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Youth Empowerment and African Initiated Churches in Urban Zimbabwe

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Poster Advertising the “Billionaire Mindset Summit” of United Family International Church, an African Initiated Pentecostal-Charismatic Church.

Abstract:

New Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, a recent branch of African Initiated Christianity, are attracting vast numbers of people in urban Zimbabwe as well as many other African countries. Their message of empowerment and prosperity is particularly attractive to the youth. The churches are increasingly engaged in youth development by providing education, business support and career mentorship. Partnership between international development agencies and the new Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in these areas would have substantial impact on youth empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa.

(Deutsche Zusammenfassung auf S. 5)

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Rapid Growth of New African Initiated Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in Zimbabwe

In the past ten years, there has been a rapid proliferation of new African Initiated Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs) in Zimbabwe's urban spaces. While the concept and metaphor of 'African Initiated Churches' has been subject to protracted debates, the concept is used here to refer to churches initiated in Africa and by African prophets/pastors. New Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches are the most recent branch of churches that evolved in African Initiated Christianity. The majority of these new PCCs attract over 50 000 congregants at their mega services, preach and propagate prosperity gospel. Prosperity gospel, often referred to as the 'health and wealth' gospel is based on the belief that God wants his children to be economically and socially successful in life and to exercise dominion over sickness, poverty and all forms of human suffering (see Gukurume 2017). In trying to promote human flourishing, these new PCCs run various charity activities, business and entrepreneurship training and mentorship programmes. The recent emergence and rapid growth of these new PCCs has revolutionised the country's religious landscape in multiple ways. In fact, new PCCs have become an important part of the contemporary public sphere. They are publicly visible and audible through public worship services, street preaching, stickers on vehicles of congregants and impressively huge billboards that advertise their mega events, located at strategic intersections in urban spaces.

New PCCs' Business and Entrepreneurship Training for Youth

One of the most significant ways through which new PCCs contribute to youth empowerment in Zimbabwe is through business and entrepreneurship training programmes. As part of their prosperity gospel, new PCCs actively teach young people to be adventurous and enterprising. The youth are urged not to be content with measly salaries as employees; instead, they encourage them to become entrepreneurs and employers. As such, in trying to cultivate these values, new PCCs like the United Family International Church (UFIC), Spirit Embassy-Good News Church and Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) organise a number of business and entrepreneurship training and workshops for their youthful congregants. For instance, UFIC holds an annual mega 'Billionaires Mindset' summit and several other small business seminars throughout the year. For these business workshops, PCCs invite prominent business tycoons to share their experiences with young congregants. Sometimes they invite officials from the company registry to enlighten young people on how to register companies. "We train young people to realise that there is more to just being an employee – we make them understand that their future is in their hands and that entrepreneurship is as good a career as well", one PCCs pastor asserted in an interview. Through these workshops many young people are inspired and trained to become entrepreneurs. In a country where unemployment rates have reached a crescendo of 80% (Gukurume 2015), many young people find calls to become entrepreneurs compelling and attractive. Indeed, during my fieldwork many youth were engaged in some form of 'penny capitalism' akin to petty businesses such as micro and small enterprises.

Educational Scholarships and Social Support

Through their charity wings, many new PCCs offer scholarships to less privileged children from primary school to university level. Mega PCCs like UFIC offer scholarships and bursaries to over 50 students through their AGAPE family care charity department. Similarly, Spirit Embassy-Good News Church also offers scholarships to many students through their Hand of Mercy charity department, while PHD also does different kinds of charity work to assist youth and students at secondary schools and universities. Many of the beneficiaries of these scholarships are orphans and poor people. As the scholarships are financed from church funds, the number of recipients is limited and normally from within the church. Nonetheless, they have certainly changed lives and reconfigured the future of the few lucky recipients. Some Pentecostal churches have even begun to construct their own state of the art schools and universities. For instance, at the time of writing, UFIC was constructing Ruthdale high school in Greendale, Harare, while the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa had finished constructing a new university, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University in Bindura. In light of the foregoing, I contend that through such scholarship programmes, new PCCs are actively promoting sustainable development by training and empowering future leaders. Indeed, in a context where the state has withdrawn financial support to university students due to the protracted economic crisis (Morreira & Hayakawa 2015; Gukurume 2017), these new PCCs have become important spaces of alternative funding and networks of social and financial support for the youth in general and university students in particular. As such, by contributing towards the improvement of tertiary education continuity and outcomes of students, new PCCs should be viewed as important actors and agents of youth empowerment in the country.

Mentorship and Business Networks

Many new PCCs operate through professional departments. For instance, UFIC, PHD and Spirit Embassy all structure their work in a department system. Such departments include the health department, legal, media, charity, marketing and finance departments. These departments are led by established professionals in different fields. Church members are encouraged to join these departments based on their professional training and interests. For the youth, departments provide important spaces to meet and interact with their role models who have made it in their respective professional fields and to receive professional mentorship. Given the fact that many of the PCCs attract senior politicians, top business people and other captains of industry, the church has also become a space of not only forging convivial relationships and business networks, but also spaces where employment opportunities are accessed. In fact, the mega-PCCs themselves have also become big employers in their huge media, university and other departments. In a church service, one youthful “prophet” declared that he was sent by God to raise-up “Christian billionaires and leaders”.

Policy Recommendations

The new African Initiated Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in Zimbabwe are an example of a dynamic Christian movement found in many countries throughout the continent. These new churches are particularly active in youth empowerment. There are several areas in which international development cooperation could engage with these churches. Prime areas of mutual engagement would be the education sector and youth economic empowerment programmes.

- Development cooperation could partner with new African Initiated Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches for business and entrepreneurship training programmes, as well as career mentorship initiatives.
- Development cooperation could partner with new African Initiated Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in the provision of educational scholarships and financial support programmes to increase the number of beneficiaries.
- There could be a transfer of expertise to improve the quality of education and training provided by new African Initiated Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches.

It should however be noted that not all new churches would be equally good partners for development cooperation. In some of the churches, for example, only church members benefit from these programmes and some churches have been implicated in fraud and other controversies. Hence, potential partners should be thoroughly assessed beforehand. Nonetheless, if the prerequisites are in place, there is great potential for fruitful collaboration with new African Initiated Pentecostal Churches for sustainable development in Zimbabwe and beyond.

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Neue Charismatische Pfingstkirchen sind eine neue Generation von African Initiated Churches. Sie üben in den städtischen Ballungszentren Simbabwes und in vieler anderer afrikanischer Länder eine ungeheure Anziehungskraft aus. Ihre Botschaft von Empowerment und wirtschaftlichem Erfolg ist besonders für junge Menschen attraktiv. Viele dieser Neuen Charismatischen Pfingstkirchen sind zunehmend in der Arbeit mit Jugendlichen engagiert, in Form von Bildungsangeboten, wirtschaftlicher Unterstützung und beruflichen Mentoringprogrammen. Partnerschaften von Entwicklungszusammenarbeit und diesen Kirchen könnten wirkungsvoll zur Erhöhung von Bildung, Arbeitsmarkterfolg und Unternehmertum in Afrika beitragen.

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