

## **Factors Contributing to Negative Ethnicity in Church: A Review in Presbyterian Church of East Africa Context**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article is an extract of the Dissertation presented by Robert Waihenya Ngugi at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in September 2018 on The Effects of Ethnicity on Evangelization in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (P.C.E.A.). This paper reviews the factors that contribute to negative ethnicity in the Church today in the context of the P.C.E.A Church. It is guided by the Pastoral Theology method which is the Pastoral Cycle. It is also known as the Spiral or Cycle of Praxis. The cycle comprises four sections namely: the insertion, social analysis, theological reflection and pastoral action. In the introduction, there is the insertion which addresses the historical background of the P.C.E.A Church in Kenya, the definitions of negative ethnicity and the theological reflection with regards to the true teaching of the Church on negative ethnicity and the evidence of the same in the P.C.E.A Church. Various factors contributing to negative ethnicity in the Church form the social analysis of the paper. This paper uses secondary sources of information done by scholars and researchers on the topic of negative ethnicity in the Church. In conclusion, the paper highlights the factors that contribute to negative ethnicity in the context of the P.C.E.A Church which include ethnic misjudgments, ethnocentrism, ethnicitis and strive. As Part of Pastoral Action, the paper recommends key areas hampering evangelization from an ethnic perspective that must be explored to eradicate negative ethnicity in the Church.*

**Keywords:** *Negative ethnicity, P.C.E.A and ethnicity, Church and ethnicity, tribalism in Church, P.C.E.A negative ethnicity, ethnicity in Church, Church negative ethnicity, ethnicity and evangelization*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Kenya has 43 tribes and the issue of ethnicity affects many institutions including the Church. In the past there have been politically instigated ethnic tensions between some of these ethnic groups. The worst was the 2007/8 post-election violence which followed a disputed presidential election. Specifically, Churches were burnt down including those belonging to the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (P.C.E.A.) which is the Church under review in this paper. This paper tries to review the ethnic profiling in the Church while investigating the ethnic composition of the

P.C.E.A Church which has got a membership of about 4,000,000. It will be beneficial in addressing the challenges of negative ethnicity which is a national concern.

Theologically, what is referred to as an ideal Church according to Chong (2013) is one without negative ethnicity and where everybody belongs, everybody serves, everybody discerns, everybody leads, and everybody witnesses. These marks should inform every denomination on how to have a Church free of negative ethnicity. The P.C.E.A Church in its mission and vision captures this well as contained in its Strategic Plan 2012-2016 stating that the vision of the Church is to be great and dynamic (P.C.E.A, 2016). A Godly model Church for wholistic service in pursuance of the great commission and its mission is to empower, equip, build and transform Gods people for effective service through preaching, teaching and witnessing in words and deeds (P.C.E.A, 2016).

The historical journey of the P.C.E.A Church started in 1891 when missionaries from Scotland arrived in Kenya and started doing their mission work. The first missionaries were Dr. Stewart and his mission team who camped at Kibwezi in the *Akamba* country some two hundred miles from Mombasa, on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1891 (Muita, 2003). On 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1891, Dr. Stewart made an agreement with Chief Kilungu of the *Akamba* people in the area to purchase 300 acres of land around the headsprings of the Kibwezi River (Muita, 2003). Further, Muita (2003) notes that clearing the ground, planting and building began immediately irrigation canals were dug, buildings erected. The goal of the mission was to provide schools, medical care, vocational training, religious training and worship. On 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1892, the first Church building at Kibwezi was opened by the Rev. Dr. Stewart after which he left for Scotland (Muita, 2003). After Dr. Stewart left for Scotland, Dr. Moffat took over the mission at Kibwezi and built houses, a dispensary and cowsheds. On 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1891, the first school was opened and two *Akamba* students enrolled (Muita, 2003). It is for this reason we understand as a historical truth that the first beneficiaries of the Scotland mission in terms of health, agriculture, education and development were the *Kamba* people. There were challenges in this mission as there was no water in the area. There were also many diseases including malaria and many missionaries succumbed to it. After finding out that they were not making any progress, they decided to relocate the mission. Watson travelled to Dagoretti in September 1894 to explore the possibility of transferring the mission to *Kikuyu* land (Muita, 2003). With this conclusion it was clear that the mission at Kibwezi was to be relocated to Kikuyu land. Another missionary by the name Thomas Watson took over the mission leadership. He was given £40,000 to transfer the mission from Kibwezi to Dagoretti and in September 1898, the Kibwezi mission was finally transferred to Dagoretti. The mission flourished and extended to Tumu Tumu, Chogoria, and Kambui all within the Kikuyu and Meru ethnic groups.

Negative ethnicity is ethnicity used to injure, frustrate, ridicule and demean one ethnic group against another. It is also when one ethnic group engages in negative competition with another ethnic group with an aim of either suppressing the other or painting the wrong image of the other through stereotyping, discriminating or ignoring them through little or none inclusivity. This kind of negative ethnicity can seriously hurt evangelization and to say the least, no effective

inter-ethnic evangelization or positive relationship can take place where there is negative ethnicity.

The P.C.E.A constitution explains that the P.C.E.A Church is Catholic because it offers the whole Gospel of Christ to all men everywhere and to all ages, and is therefore made up of all who in every place call on the name of the Lord (P.C.E.A, 1969). This clause in the P.C.E.A.'s constitution defeats every element or mentality of negative ethnicity and sidelining of any community. Chapter Twenty Six of the Practice and Procedure which is the Church's guiding document in all its affairs affirms that, P.C.E.A supports the 1948 universal declaration of human rights and also the 1959 declaration of the rights of the child which refer to all human beings as being born free and equal in dignity and rights and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood (P.C.E.A, 1969).

The Catholic Church is the largest Church in terms of membership globally. It consists of diverse races, cultures and tribes even here in Kenya and especially within the Nairobi region. An arm of this Church called The Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace, is against racism which is also a form of ethnicity. The Catholic Church also explains institutionalized racism, where this kind of racism is sanctioned by the constitution and laws of a country. It is justified by an ideology of superiority of persons from European stock over those of African or Indian origin supported by erroneous interpretation of the Bible (Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace, 1988). Congar (1953), giving the position of the Catholic Church on racism which very closely relates to the problem of ethnicity, indicated that racism involves dividing and disregarding of human beings into groups and then the effecting of discrimination against some on them on the ground that their human qualities or characteristics are genetically determined.

The Bible touches on negative ethnicity in its teachings. Paul attacked one of the greatest cultural and religious practices of the Jews which made them feel different from others. This is the circumcision by saying that, a man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical as indicated in Galatians 3:28. Paul told them that their ethnic identity which was only physical and was of no value, if they did not have the inner conviction and meaning of circumcision. In this chapter Paul says that even the Gentiles so long as they obey the law are better than the Jews who are circumcised and do not obey the law. We also see the negative ethnicity in the bible when Peter regards people who were not of his ethnicity and their foods as unclean. When he went to pray at noon at an upper room and he was hungry, the Lord gave him a vision of a large sheet dropping from heaven with all kinds of animals that he was told to kill and eat. He then refuted that vision saying that he had never eaten anything unclean. The answer from the Lord was that he should never call anything unclean which the Lord had made clean as indicated in Acts 10: 10 – 16, NLT. This was a vision to end the negative ethnicity in Peter which was common with all Jews who regarded Gentiles as unclean due to their foods, religious and cultural differences.

The section that follows looks at the factors that guided the review which include: ethical misjudgments, ethnocentrism, ethnical fundamentalism, the problem of ethnicitis and strive and internal divisions.

## **FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO NEGATIVE ETHNICITY IN THE CHURCH**

A Church living in denial of negative effects of ethnicity is not really helping itself in terms of evangelization, growth, spirituality or image-wise. It is good to know and understand the factors that contribute to negative ethnicity in the Church which include the following:

### **Ethnical Misjudgments**

A major cause of negative ethnicity is ethnical misjudgments. This is where one ethnic group looks at another ethnical group and passes wrong judgments on them. When this happens in the Church, it affects evangelization negatively, causes misunderstandings and strive. Often, this spills over to the wider community. Homan (2008) further notes that when individuals of different cultures engage each other, each may misjudge the others action based on learned expectations. Everyone is bringing their own unique history with the other group, along with the influence of political relationships. They bring stereotypes, prescribed patterns of communications, etiquette and problem solving approaches as well (Homan, 2008). This affirms the fact that one ethnical perception over the other and how one ethnic group treats the other based on the perception brings out either positive or negative ethnicity. There is also need to have cross cultural knowledge. This reflects on understanding the history, traditions, values, family systems and artistic expressions of major clients groups that one serves (Homan, 2008). Categorically, ethnical misjudgments fuel negative ethnicity thus affecting evangelization.

### **Ethnocentrism**

Ethnocentrism is both good and bad. It often functions in a positive way to reinforce a society's belief in its own worth (Elbert, 1981). But ethnocentrism is generally negative. This is a situation where one culture believes it is superior in terms of their own norms and values. It is inevitable that all cultures are ethnocentric since they view and judge all things from the viewpoint of their own culture (Elbert, 1981). This causes superiority battles and battles of resistance of one ethnicity against the other, something which affects evangelization in a big way. This is something the so called minorities in the Church do not take with their hands down. They strongly resist this de-culturization from their own culture and being re-culturized into another due to ethnocentrism of their own ethnic group.

This problem exists in the P.C.E.A Church as well as other Churches. Ethnocentrism manifests itself in the Church in the manner in which it appoints its leadership. Wosyanju (2017) points out that, concerning power distribution and administration, leaders such as Bishops from Kenyan mainstream Churches are often appointed and assigned duties basically on ethnic arrangements as more and more dioceses are created along ethnic boundaries. These Churches are threatened

by the clamor for each ethnic group to have its own bishop (Woysanju, 2017). This is the problem of negative ethnicity where one's ethnicity is put before what an ideal Church demands and the need for effective evangelization, social peace and cohesion.

### **Ethnical Fundamentalism**

This is the ethnic assertion where one can do anything to fight for the supremacy of his or her ethnicity. It is a position where one ethnicity goes to any extent of oppressing the other even if it means genocide like the one that occurred in Rwanda. Basically, ethnical fundamentalism entails a situation where one ethnicity does anything to frustrate the other ethnicity and ensure they become voiceless. This can happen to a Church like the P.C.E.A where the small ethnicities are reduced to mere spectators without a voice. It can as well manifest in a manner that it is the small ethnicity within the Church or an area which harasses the bigger group and fights them in whatever they try to do or say. In Kenya, there have been a number of tribal clashes within the Rift Valley Region. Specifically, the Kalenjins, who are the main tribe residing in the area dominate the area and fight the Kikuyus to leave the area.

Stewart (1981) also comments on ethnical fundamentalism and says that ethnicity builds principles and certitude which can at times be excessive and fundamentalist. Moreover, it is seen as a frame of reference that guides routine ideas that are used to interpret, understand and guide values that tend to antagonize the frame of reference of other ideologies (Ntedika, 2009). This is ethnical fundamentalism.

### **The Problem of Ethnicitis**

*Ethnicitis* is a term which was coined by Wagner Peter to define the ungodly intolerance of the various groups in the Church where although they are in the same city, they cannot worship together as they are racially or ethnically different (Sider and Olson, 2002). If one visits a town called Baragoi in Samburu area, we have two P.C.E.A Churches very close to each other. The one on the left as you head towards Maralal town is a Church for the Samburus and Kikuyus while the one on the right is for the Turkana. These two groups cannot attend each other's Church which is a good example of Ethnicitis. Sider and Olson (2002) quote Peter Wagner and say ethnicitis is about people of different races who find themselves living next door but cannot bring themselves to worship themselves at the Church on the corner. This is the ungodly syndrome called ethnicitis. It is tribalism, ethnicity and racism combined in the Church.

Therefore it follows that, while selecting leadership for such a Church, ethnicity is always the first consideration. It therefore becomes a hindrance to an all-inclusive Church therefore contributing greatly to negative ethnicity in the Church. Waje (2008) says that the Church in Africa has not always lived up to this idea. Members do not show adequate care for one another during times of crisis. When selecting Church leaders or candidates, ethnicity sometimes seems to be regarded as more important than their spirituality. Some Churches even refuse to accept leaders from outside their ethnic group (Waje, 2008).

## Strive and Internal Divisions

Another factor contributing to negative ethnicity is the creation of hostile camps within the Church which are designed to fight each other so as to protect themselves from a threat of another group. This becomes a very delicate Pastoral pedestal especially to the Pastor of the Church as he tries to balance and harmonize the camps since each camp tactically tries to win the Pastor to them. Watkins (2010) asserts that dealing with such a camp mentally, a Pastor needs to consider who is feeling unheard, unattended to or unloved, how those feelings are affecting their behaviors, who is hurting and why, who is pasturing those outsiders, and what tangible acts of love are working to hold the congregation together and move them forward.

## CONCLUSION

Negative ethnicity is a real problem within the Church today and it is badly hampering evangelization. It is mainly caused by ethnical misjudgments where one ethnic group looks at another ethnical group and passes wrong judgments on them, ethnocentrism which is a situation where one culture believes it is superior in terms of their own norms and values. Other factors contributing to negative ethnicity are: ethnic assertion where one can do anything to fight for the supremacy of his/her ethnicity and ethnicitis which is the ungodly intolerance of the various groups in the Church. Lastly, internal divisions in the Church can result in the creation of hostile camps designed to fight each other so as to protect themselves.

The Church in general has failed the test of negative ethnicity. Having looked deeply into the issue of negative ethnicity in the Church from the factors contributing to this vice, this paper recommends the following to mitigate the issue of negative ethnicity; distribution of leadership positions that reflects a balanced ethnicity which takes care of even the minority ethnic groups in its membership. Another area the Church needs to look into is the clergy representation so that they balance different ethnicities in the Church composition. The Church should also make a deliberate effort to have programs teaching against ethnic stereotypes especially among the young people. Finally, since the Church sponsors many schools in Kenya, it must influence the education sector and see to it that there is a curriculum in schools promoting positive ethnicity and at the same time condemning the negative ethnicity.

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