

Every Migrant a Missionary

Immigrant Christians in America

MARCH 20, 2014 BY [JANEL KRAGT BAKKER](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



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The decline of Christianity in America has been widely publicized, dramatically lamented, enthusiastically celebrated, and routinely exaggerated. It's true that fewer people are going to church, more people are going to church less often, fewer people who have left the church are coming back, and more people who have stayed in the church are disgruntled. But these facts don't tell the whole story.

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They miss what's happening beyond the walls of historic American religious institutions. More importantly, they miss what's happening among millions of foreign-born individuals who identify themselves as Americans, who create and steer culture, and who lead religious lives. Under the radar of most pundits and outside the scope of popularly recognized Christian institutions, these immigrants are quietly transforming Christianity in the United States. They are the new faces of American Christianity, and new mouthpieces of the gospel on American soil.

The increased religious diversity of the U.S. has also been widely publicized, dramatically lamented, enthusiastically celebrated, and routinely exaggerated. Over the past generation, to be sure, the number of non-Christian immigrants in the U.S. has grown. Since Congress passed the watershed Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, more than 36 million people—most of them from Africa, Latin America, or Asia—have immigrated to the U.S. One in eight residents is foreign born. As Diana Eck's [Pluralism](#)

[Project](#) details, mosques, temples, ashrams, and meditation centers now dot the American landscape, especially in urban areas.

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In the early 2000s even such conservatives as George W. Bush began including mosques in the list of American houses of worship. At the same time, the widespread resistance to the “Ground Zero mosque” showcased the ambivalence of many native-born Americans toward the religious traditions and cultural heritages of the foreign-born among us. For good reason, the rise of non-Christian religions in the U.S. has received attention. But this attention can be misleading. Three in four new immigrants to the U.S. are Christians. Not Muslims. Not Hindus. Not Buddhists. Not atheists. Christians. As R. Stephen Warner has noted, we are witnessing not so much the de-Christianization of American society as the de-Europeanization of American Christianity. Not so much the decay of American Christianity as its restructuring. Not so much its death as its transformation.

At least at first, most Christian immigrants worship in distinctly immigrant congregations. These congregations foster religious and cultural ties between immigrants and their countries of origin. They also help people make a home in their new country. Especially in recent years, however, immigrants have also begun to alter the social composition of historic American congregations. The National Congregations Study, a broad survey of American congregations, found that predominantly white and non-Hispanic churches were measurably more ethnically diverse in the late 2000s than they had been in the late 1990s. The percentage of people in congregations with no immigrant members decreased from 61 percent in 1998 to 49 percent in 2006-2008. And the percentage of people in completely white and non-Hispanic congregations decreased from 20 to 14 percent in the same time period. Though the majority of new immigrants worship in immigrant congregations, enough worship in predominantly white, native-born congregations to significantly diversify them.



Jehu Hanciles

Recently journalists and scholars have begun paying more attention to the mark immigrants make on American Christianity. Since Christian immigrants arrive in the U.S. from all over the world and represent diverse traditions and cultures, it's difficult to

make accurate generalizations about them as a group. But case studies help us tap into the ways immigrants are altering the course of American Christianity. Jehu Hanciles and Afe Adogame, two scholars of African origin who now reside in the U.S. and the U.K. respectively, illuminate the impact of the African Christian diaspora in the North Atlantic. “Massive South-North migration is creating new religious communities and new religious trends within western societies that present significant challenges to cherished ideals, and portend an enduring impact on its wider cultural ethos,” writes Hanciles in *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Orbis, 2008). The largest churches in Great Britain and in continental Europe are both African founded and led, for example. While voluntary African migration to the U.S. is a smaller and more recent phenomenon, African Christian communities are also proliferating here.



Afe Adogame

African Christian immigrants do more than add themselves to the rolls of U.S. Christians. While it's fairly obvious that every missionary is a migrant in one way or another, Hanciles argues that the reverse formulation is also true: every Christian migrant is a potential missionary. African Christian immigrants in the U.S. often take this missionary impulse quite seriously. They typically self-identify as international and multicultural, and they replace the preoccupation with cultural self-maintenance that usually characterizes immigrant congregations with bold visions of multicultural outreach and missionary fervor, says Hanciles. Seeing the West as a ripe mission field, African Christians carry out what has come to be known as “reverse mission” efforts, in which colonial patterns of missionary sending and receiving are flipped. In American history, successive waves of immigration have been the main source of growth and transformation in the church. Since Africa is now a heartland of Christian faith and a prominent source of international migrants, and since the U.S. is now the primary destination for African migrants, we can expect to see African immigrants significantly altering both the demography and ethos of American Christianity.

African immigrants express their Christianity in language, customs, and forms of spirituality foreign to many native-born Christians. Torn between tradition and modernity as well as home and host cultures, African-led churches in the West negotiate competing world views and identities, says Adogame in *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (Bloomsbury, 2013). In this

dance between clinging to what they know and reinterpreting this knowledge in a new context, African Christian immigrants typically retain a belief in and a ritual orientation toward supernatural forces, both of which are prominent in indigenous cosmologies in Africa. Because most African Christian communities in Europe and the U.S. replicate the cultural and religious sensibilities of their home contexts, their churches are dominated by African immigrants even when they target non-Africans in their membership drives. As preference for experience over doctrine and religious expression over religious consumption grows in our religious landscape, and as African immigrants increasingly assimilate into American culture, the missionary impulse of African immigrant religious communities may be more fully realized.

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Immigrants are neither squashing nor corrupting American Christianity. As they transform it they breathe new life into it. The future of American Christianity certainly will include Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelicals of European descent. But increasingly it will feature people whose lineage is not European. It will include not only African Americans, but Africans, not only transplants from American and European mission churches abroad, but migrants from the Majority World sent to North America to be missionaries themselves. Indigenization, contextualization, acculturation—call it what you will. The truth is that Christianity is not, never has been, and never will be the property of the fabled “Christendom.” Like migrants themselves, the faith moves, and moves, and moves again.