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*The Church in Africa –  
Historical Consciousness and  
Patterns of Engagement*

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# **Journal of African Christian Thought**

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**Themes of future issues:**

Vol. 7, No. 2 (December 2004)

*Muslims and Christians in African Perspective*

Vol. 8, No. 1 (June 2005)

*Christ in African Experience - Reflections from Homeland and Diaspora*



# Editorial

In Volume 1 of the *Journal of African Christian Thought* (Nos. 1 and 2, 1998), we focused on the theme, 'The Church in the African State towards the Twenty-first Century', with the second issue looking specifically at 'Ecumenical Perspectives from West Africa'. In this issue, we return again to the theme of the church in Africa, but focus on the twin aspects of historical consciousness and patterns of engagement.

The 'massive, unignorable fact and factor' of the church in Africa, discerned by C.G. Baëta of Ghana<sup>1</sup> at a time when it was not so clearly evident and had to be argued for, is now recognised across the range of scholarship about Africa at the beginning of the twenty-first century. No one doubts the current vibrant and vital social impact of the church in Africa, or its likely continuing influence in the years ahead. Given this situation, it becomes important for the African church to reflect deeply on its heritage and its ongoing mission, if it is to chart a course that identifies it as heir to the twenty centuries of Christian tradition, and to engage authentically with the religious, cultural and theological issues thrown up by its immediate setting. Developing deep and accurate historical awareness and critiquing the patterns of current engagement are essential ingredients of a healthy self-understanding and heightened Christian impact in society.

However, these elements are not automatically present in the life of a church. Just as it is possible for a church to 'exist without a theology', as John Mbiti once considered the African church to be doing,<sup>2</sup> so it is possible for a church to continue operating without an adequate awareness of where it has come from or of the vital forces that brought it to its present situation. It is also possible for a church to carry on its regular functions and its time-honoured traditions without self-examination or heart-searching as to precisely what it is achieving. It becomes one of the urgent tasks of Christian scholarship in Africa to help the church to be more historically aware, and to develop traditions that build consciously and constructively upon the learning of the past.

All the articles in this issue address, in one way or another, aspects of the church's historical consciousness or the nature of the church's engagement with society, or how these two interrelate. They all share the concern that the church should fulfil its calling with greater effectiveness, by discerning and learning the lessons of the past, and by analysing and critiquing its present activity.

Robert Addo-Fening's article, 'From traditionalist to Christian evangelist and teacher – The religious itinerary and legacy of Emmanuel Yaw Boakye (1834–1914)', is a fine example of how meticulous archival research opens up hitherto forgotten stories belonging to the early days of Christian mission, stories that highlight the contribution of pioneer indigenous Christians to the engagement of the Christian faith with African culture. Emmanuel Yaw Boakye, the father of the famous doyen of Ghana politics, Dr. J.B. Danquah, is largely unknown in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the continuation of the Basel Mission Church in which Yaw Boakye was Evangelist and later

Catechist. Yet he is shown to have been a key figure in the advancement of Christian witness in his time, with a lasting legacy in both church and society.

A second article focusing on the contribution of specific personalities in the Christian history of nineteenth-century West Africa, is the article by Kehinde Olabintan on 'Samuel Johnson (1846–1901) and Yoruba historical consciousness: Discerning meaning and engaging reality in the nineteenth century'. While there are close correlations between Emmanuel Yaw Boakye and Samuel Johnson with respect to the period in which they lived, their association with the Basel Mission, and also in their concern for social transformation as a fruit of the gospel, the situation of Johnson's Yoruba country raised peculiar challenges that are shown to have shaped Johnson's ministry and the choices he made. In this first offering of the fruits of his ongoing PhD research, Olabintan seeks to understand and interpret the forces at work and to draw some lessons for the contemporary church in facing the challenges of Africa today.

The third article draws from an East African perspective. Watson Omulokoli looks at 'The roots and emergence of the modern missionary movement and the planting of Christianity in Africa', as a way to understanding the present scene of Christianity in Africa. He provides a historical survey of the Evangelical Movement in Europe, outlining clearly the evangelical roots and legacy of the modern missionary movement, while also acknowledging the indigenous contribution to African evangelicalism. The African church is largely evangelical in ethos, but it is probably true to say that it is generally ignorant of the early evangelical tradition elsewhere, to which it is related. Omulokoli seeks to remedy this, while also stressing the uniqueness of the evangelical plant that has grown in the African soil. The article is particularly helpful in pointing to the social involvement of the early Evangelical Movement in Europe, a commitment that did not find its way into some strands of African evangelicalism, perhaps because it had already been eclipsed in the consciousness of later evangelicals coming as missionaries to Africa.

The next two articles focus squarely on contemporary aspects of the African church's engagement in society. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, in his article, "God's End-time Militia": Ecclesiology in Ghana's new Charismatic ministries', gives a historical and theological analysis of the ecclesiology of one particular Charismatic church in Ghana today, and in so doing, highlights a positive contribution from which other church traditions could learn. The article may be found helpful to Charismatic churches generally, by pointing them to the strengths in their church structures that need to be maintained and enhanced, at a time when some of them are in danger of losing focus.

Philomena Mwaura's article, 'Unsung bearers of good news: AIC women and the transformation of society in Africa', considers the range of responses to women's involvement in the church that are found in African Instituted Churches (AICs) across the continent. She explores in some depth the role and impact of women in