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University) is a research fellow at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, pursuing a multiyear global research project commissioned by the John Templeton World Charity Foundation on contemporary religion. Originally from Kenya, she has received education in Nairobi, Edinburgh, and the United States, with extensive global experience, including research projects from Korea to Kentucky. She formerly served on the staffs of Nairobi Chapel and Mavuno Church.

A Case Study in Millennial Megachurch Success

Why do you think the concept of megachurches needs to be redeemed?

I wrote this book to respond to what I perceived as a gap between the spirit of megachurches versus how existing literature and popular opinion misconstrues them. This compelling narrative is an opportunity to demonstrate the sociohistorical logic for megachurch rise, growth, and popularity, and thus all the background detail of the Kenyan/African social and ecclesial conditions, personal stories of key actors, and historical detail of the broader tradition of evangelicalism. The hoped for outcome is that more than just affirming megachurch existence, this book may generate theological discourses that shape the pragmatism of megachurches; therefore, helping equip them to make a further impact in their world.

Why are megachurches important to the current state of world Christianity?

Churches that grow to mega size do so because at the intersection of generational transitions, they crystalize as communities attempting to navigate a world experienced as deeply volatile. Their message, which helps a new generation see how the gospel is the answer to a wider crisis, shapes individual, community, and social identities that undergird a new sense of purpose and place in the world. Its communication and methods of organization come to resonate with a *certain* demographic, which is why the churches grow large but also tend to be homogenous in who they attract. Specifics of framing the core message and forms of organization may differ depending on location, but in the broadest historical and social sense, such churches ought to be seen as interpreting the sensibilities of the modernizing world – the city, market capitalism, globalization, and even politics – to an aspiring, younger, and educated generation. This explains why the churches end up as successful, middle class congregations. That said, there is a case to be made that many never completely mature because after attracting a substantial following, they become culturally captive (thus frequent fallout and legitimate critique by outsiders); therefore, megachurches need to shape what they do more intentionally.

What lessons does a relatively young megachurch in Africa provide for the broader church?

A key contribution of this book is in the *full cohesive and comprehensive narrative* of one relatively young congregation, beginning with its background, to its rationalization of the issues, to its core message, to its leadership, and its impact, all of which go into creating a home for a homeless generation. The narrative is intended to make sense of the whole megachurch idea. A great deal of writing on megachurches focuses on partial or controversial aspects of them. In this narrative, a reader will miss the full import if they

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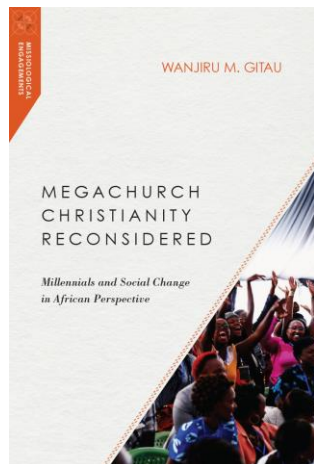


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Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective

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Building from a behind-the-scenes case study of Kenya's Nairobi Chapel and its "daughter" Mavuno Church, Wanjiru M. Gitau expands their story into a narrative that offers analysis of the rise, growth, and place of megachurches worldwide in the new millennium. Gitau shows that recognizing the psychological, spiritual, and social destabilization of modernizing societies is the first step to valuing the place of megachurches in contemporary Christianity.

focus on specifics without integrating the whole.

A second contribution is *the detail and personal stories within the bigger narrative*. The detail is intended to frame the perspective of the true believer, the person who resonates with the why and what of megachurches (including pastors and staff of such, which is why the core, intended audience is megachurches themselves). For this reader, background histories and personal stories, weaved with analysis and some theological reflection, should emerge as a reflexive mirror within the reader's world.

The recent return to kingdom and missional theology will be more effective if directed and framed for audiences of thriving ecclesiastical communities, and it is (evangelical/Pentecostal) megachurches that have been thriving in the recent decade even though their import has not been recognized because they come across as parochial. Part of the much-needed scholarship beyond this book is to challenge them to exit their bubble and embrace a much larger call to translate a gospel big enough for a twenty-first-century world.

Where does history come in to play?

As a scholar of world Christianity, I am seeking to make sense of Christianity as it is newly developing in the Global South, especially Africa. I am doing so by looking for patterns in Christian history, the universal body of Christ as I have experienced in extensive research (through global projects), crosscultural encounter, and wider social science discourse accessed through (ethnographic) research. Although based on a case study, this book attempts to move beyond a simple biographical sketch of a successful church into a much more integrative and multidisciplinary scholarship.

Where do you hope this book takes your work and others' work as scholars?

A longer-term goal of my work is to affirm the place and practices of evangelical Christianity in the modern world. A discerning reader should see this as a strong case for the place of the evangelical movement (including Pentecostalism) beyond the flat generalizations of evangelical co-optation in present social struggles – not that megachurches are the only expression of it, but they are a visible and powerful expression of evangelicalism. This then introduces a whole range of practical matters, such as leadership and its development within such churches, missional activities, networks across the globe, and significantly, the use of Scripture. I think more than any other Christian tradition, megachurches, (and generally evangelicalism), make the most creative use of Scripture through contemporaneous cultural translation in sermons, devotional literature, popular music, radio, TV, and internet-based media. All of these uses of Scripture are selectively applied to specifics of mundane life, yet on the whole, they in fact offer a most robust engagement with the Bible that I believe keeps it alive and relevant as the living word of God and a document of hope for a world that desperately needs such hope. Unfortunately, much of this is lost in the general suspicion of and parochialism in many descriptions of megachurches. I hope to write more along this line, but I also hope to challenge others, including students, to do the same.

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