Missiological Context of the Eastern Orthodox Churches in Africa

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Abstract

This article focuses on the missiological context of the Eastern Orthodox Churches in Africa under the jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, which serves the Greek-, Arabic-, and Russian-speaking communities as well as native African Orthodox communities in sub-Saharan Africa. The apostolic mission to Africa started in the city of Alexandria by St Mark the evangelist around 62–63 AD. The gospel flourished in the Alexandrian church through its famous catechetical school, participation in the ecumenical councils, and monasticism. After Islamic invasion of northern Africa (640 AD), Christianity started to decline and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria extended its jurisdiction to sub-Saharan Africa. First it served the Greek communities, but later in 1946 opened up to evangelize to native African communities. Orthodox Church mission engagement in sub-Saharan Africa has resulted in different mission approaches, like the creation of new dioceses and archdioceses, theological education, and liturgical, incarnational, and reconciliation approaches. These approaches have prepared the missiological context of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Africa for an Africanized Christianity. Native Africans searched for ecclesial identity by affiliating with Greek Orthodoxy, consequently rekindling the mission of the Orthodox Church worldwide and creating a platform for dialogue between African cultural-religious particularities and Orthodox theological ethos. This has resulted in a call for inculturation or incarnational process aiming for an “African local church.”

Keywords

Orthodox Church, Ecumenical Councils, Monasticism, Mission, Native Africans, Theological education, Church growth
This article will focus on the mission of the Eastern Orthodox church in Africa today. The main objective is to bring into account the missiological Context of the Eastern Orthodox churches under the jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa has its headquarters in Alexandria, Egypt, and extends its ecclesiastical jurisdiction into all of Africa. It serves the Eastern Orthodox churches, which comprise Greek, Arabic, and Russian Orthodox communities as well as the native African Orthodox communities in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the native Orthodox Christians are in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Congo, while a significant number of Greek, Arabic, and Russian Orthodox communities are in Egypt, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique.¹

Missiological survey of the Orthodox Church in Africa

According to the existing historical evidence of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa, Christian mission into Africa started with St Mark the evangelist in the city of Alexandria around AD 62–63.² In world Christian history, the Alexandrian church has been missiologically involved in (1) Apollos’ evangelizing Ephesus at the time of St Paul (Acts 18:24; 1 Cor. 3:4–7); (2) the ecumenical councils, which greatly contributed to the formation of the Christian doctrines through bishops like Athanasius the Great (AD 298–373); (3) formation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed and Christian doctrines; (3) the allegorical method of interpreting of the holy scriptures; and (4) monasticism. Monasticism resulted in a mission encounter between Christian monks and the Nubian traders who eventually became Christians. The Arabic conquest and persecutions caused a large number of Greek Orthodox Christians to flee Egypt.

The decline of Orthodox Christians in Egypt promoted the patriarchate to extend its mission to sub-Saharan Africa. The mission was mostly to the Greek communities that had settled in major African cities for trade. They had come into Africa after they fled Greek islands during the Turkish occupation. Ordinarily, Greek communities had their own churches, cultural centres, and schools, while priests were individually requested from Greece or Constantinople.³ These communities were not involved in

active mission to evangelize their African neighbours; however, their presence attracted a few Africans either because of intermarriages or curiosity about Orthodoxy. Those who showed serious interests were allowed to join Greek schools and were baptized as Orthodox Christians. For example, Ugandan students joined a Greek school in Moshi Tanzania under Father Nikodemos Sarikas. Through this interaction, Father Sarikas introduced Father Ruben Mukasa Spartas of the Orthodox Church in Uganda to the Patriarchate of Alexandria.4 Apparently, this was the starting point for a mission encounter between the Greeks and the native Africans.

Currently, the Orthodox missiological context in Africa and beyond is represented by a vibrant and rapid-growing native African Orthodox Church. One would be correct to say that the native African Orthodox Church is a promising future of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and All Africa. The emergence and growth of the native African Orthodox Church was through the initiatives of Africans themselves. In Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana, and Nigeria, native African Christians searched for the Orthodox faith after they protested against the Protestant churches, mission strategies in the 1930s. The protest was against cultural imperialism, evangelizing methodologies, and the collaboration of the mission churches with the colonial authorities.5 After breaking away from the mission churches, they founded African independent churches (AICs) also referred to as African instituted churches or African initiatives in Christianity.6 The AICs understood their presence as a mission extension through translation of the gospel into the African spiritual realities. The mission of the AICs is to have an “African Christianity” that would contextualize the gospel of Jesus Christ to be good news for Africa.

Toward Orthodoxy: Mission initiatives of native Africans, 1920–1958

The road to Orthodoxy for native Africans was through mission efforts of Reuben Mukasa Spartas of Uganda. In the 1920s, Spartas broke with the Anglican Church of Uganda and progressively formed a Christian community free from mission control and paternalism.7 Spartas engaged in a mission searching for an African church that would satisfy his people’s social-religious and economic-political dissatisfaction.

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experienced in their former mission churches. As a result of this search, in May 1925 Spartas wrote to Archbishop George Alexander McGuire, the primate of the African Orthodox Church in America (AOCA), requesting admission to AOCA and instructions on how to read the Bible and preach.

In answering Father Spartas, McGuire introduced him to Archbishop Daniel William Alexander, who was in charge of AOCA in South Africa. The mission of AOCA in South Africa extended to Uganda, Kenya, and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), majoring in training priests and baptisms. The tremendous growth of AOCA in Kenya and Uganda raised the need for ecclesiastical recognition and identity. This was of great missiological concern to Father Spartas, who in return contacted Father Sarikas of the Greek community in Moshi for help. Father Sarikas visited Uganda and offered catechetical training, and apparently introduced Father Spartas to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria. In order to recognize the non-canonical Orthodox churches in East Africa, Patriarch Christophoros II assigned, Metropolitan Nicolaos of Aksum (Ethiopia) to visit Uganda and report to the Holy Synod his findings about Father Spartas and his community. Metropolitan Nicolaos reported the existence of a field for mission action for the Greek Church, mainly in Uganda and secondly in Kenya. This led to mission expansion of the Greek Church in Africa beyond the limit and formal servicing of the religious needs for Greek communities. Consequently, Orthodox communities in both Uganda and Kenya were officially recognized by the Patriarchate of Alexandria in 1946.

As the newly recognized churches were enhancing their mission, political upheavals for independence brought them to a standstill. This can be termed the “dark age” of the Orthodox Church in East Africa, as the colonial program of arrests and detention did not spare the leaders and the members of the church. Father Arthur Gathuna of Kenya was arrested and detained from 1 June 1953 to 1961, leaving the congregation with a membership of about 30,000 followers without a spiritual leader. Apparently, the few women who survived the arrests gathered in secret homes for prayers, calling themselves “Mwaki” or “Utheri” (meaning ‘light’ in kikuyu language), symbolizing the light of Christ that shines even during the difficult times.

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8 See Archbishop Daniel William Alexander’s address to the first annual synod of the Uganda Diocese of the African Orthodox Church on 23 April 1932. This address is found in the Archives of the African Orthodox Church of America in the Pitts Theological Library.

9 Ibid.

10 His Eminence Metropolitan Nicolaos of Axum, Mission report to His Beatitude Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria Christophoros and to the Holy Synod.

11 Njoroge, “Towards an African Orthodox Church.”
The reopening of the Orthodox Church after the MauMau war

The Orthodox Church and its schools in Kenya were burned by the colonial authorities under the colonial emergency laws. Following the lifting of the emergency laws in 1960, the Orthodox Church restarted with enthusiasm. The enthusiasm among the native people was much connected to the long-awaited freedom and independence after fighting the colonial rule. Independence for the former freedom fighters (MauMau) and colonial detainees meant the beginning of rebuilding the entire nationhood, which had been left in ruins during the colonial era. The spirit of freedom overwhelmed the followers of the Orthodox Church, who felt the need for holistic transformation from the “old person” into a “new person” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). The old person symbolizes a person who once lived according to the cultural norms and the new person symbolizes the newly converted person, a person believing in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:25). Furthermore, the reopening of the Orthodox Church was an important mission, for it provided a platform for reconciliation and healing for the former freedom fighters and detainees, both in the barbed-wire villages and in the camps. Freedom fighters and detainees were completely traumatized by the injustices of the colonial rule, MauMau oathing, and abuses in the camps. Therefore, a new life in Jesus Christ assured these men and women of a complete healing through their continuous reception of the holy sacraments.

The reopening of the Orthodox Church was a collective effort by both the natives and the Greek missionaries. Father Spartas kept a close communication and mutual solidarity between Uganda and Kenya. Father Basajakitalo was the sole instructor in the Waithaka seminary, where he taught Orthodox worship and the liturgy of St John Chrysostom, among other liturgical rites. All these efforts to give Orthodox Church followers a foundation were enhanced when the new Kenyatta government announced that the formerly proscribed members of the African independent churches could reorganize themselves and become registered within the government. The AOCK secured a registration as a church under section 10 of the Societies Act on 5 July 1965.

13 Especially through the sacrament of the holy eucharist for the remission of sins, confession, and holy unction for physical and spiritual healing
15 See the African Orthodox Church of Kenya Certificate of Registration no. 3801 dated 5 July 1965.
The relaunching of the Orthodox Church in Kenya was the beginning of a new mission encounter of Orthodox theology and African cultures. The acceptance, growth, and spreading of Orthodoxy in East Africa meant meeting new theological challenges in regard to the customs in which these communities were living. This marked another “golden age” in which theology was to dialogue with the African religious particularities in order to find the right trends of incarnating these African religious elements with the Orthodox spirituality. This however, would mean, the Orthodox theologians needed to critically find new missiological ways in which these new communities and their different cultural practices would be accommodated within the gospel of Christ.

The Orthodox Church’s reopening in Kenya brought with it an unprecedented call for renewal of an active mission of the worldwide Orthodox Church. It is a call to the Orthodox Church to actively view the apostolicity of the church not only from the perspective of a historical achievement in sustaining the continuity of the apostolic succession, but as the very missiological nature of an “Apostolic Church” that nurtures its members to become “witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This call has resulted in allowing the Greek Orthodox Church in Alexandria, in Greece, in Cyprus, in Finland, in Australia, and in America to take on a missionary responsibility in different parts of Africa. Despite the fact that the Orthodox churches worldwide have been actively involved in mission in Africa for five decades now, it is relatively important for these churches to propagate clear mission paradigms aiming at localizing (Africanizing) the Orthodox faith in Africa.

The mission approaches of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria

The persistent mission call to Alexandria by native Africans has rekindled the once inactive mission of the Orthodox Church worldwide. This has led the Patriarchate to embrace active mission to Africa, applying different approaches to achieve church growth.

Creation of dioceses and archdioceses

One of the key approaches to Orthodox mission in Africa is the creation of dioceses and archdioceses (Archbishoprics) by the Patriarchate. Creation of the

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16. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed where we confess “and in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.”

17. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1997), 190.
dioceses and archdioceses has, on the one hand, brought authentic Orthodox faith and, on the other, opened ways for the Alexandrian Patriarchate to redefine its mission in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This started in 1958, when the Archbishopric of Irinoupolis (Dar es Salaam) was created to care for Orthodox Christians in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Mostly, the diocese and archdiocese are created to house existing communities aspiring to be Orthodox. In Ghana and Nigeria, the Patriarchate applied the methodology of evangelizing to the independent churches that aspired to Orthodoxy and housed them within the newly created archdiocese of West Africa, comprising Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana. Communities aspiring to be Orthodox were officially received into Orthodoxy through baptism and chrismation. For example, in Ghana, an independent non-canonical Orthodox Church in the town of Larteh was officially received into canonical Orthodoxy through baptism by Archbishop Irenaeus. Archbishop Ireneaus continued performing more baptisms and ordaining priests in other locations, bringing the total of Ghanaians received into the Orthodox Church to nearly 3,000 over several years. Currently, the Orthodox Church in Ghana is under the Holy Archdiocese of Ghana, which was established by Patriarchal Synod in 1997.

In Nigeria there was a well-established community calling itself the “Greek Orthodox Church.” According to Stephen Hayes, it was started by an American by the name of Abuna Abraim, and it was officially received into the Patriarchate of Alexandria by Archbishop Irenaeus in 1985. Currently, the Orthodox Church in Nigeria is under the Holy Archdiocese of Nigeria, which was established by the Patriarchal Synod in 1997. In its jurisdiction, it includes the countries of Nigeria, Benin, Togo, and Niger. There are 29 local churches and nine communities served by 22 priests and two deacons.

Central Africa, Madagascar, and Sierra Leone host vibrant and rapid-growing Orthodox communities. In Congo, the mission was started by Father Chrysostom Papasarantopoulos, a Greek missionary who had previously worked in Kenya and Uganda for more than ten years. Later, Father Chrysostom was joined by Father Cosmas Grigoriatis. After the death of Father Cosmas in 1989, his monastery

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19 Ibid.


continued to support his mission in Congo. In Sierra Leone, the Orthodox mission is exceptionally focused on philanthropy and humanitarian aid for the war and Ebola victims, under Archmandrite Themistoeis Adamopolos. The patriarchate has continued to create more dioceses. For example, the Patriarchal and Synodic decree on 1 November 2006 established the Holy Diocese of Kolwezi, which later changed to the Holy Diocese of Katanga on 9 October 2009. Other dioceses include the Holy Dioceses of Burundi and Rwanda (established 2009), Botswana (established 2010), and Brazzaville and Gabon (established 2010).

**Greek Orthodox missionaries, mission organizations, and philanthropy**

Over the past five decades, the Greek Orthodox Church worldwide has embarked on sending missionaries to Africa. The church of Greece, and especially through “Syndesmos,” led by then Father Yanoulatos Anastasios (current Archbishop of Albania), started propagating the Orthodox concept of mission, mainly published in *Porethendes* (Go Ye, Matt. 28:19). Propagation was achieved through a mission institute in the University of Athens; students were trained on different mission activities, such as translations. This approach motived many individuals to come to Africa, including Father Chrysostomos Papasaranantopoulos, Mrs Stavrista Zachariou, and Father Cosmas Grigoriatis from the Monastery of St Gregory in Mount Athos, Greece. These three people set the best example of many individual Greek people who sacrificed themselves to work with the Africans unceasingly in terms of building churches, and supporting the local clergy, catechism, and scholarships, and, finally, leaving their bones buried in the mission field.

Furthermore, mission offices have been opened in different countries, where Orthodox Christians donate money and offer prayers to assist in mission work in Africa and beyond. These missionary organizations include Apostoliki Diakonia; External Orthodox Missionary Fraternity of Thessaloniki; St. Cosmas Missionary Organization, Thessaloniki; the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (OCMC) in

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23 All these lectures and activities can be found in the journal *Oi Φίλοι της Ορθόδοξης Βορείου Ελλάδος* 42 (January–March 1974).

24 See related articles in *Oi Φίλοι της Ορθόδοξης Βορείου Ελλάδος* (which later changed its name to Orthodox Mission Abroad) 42 (January–March 1974).

America; Philanthropia in Finland; and others in Cyprus and Australia. These organizations offer scholarships to students from Africa to study not only theology but also other disciplines, such as education, medicine, and business. We have witnessed missionaries from these countries visiting African countries and opening primary and secondary schools, colleges, and medical centres, which are attended not only by Orthodox Christians but also by members of other denominations. The best example is in Kenya, where, through donations from the Orthodox Church in Australia, the Orthodox Teachers’ College of Africa is offering courses in business and early childhood education.\(^{26}\)

**Theological education approach by Archbishop Makarios Mouskos of Cyprus**

The mission approach of Archbishop Makarios (Mikhail Kristodolous Mouskos) and the president of Cyprus was to enhance the theological and technical education of the local clergy. Archbishop Makarios believed that the churches of Greece and Cyprus were ready to engage in active mission and contribute to the Christianization of hundreds of thousands of Africans.\(^{27}\) In order to achieve this, Archbishop Makarios established a theological seminary in Nairobi where local clergy would be theologically trained and engage in mission throughout Africa.\(^{28}\) The seminary has remained the spiritual and training centre for Orthodox priests and catechists for the whole African continent. Currently, there are 70 students studying Orthodox theology in Nairobi with the aim that, after returning to their respective countries, they will be able to enhance the Orthodox faith through their priesthood and also teach in minor seminaries in their respective countries.

Archbishop Makarios’ mission to Kenya was also marked by his official visit in March 1971, where 5,000 natives in the towns of Waithaka and Nyeri were baptized. This was a boost for the Orthodox Church in the Nyeri area, as 3,000 people under the leadership of Father Peter Kinyua Wachira joined the Orthodox Church.\(^{29}\) Archbishop Makarios’ political friendship with president Kenyatta secured the place of Orthodox Church in Kenya that had been denied by the

\(^{26}\) A. Tillyridis (Metropolitan Makarios of Kenya), article in Orthodox Teachers’ College of Africa *Yearbook and Review* (2009), 96–98.


\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Githieya, *Freedom of the Spirit*, 112.
colonial government in the 1950s. His tours and baptisms within the local churches boasted the spiritual enthusiasm of the locals. According to David Barrett, the Orthodox Church had grown from one congregation in Waithaka in 1965 to about 230 congregations nation-wide in 1972, and with a membership of 250,000 ministered by 33 priests.  

Liturgical, incarnational, and reconciliatory approaches of Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos

The era of Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos as the acting bishop of the Holy Archbishopric was characterized by liturgical, incarnational, and reconciliatory approaches to mission. This started with the opening of the seminary school for theological training. The students training at the seminary catechized in the nearby churches, and eventually liturgical life started to root itself in the lives of Africans. The seminary was the meeting point for theological trainees and the liturgical life of the church. In disseminating theological knowledge to the local Christians, liturgical items, namely icons, crosses, and liturgical and catechetical books, found a place in Orthodox Christians’ homes. Liturgical and catechetical books were translated into seven different Kenyan languages; furthermore, local clergy were ordained, and permanent church buildings, mission stations, health centres, and primary and nursery schools were constructed.

In his reconciliatory approach, Archbishop Anastasios was to solve major challenges affecting the mission in East Africa. Local Christians believed that some of these emanated from the Holy Archbishopric of Irinoupolis, which existed parallel to the African Orthodox Church of Kenya, resulting in a conflict of interest for both parties in the same mission field. Archbishop Anastasios’ reconciliatory approach brought the group led by Bishop George Gathuna closer to the Holy Archbishopric, albeit not fully reconciled. This led to a decline in dissident groups that were emerging and eventually dividing the church.

After Archbishop Anastasios left East Africa for Albania, his mission approaches were continued by the current Metropolitan Makarios Tillyrides of Nairobi.

32 The Holy Archbishopric of Irinoupolis was registered to the registrar of *Companies Act* (1968) Cap 486 Laws of Kenya, while the African Orthodox Church was registered under the *Societies Act* Cap 108 Laws of Kenya.
the era of metropolitan Makarios (then the Metropolitan of Kenya), the number of consecrated churches were double those of Archbishop Anastasios’ time, with more mission initiatives in education of the clergy and laity; in building and consecration of churches and building of schools and clinics; in philanthropy; in liturgical life; and in translation of books into native languages. Likewise, Metropolitan Makarios initiated bringing more Orthodox missionaries from Cyprus, Greece, Finland, and America. These missionaries assisted the local communities in capacity building and building of churches and catechism, which has led to the baptism of thousands of Christians. Church membership in Kenya is estimated at one million active members, served by three bishops and 252 priests.  

Today, the mission initiatives of Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa Theodore II are enhancing the growth of the Orthodox Church in Africa. His mission approach focuses on the creation of more dioceses under native African leadership. For example, in East Africa, today there are four metropoles (the metropoles of Nairobi; Kampala & all Uganda; Dar el Salam; and Mwanza) and three dioceses in East Africa (the dioceses of Nyeri & Mt Kenya Region; Kisumu & Western Kenya; and Arusha & Central Tanzania), and 21 metropoles and five dioceses in the rest of Africa. Patriarch Theodoros II’s mission approach of creating more dioceses with native African leadership is bringing leadership to native Christians, and the sense of church ownership is growing. This is facilitating the meeting of Orthodoxy with the African leadership and cultural ethos. This approach calls for a missiological paradigm that will Africanize Orthodoxy, creating an “African local church.” This means the church has to take root in Africa, imbuing itself with the cultural, natural, and social characteristics that constitute the life, values, and thoughts of the African people. This paradigm will facilitate the transformation of Orthodox theological thought to meet the African social-psychological-religious ethos. Consequently, Africans will uphold Orthodoxy as their way of life; by responding to Africans’ day-to-day life concerns, Orthodoxy becomes meaningful.

Conclusion

The missiological context of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Africa clearly indicates that Orthodox mission began with the AICs, which aspired to an Africanized


34 John D. Zizioulas (Metropolitan of Pergamon), *Being as Communion; Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 254.
Christianity. Native Africans like Father Spartas of Uganda searched for ecclesial identity, affiliating their communities with Greek Orthodoxy and reading the biblical stories as their own stories. This resulted in a call for inculturation, where the gospel would meet and dialogue with African cultural particularities.

In an African setting, religion responds to the mystery of life not only through words and ideas but also affirmatively through symbols, sound, and colours.\(^{35}\) It is therefore important for the Orthodox mission initiatives in Africa to apply authentic incarnational mission methodology that will facilitate critical study, theological direction, and a dialogue between Orthodox ethos and African religiosity. Africans are religious people, and the Orthodox there believe the church is a worshipping community.\(^{36}\) Worship comes first, doctrines and discipline second.\(^{37}\) How then will it be possible for Africans to enter deeply into Orthodox worship if its structure and textures are foreign to them? How can Africans express their joy in the celebration of the divine liturgy without singing and dancing? Will they find the liturgical joy to nourish their spirituality through chanting the eight tones of the Byzantine hymnology? Or is it more appealing to introduce African rhythms, dances, drums, and clapping in the worship – because music, drums, and singing bring forth a wonderful concentration of the psyche and the body, energizing the persons involved to consciously communicate with God.

Through the missionary work of the worldwide Orthodox Church, Orthodox churches in Africa have received theological training and ordinations for local priests, translation of liturgical and spiritual books, and the building and consecration of churches, schools, orphanages, and hospitals. This is a ground being prepared for constructive dialogue between Orthodoxy and African cultures, which can be achieved through an integrated theological training in the Orthodox seminaries in Nairobi, Alexandria, and the faculty of theology at the newly established Orthodox university in Congo.

This study recommends, first, a comprehensive study on Orthodox Church growth, statistically documenting the number of Orthodox adherents in Africa. This can be done as per archdiocese and diocese. Second, it is necessary for graduates from


either universities and/or theological schools to undertake research and identify areas that Orthodoxy can integrate with African lifestyle and worldviews, cultures, and philosophy. This is an area of importance because most Orthodox churches in African started as a means of searching for an Africanized Christianity based on African realities that answers to social, economic, and even political problems affecting Africa peoples today. Third, Orthodox mission in Africa needs to venture into methods of mission and evangelism to deepen Christian faith in Africa, particularly through its rich liturgical and patristic traditions. And finally, Africa is experiencing the emergence of different Christian denominations and religious sects, which calls upon the Orthodox churches to continue engaging in ecumenism in order to bear witness to Christ for the world to believe (John 17:21).