

African Christianity Rising

Stories from Ghana and Zimbabwe

A DOCUMENTARY FILM SERIES

Christianity's explosive growth in Africa was totally unexpected at the dawn of independence from colonial rule. It is part of a startling reversal in world history. Christianity is no longer the religion of the West. Over two-thirds of the world's Christians now live in the global South—with Africa growing the fastest—and all signs point to this trend continuing. We are turning a page in world history. What does it mean? What is Christianity becoming, and what new, perhaps surprising, developments will it foster?

With guidance from leading scholars in the field and major funding from Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation, we have been documenting the vitality and changing nature of Christianity in Africa. We have explored, among other things, the ways in which it is has become increasingly popular by becoming increasingly *African*: by emphasizing healing, for instance, or dancing as spiritual discipline, or addressing the multiplicity of spirits that are part and parcel of the world most Africans know.

The stories we filmed bring viewers into this African world through the personal dramas of ordinary people wrestling with unmistakable, and at times gripping, human problems: for example, a young pentecostal woman struggling to overcome bitterness toward her mother, or a teenager wracked by poverty, depression and guilt, who has been persuaded by a traditional healer that hateful relatives have placed a curse on her life. Her Methodist pastor brings in the church's "prayer group" to pray against any spiritual powers she and they think might be at work.

Such stories are illuminated by leading thinkers on the subject, like Archbishop Peter Sarpong of the Catholic Church in Ghana, a pioneer in introducing African culture into Christian worship, and Kwame Bediako, one of Africa's leading theologians, or Eben Nihwatiwa, a Zimbabwean theologian and leader among African bishops in the United Methodist church, and Trevor Manhanga, the Pentecostal head of Zimbabwe's Council of Churches. Filming some of our characters on routine "missions" to North America points to certain impacts African Christianity is having in the West, at a time when African congregations are taking over old churches in Holland, Norway and Sweden, and the largest church in London is African-led. That the current head of the World Council of Churches, of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and academic head of the largest theological school in the United States are all Africans, further testifies to African Christianity's importance on the world stage today.

We filmed 300 hours in Ghana and Zimbabwe—half in Digibeta and DVCAM by leading *cinéma-vérité* cameramen including Tom Hurwitz (cameraman for many of Barbara Kopple's award-winning films). In both countries we followed stories in all three kinds of churches typically found in sub-Saharan Africa today: mission-founded, old independent—or "spiritual"—churches, and new Pentecostal or charismatic ones.

From this material we edited over 2 1/2 hours of roughcuts praised by leading thinkers in the field. With interest from South African Broadcasting to air a series from these materials, as well as interest from other broadcasters, we have completed two films for broadcast: *African Christianity Rising—Part 1: Stories from Ghana* and *Part 2: Stories from Zimbabwe*. (Each currently runs just over an hour). We intend to release DVDs with many extras for diverse educational use and to employ online social networking and video posting to draw people around the world to this work

Producer/director James Ault is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and scholar who has lived and worked in Africa. His first film, *Born Again: Life in a Fundamentalist Baptist Church*, won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival and was broadcast nationally on PBS, on Channel 4 in the UK, in Europe and around the world. His book on that project, *Spirit and Flesh* (Knopf 2004) was named one of the 5 best nonfiction books of the year.

Editors Kate Purdie has worked in New York with David Grubin, Robert Drew and *60 Minutes*. Jean Boucicaut edited the award-winning *Secret Daughter* and *Liberia: America's Stepchild*.

EARLY PRAISE FOR *AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY RISING* ROUGH CUTS:

"The most penetrating and informative material I have ever seen on African Christianity, bringing out its vitality and variety without ever sensationalizing or exoticising."

Terence Ranger, Professor of African History, Oxford University

"Magnificent and often really moving; the whole film would be a dazzling success."

Philip Jenkins, author of *The New Faces of Christianity*

"They raise, far more effectively than any lecture could, fundamental issues about African Christianity, modern African forms of society and how culture and world view shape perceptions, and indeed the nature of Christianity itself."

Andrew Walls, Professor Emeritus & Founder, Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Nonwestern World, University of Edinburgh

"A striking portrait, revealing a Christianity poised to renew the vitality of a faith once received from Europe and America."

Al Raboteau, Professor of Religion, Princeton University

"The depth and scale of the work is truly remarkable and I believe that it makes important statements about the development of Christianity in Africa."

Ed Worster, Programming Director, South African Broadcasting