12</sup> In general, churches in Malawi work hand-in-hand with the government in the following areas:

- Education: schools at different levels, including tertiary education and vocational training.
- Health and healing: clinics, hospitals, home-based care, and spiritual healing.
- Mass media: printing, the provision of religious literature, private radio stations and TV, and media houses.
- Social action: development projects, human rights advocacy for access to clean water, sanitation, food security, etc.
- Politics: the church has worked hard to bring about a multi-party system of government and continues to play the role of a watchdog of democracy through PAC.<sup>13</sup>

### Ecumenism

The Christian denominations have formed different associations to promote development, advocacy and civic education on national issues. The notable ones are as follows:

- **The Christian Council of Malawi** (January 1942) which brings together the following churches: Africa Evangelical Church, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Anglican Diocese of Lake Malawi, Anglican Diocese of Northern Malawi, Anglican Diocese of Southern Malawi, Anglican Diocese of Upper Shire, Baptist Convention of Malawi, Central Africa Conference of Seventh Day Baptists, Church of Africa Presbyterian, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Blantyre Synod, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Livingstonia Synod, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Nkhoma Synod, Church of Nazarene, Churches of Christ, Evangelical Church of Malawi, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malawi, Free Methodist Church, Independent Baptist Church, Providence Industrial Mission, Salvation Army and Zambezi Evangelical Church. The aim is to give churches the opportunity to speak with one voice in areas of health, advocacy, education, spirituality, youth and women's empowerment.
- **The Episcopal Conference of Malawi**: this brings together the seven dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church in Malawi.
- **The Evangelical Association of Malawi** (EAM) is an umbrella body for 108 churches and Christian organizations (58 evangelical churches and 50 Christian organizations). It caters for the smaller missions, such as the Zambezi Industrial Mission and the Nyasa Industrial Mission.

<sup>10</sup> [www.nswi.org/webfiles/fnitools/documents/history\\_of\\_our\\_companion\\_relationship.pdf](http://www.nswi.org/webfiles/fnitools/documents/history_of_our_companion_relationship.pdf) (accessed 30th July 2015).

<sup>11</sup> [www.bic-church.org/wm/explore/malawi.asp](http://www.bic-church.org/wm/explore/malawi.asp) (accessed 29th July 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth R. Ross, *Christianity in Malawi: A Source Book* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>13</sup> The Public Affairs Committee (PAC) is a civil society, interfaith organization made up of the main Protestant, Catholic and Muslim faith groups in Malawi. It operates in the areas of good governance and human rights. PAC is composed of the Malawi Council of Churches (MCC), Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM), Evangelical Association of Malawi (EAM), Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM) and Quadria Muslim Association of Malawi (QMAM). See [www.pacmw.org/](http://www.pacmw.org/) (accessed 29 July 2015).

- **The Charismatic and Pentecostal Association of Malawi (CHAPEL)** brings together charismatic and Pentecostal denominations and some African Instituted Churches.
- **The Baptist Convention of Malawi (BACOMA)** caters for Baptist groupings in Malawi.

Another aspect of co-operation is the formation of inter-church associations. This came about from the consideration that the churches' role in development could best be played if they acted not as individual entities but together. Examples of this category include:

**The Christian Service Committee (CSC)** (1967) for relief operations (floods and refugees), welfare projects, such as school feeding, and development, including drilling boreholes, building school blocks, and the provision of food security, water and sanitation.

**The Christian Hospitals Association of Malawi (CHAM)** drawing membership from thirteen Protestant churches and the Catholic Church in Malawi.

**The Christian Literature Association (CLAIM)**, created in 1968 by thirteen churches.

**The Board for Theological Studies (BTS)** currently has eight theological Institutions. The Board for Theological Studies brings together some theological institutions of different traditions aimed at teaching a common theology syllabus suitable for Malawi today.

**MANERELA** is a network of religious leaders living with or personally affected by HIV and AIDS.

The ecumenical work of the church is remarkable because it has been able to achieve a common goal. The unity of the churches helps denominations to reach out to those areas they cannot reach individually. It has become common now that pastors (ministers) within a community form what they call a 'pastors' fraternal'; the purpose of these is to help pastors work together.

Apart from the associations which are under the umbrella of the different churches, there are religious groups which are non-denominational, such as World Vision International, which concentrate on interdenominational Christian witness and development in different sectors. A popular ecumenical gathering are what are known as **interdenominational fellowship groups**. Adherents can have dual membership – to an established church and to the fellowship. These fellowships are also known as ministries. With the passage of time, some develop into churches. They concentrate on purely spiritual matters. Examples include the New Life for All Ministry, Life Ministry, and the Women's World Day of Prayer which invites Muslim women to participate as well.

Some mainline churches may not allow their members to go to such fellowships but at a practical level, this is difficult to control. One way of keeping their members within their churches is that most mainline churches have introduced religious ceremonies that may attract people. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has a charismatic wing which has adopted a charismatic type of worship which may include speaking in tongues. The CCAP has what it calls contemporary worship. This allows Christians to have the freedom of singing choruses and dancing to gospel music as is the case with Pentecostal and charismatic churches. This attracts many young people as they feel no longer restricted to a particular or traditional way of worship. Christians want lively worship services and one result of this has been the growth of many choirs in the church to supplement traditional hymns with other types of music. There is an increase in outreach by various denominations to meet the spiritual needs of their members. Another activity which is growing and becoming popular are nights of prayer services. Observations show that night prayers are patronised by the young, an indication that they have some needs which may be addressed by the churches.

At an international level, some churches in Malawi have joined organizations like the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Episcopal Conference of Eastern Africa (AMECEA), the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA), the World Council of Churches (WCC), the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), the Lutheran World Federation, and the Network for Congregational Theology (NETACT).

### Challenges for Christianity in Malawi

In this section, we would like to highlight five major challenges faced by the churches in Malawi. The challenges are not presented in any particular order of importance. The first challenge is the role of women in the church. Women are often denied their rightful place in the church simply because of their gender. Even in the churches that have accepted women's leadership roles or ordination, the situation is not easy. Women continue to struggle for recognition and acceptance as equal partners. In this context, women's ordination is controversial. After many years of debating as to whether or not to allow women to administer the word and sacrament, the Assemblies of God ordained their first woman in 1994. Her ordination became possible because the church leadership recognized the call of God to women. This was followed by the Livingstonia and Blantyre Synods of the CCAP in 2000 and 2001 respectively. The Blantyre Synod has even appointed a woman to the position of Synod Moderator, something that had always been a male preserve. The United Methodist Church in Malawi now allows the ordination of women. Debates continue in the Nkhoma Synod and in the Anglican Church on whether to allow women's ordination or not. In churches where women have not been given this opportunity, they have continued to participate fully in the church's other ministries. They are regarded as the backbone of many churches. They work hard in fund-raising activities, pastoral visitations, singing in choirs, entertaining visitors, teaching Sunday school and many other activities. They are very active in their own women's groups, helping themselves on their spiritual journey. Despite all the delays in allowing women to take leadership roles in the mainline churches, women in the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have gone ahead to lead churches. Women have moved from the mainline churches and founded house churches which have become community churches. In these churches, women have assumed the highest positions as founders and even bishops. In other Pentecostal churches, the leadership of women is seen in the wife of the leader being given a title and called Pastor. 'The pastor's wife or first lady serves as a noble power for mobilising and deploying the female evangelical power.'<sup>14</sup> Examples of some of these churches founded by women are the Chilobwe Healing Centre (Mayi Nyajere, 1986), Revival Ministries (Mayi Gonthe, 1986), Blessed Hope Church and Ministries (Bishop Yami Mchika, 1992), Namatapa Miracle Centre (Mayi Chipondeni, 1992) and the Chisomo Worship Centre (Mayi Chapomba, 1998).

The second challenge is the role of youth in the churches. The missionaries who brought Christianity also promoted education, which helped many young people to go to school and gain knowledge, skills and jobs. But today the young are faced with many challenges such as dropping out from school, unemployment, early marriages and drugs, to mention just a few. In some of the churches, the young are not given the opportunity to participate in church activities, and in some cases the young find traditional church services boring. They want a vibrant church. Church leaders are not of one mind in finding solutions for youth involvement in the churches. It is evident that most of the young people who have participated in youth groups such as the Students' Christian Organization in Malawi (SCOM) have become responsible leaders in many sectors, including the church. This is because, in such groups, young people were given the chance to develop their gifts.

The third challenge currently facing the church in Malawi is the HIV and AIDS epidemic. The church has moved from preaching messages that promoted stigma to messages with life-affirming theologies. However, we still have some pastors who discourage their members from taking anti-retroviral treatment, claiming that they can effect miraculous healing through prayer alone. The presence of an umbrella body called Malawi Interfaith Aids Association (MIAA) is helping to mitigate this challenge. This body is also helping the faith community to be involved in advocacy when dealing with HIV and AIDS issues.

The fourth challenge is the relationship between Christianity and African culture. African people express their Christian faith through their culture, and it is difficult to separate the two. However, some

<sup>14</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 153.

African theologians have argued for a methodology that helps to avoid African cultural practices that are hazardous to human life and which do not promote human dignity. Examples of such cultural practices include witchcraft and sorcery, wife inheritance, property theft and child marriages.

The fifth challenge is secularization. The secular world respects the church in Malawi and expects its members to be exemplary. Alarming cases of gender-based violence, corruption, the misappropriation of church and public funds by some church leaders and some church members, all affect the credibility of the Christian teaching.

Despite this, the church is still strong in Malawi and it is called upon to address issues of the modern world such as gender affirmation and standing for the marginalised, youth culture, equal access to education, homosexuality and the promotion of human dignity.

The growth of the church with so many denominations and ministries is a clear indication that the people of Malawi would like to have the Word of God in their lives. This growth should serve to promote unity and foster a common goal, instead of wasting time in competition and making other denominations seem inferior. Disputes within and between churches may make the possibility of further ecumenical development impossible.

In partnering with the government on developmental issues, the church should continue to take its prophetic role of ministry seriously, without compromising its call. As watchdogs, the church is called to stand for peace and justice. It has to ensure that there is an equal distribution of resources in the country to all its citizens, and that there is a fair representation of people in all sectors, based on merit.

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