



FOR THE LOVE OF MONEY: The church 'business' in Kenya

By Dauti Kahura



Set on a 20-acre piece of land in the Athi plains, the Mavuno “Hill City” Church (a Kiswahili word meaning harvest) looks like anything but a church: its mega dome tent resembles one huge dance hall - complete with discotheque-type revolving multi-layered and multi-coloured strobe lights that flash on and off, and a soundtrack system that would rival sound system proprietor DS Njoroge’s, 10,000-watts sound system equipment. Kendrick Lamar, the American hip-hop mega star rapper would have no problem holding a concert here. As a visiting Anglican Church cleric commented: “There’s nothing to suggest this is a holy sanctuary: a rap reggae artist could as well find his footing here. The tent could also be used to hold a conference for businessmen or entrepreneurs discussing multi-billion-shilling investments.”

Hill City, which can hold up to 4,000 worshippers, is one of the symbols of the growing influence of America’s evangelical religious culture of giant churches, whose preaching is beamed in real time on billboard-sized LED smart screens. The church precincts are no longer referred to as a compound, but a campus.

It is the kind of church where testimonies warm and cheer up the worshippers. Testimonies of success abound. “Since coming to this church, I cannot keep up with the growth of my company...my products are moving faster than I can replenish them.” Or “After I started attending this church, my

prayers were answered - I got a job, which flushed the anxiety from my heart. The job gave me a relaxing feeling, the kind of feeling you have when you know you've a big bank account somewhere."

Surrounded by Chinese-themed mega estates, Hill City is 35km from Nairobi city centre. Located off the Nairobi-Mombasa highway, it is a 3.5km walk from Stage 39, the nearest bus stop for worshippers intending to trek to the church. It would really take an inspired Christian to attend this church - the scorching sun and choking dust is not made for trekking. In short, it is not your typical walk-in-walk-out church. Its parking bay can easily hold 500 vehicles.

"Mavuno Church's relocation of its headquarters to a location just beyond the city limits in 2014 resulted in a number of members moving to other churches, as well as to other Mavuno campuses closer to their areas of residence," said Pastor Linda Ochola-Adolwa, who oversees Mavuno Crossroads Church, which meets in the Lavington suburbs.

Mavuno Crossroads was started in June 2016. Its worshippers are the remnants of the original Mavuno Church that used to meet at Bellevue in South C. Reluctant to move to "Hill City", they finally found a suitable location where they could pray and worship: at the Lavington Primary School. They refurbished seven classrooms and gave a face-lift to the primary school. Today, the congregation is made up of nearly 400 worshippers.

"The people who formed Crossroads were the well-heeled Christians who had been supporting the Mavuno Bellevue Church with their big tithes," said a Mavuno church-goer. "The Crossroads Church worshippers are all professionals and affluent and they meet in a rich suburb, away from the prying eyes of the less privileged Christians." It was just a matter of time before Mavuno Crossroads' leadership and the headquarters at "Hill City" were at crossroads over the issue of control of money allocation and tithe contribution, whispered a Crossroads Mavuno worshipper.

"Pastor Muriithi Wanjau [founder of Mavuno] is upset about the fact that Crossroads, which is a much smaller congregation, has a lot bigger slice of money than the huge congregation at Hill City," said a Mavuno Church Athi River worshipper. "He has always wanted control of the Crossroads money, but he seems to be encountering headwinds. It is a public secret that Pastor Muriithi has shown displeasure with Mavuno Crossroads Church's leadership over his inability to oversee its finances."

"Nothing could be further from the truth", retorted Pastor Muriithi. "In fact Hill City, with its big contribution of tithe is able to fund other churches that are not as endowed as Mavuno Athi River. Every church (independently) controls its finances and its choice of projects, even as they contribute their share to the central operations of the Mavuno Church," posited the pastor. The biggest operation of the church is planting Mavuno churches where there are none.

"Hill City contributes 42 per cent of its finances to the centre, Crossroads about 15 per cent, the same as Downtown, but generally churches give between 5 and 20 percent of the finances to Mavuno Church, of course, depending on their financial capabilities." There has been a lot of rumours and misinformation out there about Hill City and me, said Pastor Muriithi.

"It is true, there was a disagreement between Pastor Linda and I", the soft-spoken Pastor Muriithi told me, "but let me not disclose what the disagreement was about." Pastor Muriithi said he and Pastor Linda agreed to engage "a trusted resource person," in the person of Oscar Mureu, who is considered to be the titular bishop of Mavuno/Chapel group of churches. "We sat down with Oscar and he agreed to arbitrate our pressing issues and, we all agreed to leave the matter with him, so it's an ongoing matter because he is currently looking into it."

There are seven Mavuno churches in Kenya, “but because of planting churches along the logic of colonial lines within the city, the outcomes of this has been a subtle segregation within the Mavuno congregations,” said a Downtown Mavuno church-goer. Downtown Mavuno meets at Ufungamano building near the University of Nairobi. “Crossroads is the best example of a group of people for whom class and space are more important than just being called Christians.”

Mavuno Church encourages the starting of satellite churches based on specific area’ needs to cater for specific Christians, said the worshipper. In Eastlands, for instance, there is Mavuno Mashariki (Kiswahili for east). For long Mashariki used to meet in Donholm estate, but now meets at Naivas supermarket’s premises, where they erected a tent off Rabai Road opposite Buru Buru Phase V. “That church is for people from Eastlands...that’s just it,” said the worshipper.

There are seven Mavuno churches in Kenya and, in addition to their apparent intra-competition over which among its branches has the most money, “Mavuno is a church that practises subtle segregation,” said a Downtown Mavuno church-goer.

Mavuno Churches are led, presumably, by pastors influenced by the American televangelists from the south and mid-west who preach the message that success comes to those who pray. Forty-nine-year-old Senior Pastor Muriithi, takes no prisoners and pulls no punches in his preaching. In the month of October, he aptly called his preaching, “Wakanda Unchained – The Financial Liberation” series. “It was one of my boldest preaching,” confessed the pastor. “I will tell you something – our church looks rich...many are in debt...Christians give the illusion of success, you know, the idea is to fake it until they make it.”

In one of his Sunday sermons (which the church uploads online and which are available for all to view), Senior Pastor Muriithi rankled some of his congregants by talking about Jews and them being God-inspired money geniuses. He claimed Jews were successful because they understood the language of money and that is why they continue to attract hatred from other races as their blessings get multiplied.

“In a country riven with deep ethnic passions and where Kikuyus refer to themselves as Jews, it was deeply inconsiderate and insensitive to use the analogy of the Jews as God’s chosen people, whose success is seen as money-driven in a heterogeneous and multi-ethnic congregation,” said a Hill City worshipper to me. “Pastor Muriithi was preaching about Uthamaki theology in the guise of extolling Jews’ money virtues.”

“Let me say this, I regret the comments made afterwards by one of my congregants on my Jews’ analogy,” surmised Pastor Muriithi. “She misinterpreted my choice of Jews as people who have succeeded financially and otherwise as the biblical people of God. I could as well have used the example of the Ismailis. What I was saying is this: Jews are successful because they have stuck together, they are there for each other and, unlike some of our people who are socially and economically envious of one another, Jews help each other.” The pastor pointed out that after Jews were persecuted and suffered immensely, they learned that their success and survival lay in hanging together and not separately.

“I’m not a career pastor,” Pastor Muriithi reassured me as we concluded our somewhat difficult conversation suppressed by muttered breaths from both sides. He told me tithe- giving has been abused no doubt by many pastors, who are out to make money from their churches. “But that doesn’t invalidate the fact that Christians must not offer their tithes as commanded in the Bible. It is scriptural, it isn’t Pastor Muriithi’s command.”

‘Poverty does not glorify God’

“Africa suffers from [a] deficient money idea,” sermonised Senior Pastor Muriithi in one of his Wakanda series (the title is taken from the runaway success *Black Panther* movie about a mythical East African country). “Poverty does not glorify God,” boomed the pastor. Fired up like an American prototype televangelist, some of Senior Pastor Muriithi’s biblical pronouncements have been putting some of his worshippers on edge: “By God, where did he get that one from?” asked an exasperated Hill City church-goer.

“All what Pastor Muriithi seems to be preaching about is money, money and money,” said the church-goer. When does he get to preach about theological foundations?” As the presiding and founding pastor of the Hill City Church, one of the first sermons he preached at the newly inaugurated church in Athi River in 2014 was “financial plan for couples and money.”

As he preached in one of his Wakanda series, Pastor Muriithi plucked his authored pamphlet - “*Financial Foundations*” - and waved it to the crowd, saying it was the key to unlocking financial success. In an unflattering comment, a worshipper confided to me: “Pastor Muriithi is less concerned with spiritual matters, but with making money. How I wish he could write on the theological foundations to understanding the Synoptic Gospels,” bemoaned the worshipper.

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“Mavuno Church is run like a business,” said one of its pastors, who asked for anonymity for fear of antagonising his congregation and upsetting the church’s leadership. “It has a business plan model that must fit its expansion plans - in the country and elsewhere in Africa.” The church’s grand mission is to conquer and evangelise to African cities’ urban wannabes, “hence money is at the core of its expansionist manoeuvres,” said the pastor.

It is true Mavuno has an ambitious plan: “to plant culture-defining churches across the capital cities of Africa and the gateway cities of the world,” observes Pastor Linda.

Other than preaching about their favourite subject (money), “evangelical pastors have become experts in everything and anything,” said a Mavuno church-goer. “From investments and wealth creation, to sex and sexuality. From marital issues and parenting, to what type of people you should be associating with and who to invite in your house.” Senior Pastor Muriithi has been advising and discussing how to set up a business and how to avoid the pitfalls of incurring debt by not going to a bank to borrow money, said the Christian. “Is Pastor Muriithi an investments banker or an economist?” queried the churchgoer.

“It’s true I teach about saving and investing,” said a confident Pastor Muriithi. “And it is my desire to teach about money, because I consider it to be part of my obligation to preach on social transformation as a way of uplifting the Mavuno Church. I am raising a church to bring change among the younger generation, the so-called millennials and Generation Z. It is important for our people to understand why poverty exists amidst us and for the blessed to use their blessing to uplift the less privileged in society.”

“It is very strange that some people would accuse me of preaching about money,” said a somewhat miffed Pastor Muriithi. “My Wakanda series came after two years of not talking about money...I think I spoke about money one other time in those two years.” The pastor reminded me that this year alone, he preached for only three months “and out of those three months, I only spoke about

money for four weeks out of 52 weeks. It is not as if my preaching is all about money," the pastor said.

In 2012, Fr Ambrose Kimutai described some of his colleagues as church ministers who put the love of money above everything, in essence, "bastardising the holy shrine of God."

"The new churches of the evangelical type are in the business of promoting capitalism and neo-liberalism through their prosperity teachings and have nothing to do with spiritual nourishment or contemporary societal problems facing Kenyans," said Njonjo Mue, the Oxford-educated lawyer with a theology degree from the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), today known as African International University (AIU). "These pastors are just careerists, advancing their own causes of enriching themselves in the churches."

"The church in Kenya is still colonial in form and structure," said Njonjo. "After the exit of the colonial church, presumably with the colonial government, it bequeathed its reign of power to the 'white community' of Kenya - the Kikuyus. Is it any wonder that the former Attorney General, 'Sir' Charles Njonjo (no relation), in his heydays would decide, for instance, who was going to be the Anglican Archbishop in Kenya?" he posed. "The majority of Kikuyu church leaders fought former President Daniel Moi, not because he was dictatorial and oppressive, but because he was a Kalenjin," said Njonjo, a born-again Christian.

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The reference to picking Anglican archbishops by Charles Njonjo cuts back to the 1980 elections of the second Anglican archbishop. Archbishop Manasses Kuria, who died in 2005, was the second Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) Archbishop after Festo Olang' who retired in 1979. In line to succeed him was the fiery Henry Okullu, the Bishop of Maseno South. The elections became a contest between ethnicities.

In his autobiography, *The Quest for Justice*, Okullu wrote: "The Luhya and Kikuyu ethnic sentiments enforced by political tribalism blocked my way, such that a third person, out of the 25 electors could not be found to sign my nominations." Okullu said that Bishop David Gitari told him, "Since Archbishop Olang' was from Western Kenya (Olang' was a Luhya), this time, you people from Western are to be prepared to support an Archbishop from Central Province." Okullu shot back: "This time the election of the Archbishop must be geographically decided?"

In the ensuing cacophony - of who should succeed Olang' - Olang' himself asked Okullu to throw his support towards the Assistant Bishop of Mombasa, Crispus Nzano, a nondescript auxiliary bishop, but a bishop nonetheless. Okullu declined. To break the impasse, Nzano had been nominated alongside Mannases Kuria, an equally unknown bishop from Nakuru. On the eve of the election, Attorney General Njonjo telephoned Nzano and prevailed him to step down for Kuria and he obliged. James Hamilton, the then Chancellor of ACK, declared Kuria the second Anglican Archbishop of Kenya unopposed.

"The Christianity Kenya received from Western missions seemed to have emphasised personal piety at the expense of public and social implications of the Christian faith," said Pastor Linda. She described the Mavuno congregation as largely middle class, professional, and young: "Hill City is a young congregation having started in 2005. This middle class congregation, which is multi-ethnic

and sometimes multi-racial, tends to be apolitical in its approach to socio-economic and political matters.”

These types of Christians have come to view politics as anathema to their well-being: cushioned and shielded from the vicissitudes of *real politik* because of their privileged class backgrounds and professional lives, their economic largesse has also afforded them the luxury of ignoring the politics of the day around them. But after the post-election violence of 2008, many middle class (Mavuno) Christians woke up to the crude reality that politics was part and parcel of their lives and, even if it did not affect their lives directly, they had friends and relatives who had suffered because of politics gone awry.

Living in a ‘Christian bubble’

“Middle class Christians are aware of the corrupt political system, the socio-economic breakdown of our institutions and ethnic chauvinistic politics, but they seem to be exasperated and worn down by all these societal ills,” says Pastor Linda. “The greater temptation for this class of Christians is to live in a ‘Christian bubble’ of donating Christmas gifts to the poor and children’s homes, hence believing they have done their bit of civic and societal obligations.”

Yet, according to Pastor Linda, the church’s greater dilemma seems to lie in how it views its defined prophetic role: Does it obey the secular rules here on earth as stated in Romans 13 and just preach for peaceful co-existence as St Augustine proposed, or does it engage in the politics of the day and hope not to be muddied by it or shun politics altogether?

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“Although the majority of Kenyans are Christians - more than 80 percent - they have relegated their church sanctuaries to politicians,” said a senior Anglican Church cleric. “Nowadays, it is the politicians who are crafting and dictating what messages the pastors and priests are to preach to their congregations.” The result: church leadership has become impotent and obsolete.

“After the poll violence of 2008, it became increasingly difficult for the Catholic Church to speak collectively in one voice,” said an Archdiocese of Nairobi priest. “The post-election violence had exposed the deep running ethnic fissures within the church. The Church had taken political sides, and one of its clergy members had been killed because of the ethnic mayhem and the dangerous ethnic and political emotions,” said the priest. “The Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) meets nowadays to preach bland messages, such as the need for Kenyans to keep peace. It has ceased to have the moral compass to direct and guide the people.”

The priest told me that it was implicitly agreed among the bishops who form the episcopal conference that the church would not “impose” its collective stand on the politics of the day, or even pretend to inform it on the individual priests. “Politics became an individual priest’s responsibility - so long as he did not purport to speak on behalf of the Catholic Church of Kenya.”

“You cannot fight the government,” the priest said. “Even a powerful church like the Catholic Church is bound to be on the receiving end.” The priest confidentially told me that the government

had allegedly sent a subtle message to the church's leadership that if it pushed it too hard, it would impose taxes on its land and other properties it owns. The Catholic Church is the largest landowner in Kenya outside of the government. The cleric informed me that the government had even "threatened" to repossess some of the land it owned controversially, or land it had given the church.

The church and the state

Instead of effecting these threats, the government had done the opposite: Three weeks ago, President Uhuru Kenyatta, officiating at the funeral mass of the retired Archbishop John Njenga, asked the Principal Secretary at the Ministry of Land, Nicholas Muraguri, to return to the Catholic Church land that could have been appropriated or otherwise from the church. It is obvious that the Catholic Church leadership has been playing ball with the Jubilee Party state and hence the reward.

Although most of the Catholic Church's land was acquired before Kenya attained its independence in 1963, "once Jomo Kenyatta became president, he gave the church a plot of land in the posh Lavington area," said the priest. In Nairobi County, the Catholic Church's land is concentrated in the Langata/Karen area, leading to the area being referred to as the "Little Vatican". The other prime land is the Lavington property, where they have built posh schools, convents and even have a cemetery for their priests.

"If the state turns on the church it would be the worse for it and it will lose big time," said the priest. "The church has never contemplated paying taxes, it would never pay taxes and therefore, it would do anything to avoid creating such a scenario." The Catholic Church imports tonnes of drugs for its clinics and hospitals across the country, all tax-free. It is exempt from paying land rates. More than that, it has a large expatriate workforce that works in hospitals, schools and universities. "The last thing the church would want is for the government to make it difficult for the foreigners to work for the church," pointed out the priest.

"When President Moi vacated office in 2002, and his former VP Mwai Kibaki stepped into his shoes, relations between the church and the state altered dramatically,' wrote John Githongo in 2013. "The visceral antagonisms of the prior era melted away. A number of church leaders, including significantly, the National Council of Churches of Kenya's (NCCCK) Mutava Musyimi, were elected to Parliament. President Kibaki, not one for direct confrontation, cultivated a close relationship with the Catholic Church, whose national leadership seemed to share his conservative instincts, especially, in regard to property and acquisition."

A senior Anglican cleric, who was a close friend of Archbishop Gitari, told me, "Once Kibaki became president, the archbishop ceased any fiery attacks against the state. He even subtly cautioned criticism of the new NARC government from fellow Anglican clerics." It would seem the upshot of Archbishop's Gitari's pullback from finding fault with Kibaki's government, unlike his constant attacks on Moi's government, was that their man a (Kikuyu) had re-captured state power and that is all that mattered.

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So was the Catholic Church - which had tested Moi's patience by its stinging episcopal pastoral letters, which talked of social justice, political accountability and morality, among other pressing socio-economic and political issues - compromised?

Raphael Ndingi Mwana'a Nzeki, the Catholic prelate who had been at the forefront of demanding political transparency and of fighting against state corruption, which was rife in Moi's KANU government in the 1990s, suddenly went mute, as did the church leadership, when his friend Mwai Kibaki became the president. It was not lost on Kenyans and keen observers that Kibaki shared the archbishop's faith. Even more noticeable was the decline of the "sharp" pastoral letters that spoke truth to power.

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