

# Conversion in Africa: A Look from the Women's Side

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## 1. Introduction

Conversion produces both qualitative and quantitative church growth. There are three major theological definitions of conversion: Evangelicals define conversion as spiritual rebirth.<sup>1</sup> For most of them, there is only one conversion which is achieved when persons acknowledge their sin, receive forgiveness and begin a new life in Christ. Although among Pentecostals and Charismatics the word 'conversion' is bi-dimensional, evangelical conversion is the starting point. After this conversion to new life, there is a second stage of baptism with or infilling of the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:38 is often quoted for such a conversion.<sup>2</sup> The argument is that the filling of the Holy Spirit came upon those who had already found an initial conversion to new life in Christ and thus all Christians must have this second conversion.<sup>3</sup> Mainline churches define conversion as 'doctrinal conversion' which is achieved through the mastery of catechism instructions. Outside the three theological definitions of conversion lies conversion in the sociological sense which is the act of leaving one's church or religion to join another. This article sheds light on the relationship between conversion in the theological sense and conversion in the sociological sense based on the experiences of women in the Baptist Convention<sup>4</sup> in Malawi and of women in other churches in Africa.

## 2. Literature review

There has been a dramatic expansion of Christianity in Africa in the latter centuries. Elizabeth Isichei records a jump from 10 million Christians in 1900 to 393 Million Christians in 1990. She also argues that these figures

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1 I define Evangelicals as churches and individuals broadly coming from the revival traditions and emphasizing the bible, personal faith, conversion, evangelism and the practical application of personal faith.

2 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

3 Some call this experience the 'second blessing'.

4 The Baptist Convention is the largest of about 20 Baptist denomination in Malawi. Founded in 1960 is has around 150,000 members. There are no reliable statistics.

do not include some of the smaller mushrooming churches that have no idea of filling a statically designed return form.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have shown how conversions in the theological sense have influenced conversions in a sociological sense. Mark A. Shaw shows how the rise of the Ethiopian, prophetic and revivalist movements have contributed to the growth of the church in Africa. The ability of these movements to address evils in society through solutions in Christ has attracted Africans to leave other religions to embrace the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> The movement from one denomination to the other within the Christian faith has also been shaped by conversion in the theological sense. Classical mission churches lost members to other churches when they condemned evils such as sorcery without offering solutions to the problem. Others have joined churches that seek to improve the independence of African people. Friends Africa Industrial Mission (FAIM) in Kenya is an example of the latter.<sup>7</sup> This article makes a contribution to how conversion in the theological sense influences conversion in the sociological sense from a woman's perspective based on the experiences of women.

### 3. Methodology

Data for this article has been generated through primary and secondary research. The primary data largely reflect the experiences of an evangelical church, the Baptist Convention of Malawi. Limited additional information is based on women's experiences in other African countries. As a member of the Baptist Convention, the author has used participatory observation to collect information on Baptist women. In addition the author has used individual interviews. Some of the findings are also found in her book.<sup>8</sup> The analysis however, is not recorded anywhere else apart from this article. The author has gathered other conversion stories outside Malawi through her current Ph.D. research on the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle).<sup>9</sup> Through this network, the author has interacted with women from Africa and

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- 5 Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1995, p. 1.
  - 6 See Mark A. Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Billy Graham Centre, 1996, p. 256.
  - 7 See Esther Mambo, Harahamisi and Jumaa: "The Development of the Women's Meetings in East Africa Yearly Meetings of Friends (Quakers)" in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar, *Her Stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2002, p. 60.
  - 8 See Rachel NyaGondwe Banda, *Women of the Bible and Culture: Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere Series, pp. 195-212.
  - 9 I started this research project in 2002.

shared experiences with them on the issue of conversion. Some of these women's experiences are recorded in Circle books that the author has read. The author has centred her research on women firstly because there is usually a high percentage of them in our churches. Secondly, the author has more contact with women than men as most of her work deals with the former.

### **3.1 Sampling**

This article highlights a discussion from the women's side, as such it is based on stories of about 97 women from about 50 Baptist Convention churches in Malawi. These stories are testimonies of why people left other churches to become Baptists. These stories were collected at random from all the three regions, North, Center and South covering the following districts: Zomba, Thyolo, Blantyre, Machinga, Liwonde, Mangochi and Mulanje in the South, Lilongwe in the Centre and Mzuzu in the North. Further, there are some testimonies from women outside Malawi.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Results from outside Malawi**

It is very clear that conversion in a sociological sense is often influenced by conversion in the theological sense. Such conversions in a sociological sense are much wider than a spiritual rebirth, infilling of the Holy Spirit and doctrinal conversions as understood by the different Christian persuasions outlined above. Additional reasons with a theological motif are gleaned from this study. Firstly, miraculous physical healing pulled women from other religions to join the church. Prophetess Sophie Ajayi attracted such people to the Christian movement called the Precious Stone Society, which she founded based on her healing ministry among people in Nigeria. She had a vision from God that rain water was a cure to the influenza epidemic of 1918. Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde records Sophie Ajayi's experience in this way: "Subsequently, she met and joined the prayer band where she was mightily used for people's healing. This led to the increase of the members of the congregation".<sup>10</sup> It is not clear whether such a physical healing included spiritual rebirth of any kind or even a doctrinal change.

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10 See Dorcas Olubanke Akintunde, "The Achievements and Hurdles of the Good Women Association of Nigeria (1943-2001)", in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar, *Her Stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster 2002 p85

Other women have left their churches to join those that offered more opportunities for ministry. This is especially true in the current period where there is a rise in female religious leadership particularly in some new charismatic churches<sup>11</sup> as well as in the wake of feminist movements that seek to promote women's leadership. As such Christian churches that provide opportunities for women to engage themselves in leadership roles are likely to retain and attract women. Women such as Prof Hannah Wangeci Kinoti enjoyed the freedom in exercising their spiritual ministerial gifts within their own churches.<sup>12</sup> Other women have even fought against church policies that restrict them to lead in church. In the event that church policies continue to be restrictive, some women leave such churches. Others choose to remain in such churches trusting that one day the church will accord them room for ministry. An example of the latter group is Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa of the United Congregational Church in South Africa. Although she was only ordained at the age of 73 after being called to ministry at the age of 27, she chose to remain with the church.<sup>13</sup>

The spiritual atmosphere of a church can be either welcoming to women or not. Some women, for example, have left churches which are considered to be 'cold' spiritually and joined those that are seen to be 'hot'. Meanings of whether the church is cold or hot oscillate between solid church teachings such as the ability to offer new life in Christ to people and vibrant programmes such as good singing or a good Sunday school programme. Rev. Margeret Wanjiru of Jesus Alive Ministries in Kenya, for example, became member of the Redeemed Gospel Church after deliverance and conversion to new life.<sup>14</sup> Ngoya was also converted through the preaching of freelance evangelists belonging to the Quaker Church. Through this preaching she embraced new life in Christ and joined the Quaker Church.<sup>15</sup>

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11 See Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "A Burning Stick Plucked out of the Fire: The Story of Rev. Margaret Wanjiru of Jesus is Alive Ministries" in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar, *Her-Stories*, p. 202.

12 See Constance Ambasa Shisanga, "Professor Hannah Wangeci Kinoti: Your Seeds are Germinating in Kenya," in Isabel Apawo Phiri et al., *Her-Stories*, p. 342.13 See Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Called at Twenty Seven and Ordained at Seventy Three!" in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar, *Her-Stories: Hidden Stories of Women of Faith in Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002, p. 120.

14 See Philomena Njeri Mwaura, "A Burning Stick Plucked Out of the Fire: The Story of Rev Margeret Wanjiru of Jesus is Alive Ministries," in Isabel Apawo Phiri et al., *Her-Stories*, p. 211.

15 See Constance Ambasa Shisanga, Double Jeopardy: The Story of a Single Female Pastor in a Patriarchal Quaker Church in Nairobi, Kenya, in Isabel Apawo Phiri et al., *Her-Stories*, p. 228.

The ability to offer physical and emotional support is another reason for women to leave churches that do not offer such support to join those that do. One of the reasons why people join the Quakers, for example, is that the church offers support to members (friends) during times of crisis. The Abalogoli people of Kenya for example dominate the Quaker Church in Nairobi and expect the church to offer community support that has been eroded due to being uprooted from their original villages.<sup>16</sup>

#### **4.2 Results based on baptist Convention women in Malawi**

Similarly, conversions in the theological sense that influence conversions in the sociological sense in the neighbouring countries also apply to women in the Baptist Convention. In addition, experiences of women in the Baptist Convention highlight further reasons for conversion in a sociological sense. Firstly, the similarities. Spiritual atmosphere encourages or discourages women from leaving a congregation or one's faith. Molly Longwe, for example, was converted to the Baptist church after she found new life in Christ at a prayer meeting organized by Baptist members. She left the Presbyterian church which did not offer her such an opportunity.<sup>17</sup>

The second example is how physical and emotional support influences conversion in a sociological sense. Baptist women have left congregations with limited pastoral services to join congregations which have better pastoral services. From the sample of 97 women, 10 women left other Christian churches to join the Baptists for this reason. One of the occasions that calls for such competent pastoral services is funerals. Women in Africa become very vulnerable when they are faced with death of close members. If their churches neglect them at this juncture, they feel hated and often leave that particular church for another, which provides such social services. Five women in the sample left their church to join the Baptists in this way. One of them is Sellina Nasimango of Zomba. She left the Roman Catholic Church and joined the Baptist Church when the former church refused to offer a Christian burial for her relative.<sup>18</sup> In the same way women of Maliro Baptist church near the Mozambique boarder left their former church to join the Baptists because they felt that their

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16 Ibid., p. 232.

17 See Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, "Against the Flow: Stories of Women Pastors in the Baptist Convention in Malawi, 1961-2001," in Isabel Apawo Phiri et al., *Her Stories*, p. 195.

18 Ibid., p. 186.

former church did not provide enough emotional and physical support at the death of their family members.<sup>19</sup>

It is not only emotional support that retains women in a particular denomination but also material support. Mrs Lazarus Malabwanya was blind and was a beggar in the town of Blantyre. Mrs Cameroon, a Baptist herself, offered her quarters as lodgings, and the Southern Baptist missionaries, especially Beverly Kingsley, helped to educate her children by offering financial support. This support pulled Mrs Malabwanya and her family to the Baptist church.<sup>20</sup>

However, experiences of Baptist Convention women in Southern Malawi shed light on additional reasons for conversion in the sociological sense. From their testimonies it is clear that conversion in a sociological sense is not always necessitated by a conversion in the theological sense. There are other factors that bring about conversion in the sociological sense. Firstly, conversion often takes place in the context of marriage. Without claiming that such applies to all Africa, the role of marriage in conversion in a sociological sense is very clear among Baptist Convention women in Malawi. As an example, twenty six women among 97 in the sample left their former churches to join the Baptists following their husbands.<sup>21</sup> Of all the reasons as to why women joined the church, this single reason was the most dominant. The decision to follow a husband is both cultural as well as theological. In an African world view, husbands are leaders of households and are popularly recognized as heads of families, even though this role is highly contested by feminist theologians in Africa.<sup>22</sup> Proverbial sayings are sometimes used in cementing decisions by a husband in an African marriage. This is shown by the testimony of Rosebay Botomani who followed her husbands church. Even though Efraim her husband became a Baptist, she wanted to remain in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) at any cost. But Efraim threatened and challenged her with the proverb *sindinaone mphuno imodzi kulowa zala ziwiri* (I have never seen a nose which can accommodate two

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19 Int. Rev Mtuwe, Malirano Baptist Church, Mozambique Border, 19.5.2000.

20 Int. J.M. Ng'oma, Soche Baptist Church, 25.5.1999. Her son Samuel Malabwanya, educated in this way, became an influential Baptist pastor of Jerusalem Baptist Church from 1994 to 1996 when he left to start Good Hope Church. Int. Mr Gawaza, Bangwe Baptist Church, Blantyre 30.4.2000.

21 Of those who changed denomination or religion in the context of marriage, it was 80% wives following the husband and 20% husbands following the wife.

22 It is also contested by the fact that men often play only a transitory role in a family.

fingers).<sup>23</sup> The implication is that if Rosebay was married to Efraim, she was one with her husband and needed to do one thing with him. This proverb did not convince Rosebay until one day Efraim threatened her with these words: “If you do not come with me to church, you will find me gone back to my home”.<sup>24</sup> Rosebay followed her husband to the Baptist Church.<sup>25</sup> It is also true that more women follow their husbands in joining other churches than other family members. In the sample interviewed, only three women followed other family members. One followed her mother, the other her uncle<sup>26</sup> and the last one her elder son.

Another theological reason that causes women to leave a church and join another relates to the practice of disciplining church members and excommunication. In some churches, ‘discipline’ of a member includes barring one from receiving the sacraments. Since sacraments are viewed as important in one’s connectedness to the body of fellow believers, any withdrawal of sacraments from a member by the church is viewed as an ostracism from the body of believers.<sup>27</sup> Actually it is not viewed differently from excommunication. Such ostracism has grave implications such as being denied a decent church funeral or wedding. The desire to avert such consequences is often the reason why women leave their churches to join another. Out of 97 one joined the Baptist Church after being disciplined while three left the church because of being excommunicated. The other theological factor that leads to conversion in a sociological sense is restrictive church policies. In the sample above, 18 women left their churches to join the Baptists because they attended fellowships when their church disallowed that. Many did not have a church wedding and others were divorced. In some churches, lack of a church wedding or a divorce are a cause for non membership.

Conversion in a sociological sense is also caused by non theological factors. Four women in the sample left their churches to join an English

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23 Cf. J.C. Chakanza, *Wisdom of the People: 2000 Chinyanja Proverbs and Figurative Sayings*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2001, proverb no. 886, p. 194.

24 His marriage was uxori-local in a matrilineal society.

25 Int. Rosebay Botoman, Chisomo Baptist Church, Blantyre rural, 28.3.2000.

26 In the matrilineal societies of Southern Malawi the maternal uncle of the wife is the dominant male figure in the family setting, but husbands have more power to attract or direct their wives to change denominational allegiance.

27 This bars women also from becoming members of the important church women’s organizations, like Umanyano, Chigwirizano or Mvano in the CCAP or Umodzi in the Baptist Convention (Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, “A Survey of Women’s Organizations in Southern Malawi”, MA Module 3, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Malawi, 1999.) For the history of Umodzi wa Amayi in Southern Malawi see Rachel Banda, *Women of Bible and Culture*, pp. 89-121.

speaking congregation while three left their former church to join the Baptists because of internal church conflicts in their former church and two left their earlier congregation because of distance. In addition, some left their former churches on political grounds. In the sample above, two women left the Jehovah's Witnesses which was illegal at that time to join the Baptists.<sup>28</sup>

## 5. Possible solutions

Since churches in Africa have a preponderance of female members,<sup>29</sup> female issues must be specifically highlighted as part of the mission of the church in the world. This article singles out a few women's issues. Firstly, among churches, that treat the church wedding as a sacrament (or behave as if they do), discipline of defaulting couples needs to be lightened. In addition the churches need to find a way to separate church weddings from the high costs commonly associated with them, as almost everywhere in Africa, many people, especially the poor, are unable to afford church weddings.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, those who had a church wedding and are divorced, should be given a chance to rejoin the full communion of the church. This must be after assurance that such defaulting couples understand the sanctity of marriage, how they have failed and what forgiveness can do for them. Further, both the churches that treat church weddings as a sacrament and those who do not, should attempt to merge the church's marriage vows and the traditional wedding. But churches which do not consider church weddings as a sacrament, should not restore defaulting couples without providing proper teaching on the sanctity of marriage.

Secondly, since women are usually the care givers of family members at times of crisis such as sickness and death, the mission of the church must include adequate pastoral support when such needs occur. In the current era

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28 The Malawi Government (through its ruling party) first persecuted (since 1961) and then outlawed the Jehovah's Witnesses (1972) because they refused to buy party cards. Persecution was stopped by the new multi-party government in 1993 restituting the human rights of the Jehovah's Witnesses. For the story of their persecution and survival see: Klaus Fiedler, "Power at the Receiving End", in Kenneth R. Ross (ed.), *God, People and Power in Malawi*, Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2001, pp. 149-176.

29 This preponderance is often not so much in terms of church membership but in term of church attendance. In the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Tanzania, 52% of members are female (compared to 51% women in the national census), but in church attendance the female/male ratio is 60/40 (Gabriel Mgeyekwa, "The Growth o Congregational Life in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, Southern Diocese", PhD, University of Malawi, 2006.

30 Klaus Fiedler, "For the Sake of Christian Marriage Abolish Church Weddings", *Religion in Malawi*, no. 5, pp. 22-28.



of the HIV and Aids pandemic, women have felt the brunt of the effects through death of family members such as husbands and children. Since it is not always possible for the church to provide physical support, social support must accompany the spiritual support that many churches are good at. In the event of the death of the husband, the economic muscle of the family to acquire sufficient means for the surviving members might be lacking.<sup>31</sup> The church may then help materially during the period of transition.

Thirdly, in Africa, distance to the church affects women more than men as women are also required to meet the domestic demands before and after church.<sup>32</sup> In addition, often women accompany children to church, and if the church is far, women may be reluctant to go as the burden of carrying their children to church may be unbearable. Therefore, the church must encourage men to assist women in taking children to church. Further, there is need to encourage church planting that puts churches close to where the people are. Distance to churches may not only cause Christians to leave their churches but also to leave the Christian faith altogether.

Fourthly, it is perplexing that until now there are some churches that restrict women from participating fully in the life of the church. Time has come for churches to rethink their theologies to adopt those that accommodate women's leadership abilities and calling.<sup>34</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

This article shows that there is a relationship between conversion in the theological sense and conversion in the sociological sense. In many instances conversion in a theological sense has influenced conversion in the sociological sense. However it has been argued that conversion in the sociological sense has a wider perspective.

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- 31 In Malawi a higher percentage of women than men is not in paid employment.
- 32 In many cases, the women have to make the bath water in the morning, dress the children and make breakfast while the men wait. Thus women come often late to church after the men have been there in time.
- 33 Over the years, women participation in the worshipping life of the Baptist church in Malawi has increased, but women only became pastors under specific circumstances and were often not recognized by the men. See Rachel NyaGondwe Fiedler, "Against the Flow: Stories of Women Pastors in Malawi, 1961-2001," in Isabel Apawo Phiri, Devarakshanam Betty Govinden and Sarojini Nadar (eds), *Her-Stories. Hidden Histories of Women*, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2002. For the stories of women pastors Mellia Makina, Sellina Nasimango and Agnes Lufani see also Rachel NyaGondwe Banda, *Women of the Bible and Culture: Baptist Convention Women in Southern Malawi*, Zomba: Kachere, pp. 132-145.
- 34 Such a calling may include ordination. For a Biblical plea for ordination of women in the Baptist Convention see: Klaus Fiedler, *Baptists and the Ordination of Women*, Zomba: Lydia Print, 2008.

There is a sense that even though different church persuasions seek a different conversion in the theological sense (spiritual rebirth, baptism in the Holy Spirit and doctrinal conversion), in reality people (and women among them) are often converted to the church for other theological as well as non theological reasons.<sup>35</sup> What does this mean for the mission of the church today? The churches must see this as a reality to work with and not to fight against. Though the possibility to change denomination goes against concepts of church unity,<sup>36</sup> it often offers women the chance to reach a more fulfilled spiritual life.<sup>37</sup> This may even include a spiritual rebirth and renewal, baptism in the Holy Spirit and doctrinal change.

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- 35 These reasons might or might not include spiritual rebirth, baptism in the Holy Spirit and doctrinal conversion.
- 36 For a discussion of unity and diversity in Malawi see: Klaus Fiedler, "The Process of Religious Diversification in Malawi: A Reflection on Method and a First Attempt at a Synthesis", *Religion in Malawi*, no. 11 (2004), pp. 18-24
- 37 An example would be the case of a Catholic woman whose husband has left her and has not died yet. By joining a Baptist church, she becomes a full participating member and has again access to the sacraments.

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