

**Rev. Martin Ritsi, Director
Orthodox Christian Mission Center
Saint Augustine, Florida**

April 1991

A MISSION WITHOUT A MISSIONARY

SECTION 1—BACKGROUND

Introduction

Upon arriving in East Africa in 1987, I was amazed to find an established Orthodox Church, worshipping, training new leaders, and growing in both faith and numbers. At first, I didn't bother to question how this thriving Church had come into existence. It seemed to be a natural part of the country and my focus on where the Church had come from was given as little attention as to where the warm people or the majestic mountains, the lush farmland, and the intriguing wild life had come from. But, I was a missionary (at least that is what I was being called both at home and here in this new country) and missionaries were supposed to spread the gospel. It wasn't long before I did start to question how the foundation had been laid. To my surprise, though, there was little to be seen. This foundation had been covered over by the Church built upon it, and those who had labored to dig in the rich red soil, to mix and carry the cement and stones had been forgotten. Or so it seemed.

While faced with a shortage of clergy and no system for evangelism being taught or stated, this young Church was growing. This was to me the most amazing factor of all. Here I was to evangelize, yet it was already being done, and behind my back! And even more, when I turned around to see what they were doing the scene would vanish before my eyes, as if these pearls of knowledge were only for the Africans to understand.

In three years, I never stopped marveling at the ability of the priests, whom I was helping to train, to harvest the fields. I searched, I questioned, I interviewed and collected materials. And now, I have sat down with a hope of seeing things in a new light. Though I still feel there is much which my African brothers have lovingly hidden

from my Western World View, they have also been kind in allowing their “Mzungu” friend to enjoy some tidbits of wisdom about how they were able to spread their faith in a “mission without a missionary.”

In this paper I will dig back to the beginnings of the Orthodox Church in East Africa, and walk to the present, at which time I will apply a new perspective which I have been given in a course (The Historical Development of the Christian Movement) at Fuller School of World Missions. God has repeatedly used a system throughout history to accomplish the great and awesome task for which He has sent His Son: “...that the world might be saved through Him” (Jn. 3:17). With careful eyes and attention this pattern can be seen. It is this pattern which I would like to apply to the development of the African Orthodox Church, using it as a guide to understand a mystery which has yet to be explored.

The pattern of which I am speaking is brought out in the key theses of the above mentioned course. While those which apply to East Africa are the following:

1. renewal and expansion happen when the historical/contextual conditions are right;
2. renewal and expansion are frequently triggered by a key person;
3. renewal and expansion are often seen to have been accompanied by new leadership patterns;
4. renewal and expansion are often accompanied by theological breakthroughs;
5. renewal and expansion are contagious in contexts where information is easily distributed;
6. renewal and expansion are often seen to have begun on the periphery of the ecclesiastical structures of the day.¹

These principles can be seen at work not only in every century of Christian history, but also in the development of the Orthodox Church in East Africa. By looking for these patterns, some of the mystery behind their success can be revealed, and we can learn from our brothers and sisters how God has been at work to build His Kingdom in their hearts.

Let us now begin to explore the building of this Church. We will do this by first following a detailed account of the history. Little has been written on this subject and no source, which I have been able to find, has covered this history from the beginnings to

¹ Paul E. Pierson, Class syllabus MH 520 Historical Development of the Christian Movement (1991), p. 15.

present in much detail. Therefore, I would like to start by collecting various writings and trying and to fill in some of the missing pieces. After which, I will then focus on this history through the eyes and thesis which I mentioned above.

History in Uganda

Christian missions began in Uganda in 1877 by the Church Missionary Society of England. In 1879 the French Roman Catholic Mission also joined the effort. Though there was a short period of persecution, “By 1895, things calmed down, and Christianity then spread very rapidly and wonderfully. Thirty years later Orthodoxy unexpectedly came to life in Uganda.”²

The Orthodox story is an interesting one. It began not with a foreign mission society but with the young Anglican Obadiah Bassajakitalo and his best friend Reuben Mukasa Mugimba Sobanja Spartas (commonly known as Spartas), the brother of his wife. In 1923, Obadiah was in the army, far from his own country, and was writing to his friend Spartas about some serious religious questions. Gradually, through study and experience, he was becoming convinced that Anglicanism was unable to satisfy his deep spiritual desires, and now he was thinking to becoming part of the Roman Catholic Church. Spartas wrote him back saying that he also had the same feeling, but they should wait a little in order to investigate further where to turn. Spartas, well educated through the Anglican mission schools, continued his search with zeal.

Theodore Nankyamas (who was among the first three Ugandans to be ordained an Orthodox auxiliary bishop), colorfully tells of Spartas’ discovery:

Of special interest to him was an article entitled “Orthodoxy” in one of the English dictionaries. His enthusiasm as a result of his studies was indeed great. Like another Archimedes he ran out into the streets shouting: “I have found, I have found!” “I am no longer a Protestant,” he continued, “but an Orthodox!!”³

From this point, under the direction of Spartas, the two friends began their quest to join the Orthodox Church. First, in 1925, Spartas wrote to the self-appointed Patriarch of the African Orthodox Church in America— George Alexander McGuire (the movement, though, was not in communion with the historical and universal Orthodox Church).⁴ Not

² Bishop Theodoros, “The Orthodox Church in Uganda,” in *Martyria/Missio: The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*, ed. Ion Brian Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980y), p. 165.

³ Theodore Nankyamas, “Orthodoxy in Uganda,” in *Syndesmos*, 2, No. 5 (Sept. 1957), p. 13.

⁴ Joseph René Villatte, who gave orders to this movement, had been excommunicated first from the Protestant Episcopal bishop of the Old Catholic Church and then again by the Independent

until 1928 did McGuire respond to Spartas telling him that if he was still interested he should contact his newly consecrated Archbishop Daniel William Alexander, who was now his representative in South Africa. Spartas did so with enthusiasm and Archbishop D. Alexander made Spartas a reader under his supervision in 1929. From this time we could say that the African Orthodox Church in Uganda began, as Spartas publicly announced that he had broken with the Anglican Church and had formed a new Church called "...the African Orthodox Church-a church established for all right-thinking Africans, men who wish to be free in their own house, not always being thought of as boys...".⁵

Two years later, D. Alexander travelled to Uganda to train Spartas, Obadiah, and others. He left in 1932, having ordained these two as priests, along with two others as deacons, and four more as readers. But, this newly started church was soon to experience tribulations.

Before leaving, Alexander had been invited by a Greek in Uganda to baptize his daughter. When Alexander had returned to South Africa, this Greek, a Mr. Vlachos, informed the now Fr. Spartas that this baptism had not followed the Greek Orthodox rite, and that it was possible that Archbishop Alexander was not an Orthodox bishop at all. He suggested that Spartas write for advice to the Greek Orthodox priest, Archimandrite Nicodemos Sarikas, who was living and ministering to the Greeks in Tanganyika.

Before the close of that year, Spartas had severed his connections with Alexander and had begun another journey, this time to join the canonical Orthodox Church. Sarikas played a role in training two men at his home in Moshi in 1935 and another two in 1937. He also advised the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria to take on this new group. Correspondence continued, men were taken first to Cairo and then to Greece for training, and finally after fourteen years, Spartas was able to visit Alexandria and to receive the Patriarch's blessing and official recognition for the African Orthodox Church in East Africa, in 1946.

Though this was the official acceptance of Spartas' group, it was not the beginning of his work. Even upon his ordination by Alexander in 1932, Spartas already had 1,512 members organized into seven congregations.⁶ In 1936, Sparta was said to have had 5,000 members in 30 congregations, with 23 church schools, a monastery and a

Catholic Church of Ceylon. See F. B. Welbourn, *East African Rebels* (London: SCMPress,1961),pp.79-81.

⁵ F. B. Welbourn, *East African Rebels* (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 81.

⁶ Welbourn, p. 86.

convent.⁷ In 1946, when Spartas was officially accepted, he claimed 10,291 members in 56 centers.⁸

One might expect that having come under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church the African Orthodox would now grow even more rapidly. Being under a recognized Church did give them authority to operate and to stand up against the pressures coming from some of the local Anglican and Catholic leaders. But, things were to move slowly and little support would be given during these first years.

Let us look briefly at these beginning years.⁹ At first, in 1933 and after the visit of Sarikas, there were no missionaries sent. The patriarch (Meletios) did arrange, though, to send some service books and other literature in English, which could be translated. This same practice was also followed by the next patriarch (Nicholaos).

The first serious attempt to guide the Ugandan Church was not made until 1939, under Patriarch Christophoros II, who brought some Ugandans to Cairo for secondary schooling and then sent them on to study theology. Some of these students are still serving the Church today— one has become a bishop and another a vicar.

Unfortunately, this attempt was only a small effort, compared to the many needs of the young group. Ten more years would go by before the first missionary would live in Uganda. In 1958, Metropolitan Nicholaos Valeropoulos was assigned to East Africa. While never residing there, he visited often and assisted by ordaining more than 25 priests during his 11 years. At the time of his arrival there were only two priests. In addition to this, in 1959 he was able to assign the first resident Orthodox missionary to the Ugandans, Archimandrite Chrysostomous Papasasantopoulos, who worked in Uganda until 1967 and then moved on to Kenya where he would establish a seminary. In 1969, Metropolitan Nicholaos was elected patriarch, and he assigned Nicodemos Galliatatos to take his place. Nicodemos did not hold his position long and he was soon followed by Metropolitan Froumentios in 1973.

The years of 1972 and 1973, were especially important ones, for in 1972 three Africans were elected to become bishops. Then, in 1973, Reuben Mukasa Spartas, Theodore Nankyamas, and Arthur Gatung'u wa Gathunna (of Kenya) were ordained bishops— 27 years after the Patriarchate of Alexandria had recognized the Church in East Africa. It must be noted, though, that while they were ordained bishops, they were actually “auxiliary” bishops meaning they were not able to perform the important

⁷ Welbourn, p. 93.

⁸ Welbourn, p. 97.

⁹ This brief account on the assistance provided by the Patriarchate is found in Theodoros, pp. 166-167.

responsibilities of their office (such as ordaining new priests) without approval from the bishop they would be responsible to.

This lack of ecclesiastical power for the local Church to ordain new leaders was partially responsible for a great problem which the Church was to face, and which is still a problem to this day. At the time the Africans were recognized by Alexandria, in 1946, there were said to have been 56 parishes. But, until 1958 only two priests had been ordained for Uganda (Spartas and Obadiah). We hear of a about 25 ordinations from the period of 1958 to 1969.¹⁰ Even if the Church had not grown during these years (which it did), there would only have been one clergyman for every two parishes. In 1982 there were were still only twenty to thirty priests. Then, after an extraordinary effort by Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, this number had almost quadrupled in the next 8 years bringing the total number of clergy, in August of 1990, to seventy-nine priests and eleven deacons. Did this increase solve the shortage? Unfortunately it did not, since after the increase there was only one priest to minister to every four of the 230 parishes in East Africa.¹¹ The shortage of clergy has been, and still is, a great problem. But, let us leave this discussion for now and return again to conclude our review of the aid which was provided by the Patriarchate of Alexandria in the early years.

We have seen that from the initial contact with Alexandria in 1932, through their acceptance, and up until the year 1959, no missionary had been assigned to live in Uganda. The help during this period amounted to the sending of some books, the sponsoring of some Ugandans to study abroad, and three ordinations. From 1959 the work intensified with the assignment of Metropolitans, the sending of one missionary at a time, and more ordinations. During the next 23 years, the Church would continue to be assisted in this way. A Metropolitan would be assigned, a missionary (or the Metropolitan) would reside in the country, a few churches would be built, a seminary established, and small stipends for the clergy would be given. While there was great dedication by those who were involved, the needs of this new body exceeded by far the assistance which was given to them. This lack of guidance and assistance was felt by many as seen in the following quotations:

This number (of Orthodox) could undoubtedly be much greater if there was an organized Orthodox Mission in these areas,...Unfortunately however the people there have been abandoned, for there are only two priests for the whole of Uganda....It is necessary, therefor, for the Orthodox Church

¹⁰ Theodoros, p. 166.

¹¹ "General Information About the Orthodox church in East Africa," in *Mlango*, No. 1 (Nairobi: Holy Archbishopric of Irinoupolis, 1990), p. 3.

throughout the world to come to the assistance of such a sacred and important undertaking.¹²

Unfortunately, financial support has not kept pace with the needs in East Africa....The origin and growth of Orthodoxy in East Africa is unique. All initiatives were taken by the African people themselves, and not by foreign missionaries.... However, the African Greek Orthodox Church has been, and continues to be, hampered by lack of funds and by its relative isolation.¹³

One of the elder priests, who was questioning why so little had been done, expressed his frustration with great insight: "Because everything has a father and a mother. If it has not, that is an offence. It has no hope."¹⁴

These words, which painfully echoed across Orthodox lands, did not go unheeded. An answer did come, and a more intensified effort was begun. In 1982, a new Archbishop was assigned to East Africa— one who was to bring the Church further than in any other period of its history. Working together with the powerful leadership of Archimandrite Jonah Lwanga (the grandson of the now late Rev. Obadiah Bassajakitalo), Archbishop Anastasios' first task was the completion and opening of a seminary which had been founded in 1971, but left incomplete by the late Archbishop Makarios III of Cyprus. The seminary opened the same year of Anastasios' assignment, and in eight years of operation (as of August 1990) produced 58 priests. Though this seminary is in Kenya, students are received from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, most of whom return committed, ordained, and with great zeal to their mother countries.

In addition to the work of the seminary, Anastasios has coordinated the efforts of the Orthodox Churches in Greece, the United States, and Finland to contribute to the development of the African Orthodox through the translations of services, publications, and the building and operation of clinics, dispensaries, schools, nurseries, and churches in all three countries.

Another important development for the Ugandan Church has been the return of three students from the Greek Orthodox seminary in Brookline, Massachusetts. These students, along with the newly ordained graduates of the Makarios seminary in Nairobi, have brought a new life and fervor to the Church. Eleven other promising leaders are currently being sponsored and are studying abroad.

¹² Nankyamas, p. 14.

¹³ Theodoros, pp. 166-168.

¹⁴ Archim. Anastasios Yannoulatos, "Among the Orthodox of West Kenya," *Poreft hendes* (1964), p. 28.

These, and other developments not mentioned, have contributed to a greater growth in the Churches of Uganda, and the other East African countries. Unfortunately the exact numbers are almost impossible to track. There have been no recent surveys made, and even those which have been recorded (by Barrett and others) seem to be in contradiction. Following is a table of the different statistics for the Orthodox in Uganda, which I have been able to find:

Year	Members
1932.....	1,512
1936.....	5,000
1946.....	10,291
1957.....	6,000 ¹⁵
or	20,000 ¹⁶
1975.....	13,000 ¹⁷
or	30,000 ¹⁸
1980.....	15,000 ¹⁹

Though an exact account of the growth cannot be determined from these figures, a general picture is given which shows that the Church has been growing, more quickly at first and more slowly around 1980. There are no statistics after 1980. What I would like to suggest from this chart is that in spite of the difficulties and lack of foreign mission efforts the Church did continue to grow. In addition, during the last five years (from 1985 to 1990), I have personally seen a steady stream of new parishes opening in response to the increased number of clergy and the intensified efforts of development.

With many aspects of the Orthodox history in Uganda remaining untouched, I have provided a rough foundation to which we will return later, to apply the principles mentioned at the opening of this paper. For now we will leave the Church in Uganda and move on to see what lies beneath of the Orthodox beginnings and history in Kenya—another interesting episode which was occurring parallel to the development in Uganda.²⁰

¹⁵ Welbourn, pp. 87,93, and 96 respectively.

¹⁶ Nankyamas, p. 14

¹⁷ David Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Nairobi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 686.

¹⁸ James J. Stamooli, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 46.

¹⁹ Barrett, p. 686.

²⁰ As with the history of Uganda, these beginnings are found most thoroughly in Welbourn, especially pp. 144-161.

History in Kenya

The coming of the Orthodox Church to Kenya was closely connected to the politics of the era, the growing sense of national identity, and the desire for independence. In the 1920s, a hunger was felt. By the 30s independent groups had formed. In the 40s came the well known Mau Mau. And in the 50s revolt broke out against the British Government. During this time of unrest, Orthodoxy was planted, with its key leader being detained for ten years under suspicion of plotting against the Government. But, that is jumping ahead of the story. Let us begin with the founding of two independent school associations: the Kikuyu Karing'a Educational Association (Karing'a) and the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association (KISA).

Both the Karing'a and the KISA were established with a positive purpose: to provide more and better education, and to have education without the ban on female circumcision, which the foreign missions were trying to impose. The Karing'a was established in 1928, "Karing'a" meaning "pure," and thus showing their desire to return to tradition and tribal ways. Originally its leaders had stated that for seven years they would have nothing to do with religion; though, after this period there was a great demand for baptism. The KISA, on the other hand, had no desire to separate religion from education. Many had been educated in the CMS mission schools and felt a continued desire to include religion in their own programs. It was this desire which lead them to seek ordination by inviting the same Archbishop Daniel William Alexander who had been so helpful in Uganda. After all arrangements had been made by KISA, Alexander agreed to come. Arriving in November 1935, he proceeded to Gituamba to begin his ordination course for the KISA candidates.

At this juncture is where we will meet our Kenyan Orthodox hero. Arthur Gatung'u wa Gathunna was born in Riruto and educated by the CMS. He was trained as a teacher in 1930, but after imprisonment for theft he joined the staff of the independent school at Gituamba in 1933. Though a member of the Karing'a, he managed to become the interpreter for Archbishop Alexander and, through negotiations with Alexander, he also became a candidate for ordination. The KISA was not happy about this because of his reputation not only of being a felon, but also of being a drunkard and adulterer as well. But, with his ordination was thought to be the pledge that Karing'a would merge with KISA. It never happened.

In fact, what did happen was that the members of KISA became disillusioned with Alexander. Immediately after they had been ordained, in 1937, they left him and formed the African Independent Pentecostal Church. Only Gathunna, and one other candidate, stayed with Alexander, as the African Orthodox Church (AOC). Some say that Gathunna was intrigued by Alexander and Orthodoxy, and that he developed into a respected and energetic leader, "...opposed to drunkenness and polygamy and inspiring in his followers

an enthusiasm for Orthodoxy.”²¹ Other accounts and events prevent us from being certain of this. There can be no mistake, though, that he was the founder and first leader of the AOC in Kenya, which was also linked with political-educational Karing’a movement, yet never equated with it.

As with Spartas, Gathunna did not to remain long with Alexander. In 1939, he approached Spartas to be included in pursuing acceptance by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria. Spartas responded by assisting as much as possible, making journeys to Kenya to guide and help train this growing group. In 1946, the Patriarchate accepted Gathunna together with Spartas and Obadiah. Unfortunately, the relationship was always strained. In 1953 a priest from Uganda visited Kenya and told Gathunna that unless some improvement was made in their laxity of liturgical and moral discipline, the association would have to be broken. Soon after this the Emergency began. The Government ordered all schools believed to be carrying on subversive activities (those of the Karing’a and the KISA) to be closed, along with the Churches associated with them. In 1953, with 309 parishes and 30,000 active adult members, the AOC was banned and Gathunna was detained.

In order to become registered in Uganda, all formal association with the Kenyan Church was broken, but correspondence between the two groups continued. In 1955, Spartas applied to the Kenya Government for permission to visit, and administer the sacraments to, ‘loyal’ Orthodox Christians in Kikuyu, but he was denied. He was able, though, to visit the Orthodox in Western Kenya. In 1956, while the AOC in the Kikuyu Central districts was banned, those in Nyanza (Western Kenya) were able to receive registration. The reason for this was probably due to their loose connections with Gathunna, and also by the assistance of a District Commissioner of the Government who was part Greek.²² From 1955 onwards these Nyanza Christians were nurtured and led by occasional visits from Obadiah, so that in 1958 they claimed 121 parishes.

During the ensuing period, from the mid 50s to present, much less has been written on the Church’s development. But there is some literature and statistics which are of help in understanding this span by giving us a brief overview.

While under the ban, many members left. The Emergency lasted until 1960, and then in 1963 Kenya became independent, with Jomo Kenyatta as its first president.

In 1965 the Orthodox Church in the Central District (Kiambu) was officially registered. In 1968 the seat of the Archdiocese of East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania) was moved to Nairobi. The next year, Archimandrite Chrysostomous Papasasantopoulos,

²¹ Welbourn, p. 152

²² Personal interview with Elekiah Kihonga of South Nyanza, March 1991.

who had been working in Uganda, came to Kenya and helped establish a simple seminary, ordained some priests, and helped build some churches. Chrysostomous stayed until 1972, and from this time there would almost always be one Orthodox missionary living in Nairobi.

In 1971, Archbishop Makarios (president of Cyprus) visited Kenya. During his visit he baptized 5,000 Kenyans, many of whom had been trained in the Karing'a schools but had not received baptism during the period of Emergency. He also received a gift of land from Kenyatta, on which he began the construction of the seminary mentioned earlier.

In 1973, Gathunna (along with Spartas and Nankyamas) was ordained as auxiliary bishop. But a great tragedy was to come in 1979 when he was defrocked (unfortunately little, if anything, has yet to be written on the circumstances and results of this even).

During this entire interval, the Church had somehow been growing (as can be seen in the following chart). But, with the loss of Gathunna there was now division in the Church and many followed him, claiming to be the true African Orthodox Church in Kenya (this has still to be resolved).

Year	Members in Kenya
1970.....	250,000
1975.....	305,000
1980.....	376,000 ²³

A great number did remain in communion with Alexandria, and in fact it was only some of those in Central Kenya and the Rift Valley who followed Gathunna. In 1982, Bishop Anastasios Yannoulatos was appointed as Acting Archbishop. >From his post as professor at the University of Athens, he journeyed to Kenya frequently to begin the work of nurturing to health all those who were suffering from the schism. In addition to this, as was mentioned above, he was responsible for the completion and opening of the seminary which Makarios had begun, the ordination of more than fifty-eight clergy, and the involvement of other Orthodox Churches to aid the mission in Kenya, which brings us to present. The Orthodox of Kenya are now growing again and in a more healthy period of development. They have spread to many parts of the country and have great potential for the future. Many have great hopes and await to see what will happen in the 90s. With this I will conclude the presentations of the histories in East Africa. While some may consider this history to have been somewhat long, others may feel it too short. I, myself, would agree with the later, as I am aware that a comprehensive study of the development of this Church, from its beginnings to today has yet to be written. Due to the constraints of this paper I have been unable to include the fascinating developments in Tanzania, and the curious patterns of growth which migrating peoples have

²³ Barrett, p. 432.

stimulated. Such a study could be of tremendous value as it traced not only the Church's development in a general way, but through many leaders and the special dynamics which have been operating. Some of the original pioneers are still alive today, and many who were trained by them are now the leaders of the Church. But soon these stories may be covered over by a history which continues to move on.

SECTION 2– PRINCIPLES

Key Principles Applied

Having worked through an outline of the Orthodox beginnings and growth in East Africa, we can now proceed to the application of the key principles mentioned at the start of this paper.

Renewal and Expansion Happen When the Historical/Contextual Conditions Are Right

Both the development in Uganda and in Kenya cannot be understood without first reflecting upon the influence of the historical factors of the time. In East Africa this was a period when the people of these countries were coming to a greater self awareness, and when they were beginning to feel a sense of national identity along with rising hopes for independence. In fact, both countries were to receive independence not long after the beginning of Orthodoxy.

In Uganda we can see this clearly in the statements made by Spartas when he publicly announced that he had broken with the Anglican Church and had formed a new Church. He described his new Church saying it was "...-a Church established for all right-thinking Africans, men who wish to be free in their own house, not always being thought of as boys..." In addition we can also see in the original constitution the existence of this desire for independence:

The African Greek Orthodox Church shall be controlled by the Africans under the supervision and guidance of the Holy Ghost through the spiritual, physical and fraternal help and protection of the Holy Patriarchal Sea (sic) of Alexandria, Egypt. It shall be an absolutely independent Church in all her internal administration.²⁴

²⁴ Welbourn, p. 83.

Turning to the situation in Kenya we can see this in the Karing'a school association. This group was a political group whose very name infers the people's growing desire for a return to the "karing'a" or "pure" ways of the tribe. While female circumcision had become a key issue, Welbourn proposes that it may only have been the breaking point, representing many deep issues which had been brewing for quite some time.

In looking at the political situations of these two countries and noting that it was during this time that the Orthodox formed as one of the first independent Christian Churches, we can only conclude that a great part of the motivation for the establishment of Orthodoxy was this desire to be independent from both the foreign governmental control as well as the foreign missionary control.

But was this the only motivation? Welbourn notes,

It is ironic that, just as the Anglican Church in Uganda is on the point of becoming autonomous, with the right if it wishes to appoint an African archbishop, a Church which started with a cry, 'Africa for the Africans,' should come under the immediate authority of a Greek.²⁵

While, this may seem ironic, I believe it points to the fact that the desire to be independent and out from the control of the foreign missionaries was not the only reason for becoming Orthodox. These political factors have played an important role in the beginnings of Orthodoxy, but they were not the only motivation— as we shall see further on.

Another historical factor which was "right" and contributed to the spreading of Orthodoxy in East Africa was that of the situation of land and the people's migration to new, undeveloped areas. This is a factor which I have especially noticed, and admired, in Kenya. At various times in the past decades, new areas have opened up within the country where people could receive land cheaply. The price they would have to pay was that of being settlers and moving to undeveloped parts of the country. While this would involve great sacrifice, it was well worth it in a place where land is one's major source of income and survival.

A family can barely survive on an acre of land, with two there can be a comfortable level of subsistence, but this does not leave any land to pass on to the sons of the family. The tradition in Kenya is that when the daughters get married they will move to the families of their new husbands, while the sons will remain with their parents, being given a portion of the family's land to live on and to cultivate. As the parents grow older, the new wife will also cultivate the father's land and help to take care of the parents. With the rapidly rising population in Kenya, and much of the good land having been taken up first by the Europeans and then passed on to the elite Africans, the majority of

²⁵ Welbourn, p. 93.

the population found it increasingly difficult to find the land needed for themselves and for their children, such that when new land was available for settlement, many people accepted the hardships and traveled to these new areas. The Orthodox, being from the poorest to the lower-middle classes, were often among these settlers. Through their migration, their faith was brought to different parts of the country, similar to the process which occurred in America when people began to move further and further West.

In two areas where this has occurred in Kenya— in South Nyanza, and O'loitoktok—the Orthodox were the first Christians arrive. Other areas have been in Meru, Lamu, and Laikipia. In each of these districts a similar process occurred. An Orthodox family hears of the new opportunities, convinces some of their Orthodox friends to move with them to the new area, and then they establish a community when they arrive. There have been a few priests who have been pioneer preachers, traveling with these people to settle new property themselves. Others have had a missionary spirit and have been willing to make long journeys to these communities to nurture them in their new homes, helping them to develop worshipping and growing parishes.

This is a second historical situation which was responsible for the Orthodox expansion in Kenya— the need for land, driving people far, who through the motivation of a dedicated leader carried their faith with them.

Would Orthodoxy ever have been established had the political situations been different? It is impossible to say. What we see, though, is that these political situations of a striving for independence and migration were factors which significantly contributed to the establishment of the Orthodox Church.

Renewal and Expansion are Frequently Triggered by a Key Person

Another factor that has been seen time after time in the spreading of the Christian Church is that each movement has been triggered by a key person. In our case we could say that Spartas was the key person, for it was he who guided Obadiah, and to whom Gathunna approached. But, if we were only to give credit to Spartas this would be oversimplified. He was the key leader in Uganda, but he also worked closely with Obadiah to make a team— each having different qualities which complimented the other. Spartas was the charismatic leader, while Obadiah seems to be the one who was able to travel and nurture many of the newly starting parishes (as he did in Nyanza of Western Kenya). Orthodoxy in Uganda then, should be attributed to two key leaders whom God had chosen to be his instruments.

In Kenya, Obadiah was also to have a great influence, but he was not the key person. The main figure was Arthur Gathunna. It was Gathunna whom God first chose to seek the faith, and it was Gathunna who was the main and instrumental leader of his people in becoming Orthodox.

Just as over the many centuries of Christian history God has used key people to carry His message, the same process was used in Uganda and Kenya— three key figures were “turned on” and carried their vision to thousands to establish a new, but ancient movement in their countries.

While these three are the ones which stand out as the founders and the leaders of this movement, we cannot forget that the Church also spread from person to person in local communities. Each one of these communities needed a leader, and these local leaders were also key and influential people of great conviction, responsible for the local growth of the Church. They have been pioneers— indigenous missionaries— who carried the Gospel and planted new parishes with great sacrifices. One such man is Samuel Kabuke— one of the very first settlers to arrive in O’loitoktok. When I visited his parish in November of 1990, I found that Samuel had been leading this congregation for nearly twenty-two years. They had no regular priest to serve them. Rather, it was Samuel who would lead the Christians weekly in worship. The Church had a committee and a youth group and all the characteristics of an African parish. The only difference was that its leader was a layman, with great faith and devotion. He was responsible for a thriving parish that had planted three daughter parishes in the village. While not having a full-time priest with the ability to administer the sacraments and to baptize new members has created certain problems and stunted the potential growth of this parish, we must also recognize that it has been people like Samuel who were responsible for the Orthodox Church spreading and thriving in so many different areas of East Africa.

Renewal and Expansion Are Often Accompanied by New Leadership Patterns

While it was the Africans themselves who developed these creative leadership patterns, enabling them to meet the unique situations of Christianity as it confronted the East African situation, we must give credit to the Patriarchate of Alexandria which allowed such patterns— entirely different from anything else in the Orthodox Church— to exist. Rather than stifle the new forms of leadership, they encouraged them— and still do to this day.

What are these leadership forms? We have seen them through Samuel Kabuke. Laypersons, with little training (if any) were given the authority to function as parish

leaders. They were for the people and of the people, living as one of them, serving the Church part-time as volunteers.

Having such a pattern allowed the Church to grow rapidly with the many people who were converting. Each time groups moved to different areas, there was a system for reaching them by allowing the laity to preach and to lead the services. Also remember that in 1946 there were only two priests in Uganda (Spartas and Obadiah) and one in Kenya (Gathunna), nevertheless the members claimed by Spartas alone were over 10,000. It was this system of lay leadership which was able to minister to these 10,000 members.

If it were not for this system the Church today would die, for there would be no way to nurture the faithful. As I stated earlier, there is presently only one priest for every four parishes. This doesn't mean that the parishes are without meaningful worship each week, or that in between the weekly services there is no activity in the homes or in the churches, such as youth groups, women's groups, bible study groups etc. This is still happening through the lay leaders. Sometimes the leaders are men who had moved to new parts of the country, as in the case of Samuel. Other times the leaders were active members who started sister parishes as offshoots of the main parish. Still other times the leaders were specifically trained by the priests to nurture sub-parishes that were forming in their area. In all cases, it has been this system of allowing a strong lay leadership that has been wholly new to Orthodoxy, but which has also been a key factor in the establishment, the growth, and the nurture of the East African Orthodox to this day. While I do not mean to imply that a greater flexibility which would have allowed these leaders to have been ordained would not have been even more beneficial, I do emphatically assert that this has been an essential, constructive and new form of leadership.

Renewal and Expansion Are Often Accompanied by Theological Breakthroughs

One might question if there was any theological breakthrough involved in Orthodoxy moving into East Africa. I would suggest that there was not a breakthrough for those who were already Orthodox; but, for those who were now discovering Orthodoxy it was perceived as a revelation. First consider the searching of Spartas and Obadiah as they sought a deeper and more meaningful way to understand God. This may have been triggered by their experience with the warring factions of the Catholic and Protestant

Churches, which had even led into civil war.²⁶ We can also recall the words which were attributed to Spartas as he discovered Orthodoxy: “I have found, I have found!” “I am no longer a Protestant, but an Orthodox!!” Whether Spartas actually uttered this phrase or not, Orthodoxy was perceived as a theological, or at least an historical, breakthrough. They had found that there was a Church which had an unbroken historical connection to Jesus Christ and the Apostles, one which had never strayed from the Apostolic faith handed down from generation to generation. In a country where ancestors, lineage, and genealogy were a part of one’s identity (as it was also in Biblical times) such a Church was in fact an exciting discovery.

The intensity of this discovery, along with the power of the teachings that were then brought to them (through the guidance of Sarikas, the study of the literature that was sent, and the knowledge that was gained by those who studied abroad) cannot be underestimated. In fact, in a time when there was a strong desire for independence and freedom from European influence, I believe it was this discovery and the teachings within Orthodoxy that led them to seek acceptance by Alexandria and attracted so many to the Church. It is hinted at in numerous writings— sometimes rising to the surface as in these words by one of the key leaders who had introduced Orthodoxy to Western Kenya: “When I was reading church history I found that the Orthodox Church is the true Church. The twelve apostles died in this Church.”²⁷ Even today, the key leader of the Orthodox in East Africa (grandson to Obadiah) is keenly aware of the importance to this historical reality, as he expressed in these words: “The Church is like our mother, and when our mother suffers we cannot just leave her to find another!”

Renewal and Expansion Are Contagious in Contexts Where Information Is Easily Distributed

As we have seen, the rise of the Orthodox Church took place within a particular historical context that contributed to its discovery and acceptance. It was started by key leaders who had found something new and different, and new leadership patterns emerged which adapted to their unique situation. Another factor which supported the development of the Church was the availability of information and the increased ability for travel.

It was through the CMS missionaries that the educational system was introduced into East Africa in the early 1900s. This system was the same which had educated Spartas,

²⁶ Stephan Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, ed. Owen Chadwick (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 325.

²⁷ Yannoulatos, pp. 25-26.

Obadiah, and Gathunna, enabling them to explore the written world and thus to come upon the discovery of Orthodoxy. Spartas had first learned of Orthodoxy through a dictionary article, and later he had also learned of the Orthodox in America (under which he was first ordained) through literature. Essential in the development of these leaders, and of the Church, was the following period in which they receive literature from Alexandria, and by which they and their people were then educated in the Orthodox faith. We can see that the principle is valid in this context— the access to written materials played a key role in the discovery of Orthodoxy, the entrance into the Church, and the education of the new members.

Also important was the greater ability for world travel. This made it possible for Spartas to contact someone living as far away as the United States (even though it was 3 years before he received an answer). It also made it possible for Alexander to visit both Uganda and Kenya, for Sarikas to reach Kampala, for Gathunna to contact Spartas, and for Obadiah to minister to those in Western Kenya during the time of the Emergency. Henry Stanley, the first missionary to arrive in Uganda in 1875, would have marveled at the changes which had taken place in only fifty years. This increased ability to travel, world-wide and within East Africa, was one factor which contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity at this time— not only among the Orthodox but among all the denominations.

Renewal and Expansion Are Often Seen to Have Begun on the Periphery of the Ecclesiastical Structures

In this principle it is suggested that many of the movements by which Christianity has expanded throughout the world have begun not in the center of the ecclesiastical structures, but by groups or individuals outside of these structures. This has been more prevalent in the last two centuries in which we have seen a burst of new mission structures coming forth from the Protestant Churches— such as Taylor’s China Inland Mission, or more recently the many student movements and mission organizations. But, it has also operated from New Testament times, as when St. Paul was called to serve the Church from outside its established center. It is also seen in numerous monastic movements (from which most missionaries between the 4th and the 18th centuries have come) which had originally been established by laypersons outside the ecclesiastical structures (e.g. the Franciscans and Dominicans).

In East Africa, the Orthodox Church followed this pattern. As quoted earlier, Theodore Nankyamas of Uganda writes that “The origin and growth of Orthodoxy in East Africa is unique. All initiatives were taken by the African people themselves, and not by foreign missionaries....” When Spartas approached Alexandria it was as a non-Orthodox

asking for acceptance. Missionaries were requested, but during the next ten years very little was done from the ecclesiastical center to support this newly developing mission. They were a mission without a missionary.

Even within the Church of East Africa many of the internal expansions occurred as a result of lay people moving to new areas, and not by priests in the center planning how to expand to new territories. While there were priests who were extraordinary missionaries, spreading the gospel in the harshest of conditions, and while many of the clergy tirelessly assisted these newly planted parishes, it was often the laypeople who took the first initiative. As I ministered in these countries for three years, the churches continued to multiply. How was this being done? We had no strategy developed for expansion, no courses specifically taught on evangelism, and in fact at times some might have wished they would slow down so that we could hurry up and train enough clergy to serve them!

A great deal of this growth was due not to those in the ecclesiastical center, but to those on the periphery who were given the freedom to carry the gospel to new territories. It was due to dedicated Christians moving to new areas, or young men being trained by their priests as catechists, and even by the clergy themselves, already serving from four to ten parishes, who would create daughter parishes. In all cases this was a plan which was not really a plan at all. It was the Holy Spirit moving through individuals, some of whom were clergy and many of whom were at the periphery of the Church, to carry the light Jesus Christ to their world.

Indigenous Patterns of Worship

One last factor I would like to mention before closing this paper is the indigenous patterns of worship which arose in the Church. Because this group had started on its own, with little guidance/interference from the foreign missionaries, it was able to develop its own indigenous forms of worship. These forms made the Church more meaningful, reaching the people at a deeper level.

Originally, there was no assistance for building churches. Many would try to steal the flock away, telling them that their churches were no good; but, the mud and grass buildings which they had constructed for their parishes were familiar, and people felt comfortable worshipping in them.

Another indigenous pattern which developed was that of local music. The Orthodox worship lends it self easily to the African styles of antiphonal singing. When Spartas first translated the liturgy and set it partly to Greek and partly to local music, he created a service which could reach the heart of the African.

“...to attend a celebration of this liturgy is a most moving experience. The litany form, such an important feature of the Greek Liturgy, fits easily into the natural rhythms of Luganda; the Greek music, to which it is set, is more closely akin to Kiganda forms; and the whole feel is that of the traditional Kiganda folk-song, with its leader and chorus.”²⁸

In the Kikuyu areas, there was an Orthodox practice which Gathunna had discovered— the use of candles. While taking on a Christian meaning, the use of candles were a familiar form of worship that “appealed to the traditional Kikuyu use of fire during the circumcision, sacrifice and burial.”²⁹

Finally, there were the issues of tribal customs, such as circumcision and polygamy. Free to develop their own theology of how these practices might fit in with the Scriptures, the African Orthodox Church was able to allow the controversial practice of female circumcision to continue. Polygamy and drunkenness were condemned, but being Africans themselves the leaders of this new Church were able to show greater compassion and sensitivity to their flocks than the foreign missionaries. It is noted that these practices were prevalent in the early Orthodox Church, but they were prevalent in the other Churches as well. The difference was that the Orthodox leaders were able to understand the struggles of the people more deeply.

These are just a few of the examples which show that another reason for the success of the Orthodox was in the leaders ability to create a Church which was not foreign, but similar to the African experience. These forms were not stifled or forbidden by the Church leaders from Alexandria, so that the music and symbols of the Church became not an obstacle to be worked through, but a means to understand and worship Jesus Christ more deeply.

Conclusion

With this we have come to the conclusion of this paper. I began with a hope to understand the process by which the Orthodox Church in East Africa has grown. I have sketched a rough history of the major developments in Kenya and Uganda, and then have worked through those histories by applying certain principles which have been seen operating in most stages of the historical expansion of Christianity. We saw historical situations which instigated the formation of new religious movements, Orthodoxy being one of them. The process of migration was shown to be a factor in the Church spreading to new areas. There were key people involved in these movements at

²⁸ Welbourn, p. 101.

²⁹ Welbourn, p. 157.

many different levels and new leadership patterns emerged which fit in with the East African situation. The discovery of a historical Church, whose roots went back to the Apostles, was experienced as a revelation by many. The distribution of information brought awareness of the Orthodox faith and teachings, and new means for travel also made it possible for different leaders to contact one another in order to spread this new faith which they had discovered. As with so many instances in the history of Christianity, the coming of Orthodoxy to the East Africans was not at the instigation of the ecclesiastical center (Alexandria in this case), it was a movement which began at the periphery. And finally, we have seen that indigenous patterns of worship were also influential in the acceptance and establishment of the Orthodox Church in East Africa.

I questioned, at the beginning of this paper, how the African Orthodox Church had grown. Have the pearls been revealed? I think that were I to be able to return to East Africa, I would still marvel at the growth of the Church in spite of all the adversities. I would still be amazed at the way new parishes are being multiplied, and at how so many intuitively know what to do without ever having attended a course on Church Growth. While I have come to understand more, I cannot say that the mystery has been fully revealed. Seeing processes and principles which have also been occurring throughout the world for nearly 2,000 year, I am led to believe that the real process at hand has been that of the Holy Spirit giving faith, wisdom and knowledge to a warm and loving people of East Africa so that they too have repeated this wonderful historical process once again— spreading the love of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barrett, David, ed. *World Christian Encyclopedia*. Nairobi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982.
- “General Information About the Orthodox Church in East Africa.” *Mlango*, No. 1 (Nairobi: Holy Archbishopric of Irinoupolis, 1990), pp. 3-4.
- Kihonga, Elekiah. Personal interview with author. Lancaster: March 1991.
- Nankyamas, Theodore. “Orthodoxy in Uganda.” *Syndesmos*, 2, No. 5 (Sept. 1957), PP. 12-15.
- Pierson, Paul E. Class syllabus *MH 520 Historical Development of the Christian Movement*, Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission ISP Program (1991).
- Stamooli, James J. *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986.
- Theodoros, Bishop. “The Orthodox Church in Uganda.” *Martyria /Missio: The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today*. Ed. Ion Bria. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980.
- Welbourn, F. B. *East African Rebels*. London: SCM Press, 1961.
- Yannoulatos, Archim. Anastasios. “Among the Orthodox of West Kenya.” *Porefthendes*. (1964), p. 28.