

# 'Doing Religion' Overseas: The Characteristics and Functions of Ghanaian Immigrant Churches in Toronto, Canada

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## Abstract

While the importance of immigrants' transnational economic activities is readily acknowledged, the cultural factors that facilitate their initiation and sustenance of memberships in multiple locations have been overlooked. It is this lacuna that the present study addresses, using Ghanaian immigrant churches in Toronto as a case study. The paper examines how Ghanaian immigrant churches were founded; how they are organized; and the kinds of social services they provide. While the churches facilitate the settlement of Ghanaian immigrants, through the provision of social services, they seem to, inadvertently, undermine their eventual integration into the broader Canadian society.

## Keywords

Ghanaians, immigrants, religion, Toronto

## Introduction

Contrary to the long-standing secularization thesis,<sup>1</sup> which posits that religion will fade with the triumph of modern science, the influence of religion has expanded across the globe, due, in part, to such secular global processes as multinational capital flows and increased electronic mediation – ironically, some of the very forces that were expected to eradicate religion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Auguste Comte's *The Crisis of Industrial Civilization* 1974; and Weber's *Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions* [1920], 1946.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the growing influence of religion, see Berger 2001; Warner and Wittner 1998.

One would be hard pressed now to find any geopolitical conflict that has no religious undertone.<sup>3</sup> And, as Jacqueline Hagan and Helen Ebaugh noted, religion is drawn into virtually all aspects of international migration: from the decision to migrate, through the visa application and other preparations for the journey, to the arrival and eventual settlement process.<sup>4</sup> It is not uncommon now to find racial minority immigrants, in particular, using religious associations and practices to counteract the cultural shock, alienation, and discrimination they encounter in their adopted countries. Perhaps Timothy Smith was not exaggerating when he noted that migration is often a *theologizing experience*.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the interconnections between religion and migration, Canadian scholars, unlike their American and European counterparts, have steered clear of this area of research.<sup>6</sup> This lacuna is what prompted the *Ghanaian Immigrants' Religious Transnationalism* (GIRT) Project, which seeks to understand how Ghanaians in Toronto live their religious lives across borders.<sup>7</sup> The present paper, which examines the characteristics and functions of Ghanaian immigrant churches in Toronto, is part of GIRT's work. More specifically, the paper explores how Ghanaian immigrant churches are founded; how they organize themselves; the kinds of social services they provide; and the implications of their activities for the settlement of Ghanaians in Toronto. Even though the Ghanaian population in Toronto is ethnically heterogeneous, the vast majority of them are Christians: Of the 11,260 Ghanaians in Toronto, 93 percent are Christians; only a meager 2 percent of them are Muslims, with the remaining 5 percent declaring no religious affiliation.<sup>8</sup> It is against this background that the GIRT project focuses on Ghanaian Christian congregations.

The present study is distinctive not only in its focus on religion in counterpoint to the prevailing emphasis on immigrants' economic activities,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>) Bramadat 2005, Casanova 1994, and Warner and Wittner 1998.

<sup>4</sup>) Hagan and Ebaugh 2003.

<sup>5</sup>) Smith 1978.

<sup>6</sup>) Notable examples of such American and European studies are the works of Levitt 2003, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002, Hagan and Ebaugh 2003, Adogame and Weissköppel 2005, and van Dijk 1997.

<sup>7</sup>) The GIRT Project is based at the Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies at York University in Toronto; it is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada.

<sup>8</sup>) Statistics Canada 2001.

<sup>9</sup>) For more on immigrants' transnational economic activities in Canada, consult Preston and Lo 2000, and Wong 2000.

but also in its analysis of a subset of the African immigrant group in Canada – a group that has received, perhaps, the scantiest research attention in the budding literature on transnational migration. The next section reflects on the nexus between religion and immigration in the context of Canada, after which we outline the methodological considerations that went into the procurement of data. Following this is an historiography of the influx of Ghanaian immigrants into Canada. The data analysis is pursued in the next two sections, which examine the characteristics and functions of Ghanaian immigrant churches, respectively. The penultimate section discusses the implications of our empirical findings, before the paper concludes with a summary of the main findings and some suggestions for future research.

### Religion and Immigration in Canada

In the last few decades, massive international immigration has changed Canada's racial and ethnic composition and, consequently, its religious landscape. The vast majority of the early immigrants to Canada were White Europeans, but since the mid-1980s, Canadian immigration has been dominated by visible minorities from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, such 'Eastern religions'<sup>11</sup> as Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam have witnessed a phenomenal growth across the country. For instance, between 1991 and 2001, the number of Muslims grew by a whooping 129 percent to a total of 579,645 adherents; similarly, the size of the Hindu and Sikh populations jumped by 89 percent, each, to a total of 297,200 and 278,415, respectively.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding the growth in 'Eastern religions', Christianity remains dominant, with as high as 76 percent of Canadians declaring Christian faith by the 2001 census.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bramadat 2005, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> The term "Eastern Religion" is problematized here to hint of the fact that the common attribution of Christianity to the Western World or the global North is not completely accurate. The Ghanaian scholar Kwame Bediako reminds us in his *Christianity in Africa*, that, founded in the Middle East, Christianity was far stronger in Asia and North African than in Europe, for the grater part of its first thousand years or so.

<sup>12</sup> Statistics Canada 2001; Bramadat 2005, p. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Albeit, this represents a drop of some 6 percentage points from the corresponding figure in the 1991 census.

This apparent paradox prompted Reginald Bibby to assert that the much-touted religious diversity in Canada “is largely a myth.”<sup>14</sup> Bibby attributes the continued dominance of Christianity in Canada to the fact that Catholics and Protestants tend to benefit the most, numerically, when marital and quasi-marital relationships across religious lines. What is missing from Bibby’s exposition is an acknowledgment of the growing number of non-White Christian immigrants, or “ethnic Christians”<sup>15</sup> in Canada. While the growth of non-White Christians does not necessarily undermine Bibby’s basic argument, it certainly adds some nuanced prescience to our understanding of the intersections between religion, ethnicity, and multiculturalism in Canada. If nothing at all, the growth of ‘ethnic Christianity’ in Canada has introduced several unfamiliar liturgy and cultural rituals to the religious landscape of this country.

Following Opuku-Dapaah’s well-cited work on *Somali Refugees in Toronto* (1995), there has been a growing literature on various aspects of African immigrants in Canada.<sup>16</sup> Despite this burgeoning literature, we know relatively little about the religious practices of African immigrants in this country. The dearth of research on how African immigrants ‘do religion’ in Canada is hard to explain: Could it be that African immigrants, with their characteristic oral cultural background, have not yet spawned the critical mass of Canada-based scholars who are willing and able to write their religious stories? Or could this be part of the apparent “antireligious bias in much of social science research devoted to the new ethnic and immigrant communities?”<sup>17</sup> or part of the relative lack of interest in ‘Third World religions’ in the Western academic world?<sup>18</sup> Regardless of how one reacts to these rhetorical questions, the need for research into African immigrant religions can no longer be ignored, given the increasing significance of religion in the lives of these immigrants.

## Method(ology)

With the aid of information gathered from multiple sources<sup>19</sup> and informal conversations with members of the Ghanaian community, we were

<sup>14</sup> Bibby 2000, p. 235.

<sup>15</sup> This term was borrowed from Bramadat 2005, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Mensah 2002; Tettey and Puplampu 2005; and Owusu 2000, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Werner and Wittner’s 1998, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> This assertion is derived from Jenkins 2002, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> These sources were field reconnaissance and newspaper advertisements in *the Ghanaian*

able to identify and map 37 Ghanaian immigrant churches in the Toronto CMA<sup>20</sup> (Figure 1). Although concerted efforts were made to procure as accurate a list of Ghanaian immigrant churches as possible, our final figure (of 37) is only an approximation, as the number of churches changes by the week, with some churches splinting-up and others either folding-up completely or remaining in limbo, for a variety of reasons.<sup>21</sup> Out of the 37 churches, we selected four for our fieldwork. These included: (a) two African Initiated Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches (AICs): one with origins in Ghana (i.e., the Church of Pentecost Canada Inc.) and the other founded by a Ghanaian in Canada with a branch in Ghana (i.e., All Nations Full Gospel Church); and (b) two mainline or non-African Initiated Churches – i.e., The Ghana Methodist Church of Toronto and the Ghanaian Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church of Toronto. The selection of such a miscellany of churches was influenced not only by our overarching theoretical theme of religious transnationalism, but also by a common division of African churches into mainline or mission churches, as against African Initiated Churches (AICs).<sup>22</sup> Unlike the mainline churches (e.g., the Catholic, Anglican, or Methodist churches), which are founded by non-Africans or by ‘outsiders,’ African Initiated Churches (AICs) are founded by Africans (or in Africa), primarily for Africans in their homelands or in the diaspora.<sup>23</sup> The term “African Initiated Churches” is often used interchangeably with African-Instituted, -Independent, or -Indigenous Churches – all of which, intriguingly, share the acronym AICs.

The GIRT project, as a whole, combined multi-sited ethnography with *individual* and *institutional* surveys for the procurement of its primary

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*News* and *Ghana Post* (i.e., the two main newspapers for the Ghanaian immigrant community in the Greater Toronto Area).

<sup>20</sup> “Ghanaian immigrants” churches are operationally defined as churches in which at least 50 percent of the members are Ghanaians.

<sup>21</sup> A good example of a church in limbo is the St. Andrew’s Ghanaian Community Catholic Church in Toronto, whose doors remain closed with the cancellation of the Ghanaian Twi language Mass, until further notice, as a result of an ongoing dispute between two factions in the congregation, one of which supports the replacement (by way of a transfer) of the congregation’s founding Father Stephen Acheampong by another Ghanaian Priest, Reverend John Benedict Adde-Nweah, while the other opposes (See *The Ghana News* July/August, 2005, p. 4 for more details).

<sup>22</sup> This typology has been popularized by the likes of Turner 1979, Anderson 2001, van Dijk 2004, and Adogame 2000.

<sup>23</sup> Turner 1979 and Anderson 2001.

data.<sup>24</sup> In what follows we focus on the *institutional* survey from which the bulk of the present data stems. The questionnaire of the institutional survey, which was conducted at each of the four churches, sought information on the respective churches' history and foundation, organizational structure, membership, religious practices and connections with Ghana, and social services.<sup>25</sup> Administered to the church as an institution, any designated member of the church leadership (e.g., the pastor, the secretary, a church elder or any combination of these) was eligible to fill the institutional questionnaire.

### **Ghanaian Immigrants in Canada: Moving from *There* to *Here***

Mensah divides the move of Ghanaians from *There* to *Here* into two major waves: the first, from the late 1960s and early 1970s to 1986; and the second, from about 1991 to the present, with the four-year period, from 1987 to 1990, serving as a transition phase.<sup>26</sup> During the first wave, the number of Ghanaian immigrants averaged about 200 people per year, while the corresponding figure for the transition period hovered around 500 persons per annum. In the second wave, however, the number climbed to about 1000 per year, with some years (e.g. 1992 and 1993) even recording more than 2,000 people. Many of the second-wave immigrants, unlike their earlier counterparts, have relatively less formal education, as many came under Canada's refugee and family unification classes, both of which do not have stringent employment and educational requirements.

The influx of Ghanaians to Canada, like most migration processes, is attributable to the interplay of mutually supportive forces from the places of origin and destination, mediated by the appropriation of modern transportation and telecommunication technology. Emanating from *Here* is the

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<sup>24</sup> Whereas the *individual* semi-structured interviews and *individual* surveys were directed at the rank-and-file members of the four selected churches, the *institutional* versions were directed at the church as an organization, with the leaders serving as the main informants or respondents.

<sup>25</sup> We had originally mailed out this *institutional* questionnaire to all the Ghanaian immigrant churches identified and mapped, but, after our numerous follow-up visits and phone calls (for a period of about two months) failed to garner the necessary support and cooperation of many of the churches to fill out the questionnaire, we decided to concentrate only on the four churches which had already agreed to participate in the project.

<sup>26</sup> Mensah 2002.

centripetal force forged by the relatively conducive immigration policies of Canada, especially since the 1960s; and from *There* comes the centrifugal force exerted by the difficult socio-economic and political conditions in Ghana, especially since the 1980s.

The Ghanaian community in Canada is overwhelmingly urban, with the bulk living in Toronto. The 2001 Census puts the number of Ghanaians in Canada at 16,950, of which 66.5 percent live in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA). The Montreal and Vancouver CMAs are homes to 9.9 percent and 3 percent, respectively. Most of the Ghanaians in Toronto reside in the suburban districts of North York, Etobicoke, and Scarborough (Figure 2), primarily because of their need for affordable public and private rental accommodation and their desire to live close to other Ghanaians. Like most Black groups in Toronto, Ghanaians have higher unemployment rate, and are over-represented in low-paying, manual, processing, and machining occupations in the manufacturing industry.<sup>27</sup> Faced with racism and precarious employment regimes, it is not surprising that many Ghanaians in Toronto, like other Blacks, find it necessary to mobilize themselves in ethnic and religious associations to address their settlement and integration needs.

### Ghanaian Immigrant Churches: Main Features

The proliferation of Ghanaian immigrant churches in major Canadian cities – as in other Western European urban centers, including Hamburg, Berlin, Amsterdam, and London<sup>28</sup> – is attributable, at least in part, to the phenomenal growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Ghana, since the late 1980s.<sup>29</sup> Within the Ghanaian religious landscape, Pentecostal churches generally distinguish themselves from the mainline Christian churches (e.g., Methodists and Catholics) on the one hand, and from the ‘Spiritual’ churches or (*susum sore*), on the other: the Pentecostals see the former as being ‘spiritually dead’ and the latter as unbiblical and consumed by witchcraft, occultism, and other African indigenous rituals. Charismatic churches are quite similar to Pentecostals, especially in their emphasis on the direct experience of the Holy Spirit and the use of Charismata or ‘gifts

<sup>27</sup> See Statistics Canada, National Census of Canada, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> For works on Ghanaian churches in Europe consult van Dijk 2004 and 1997, and ter Haar 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Philip Jenkins 2002, for one, notes that “the era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetime, and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning” (p. 3).

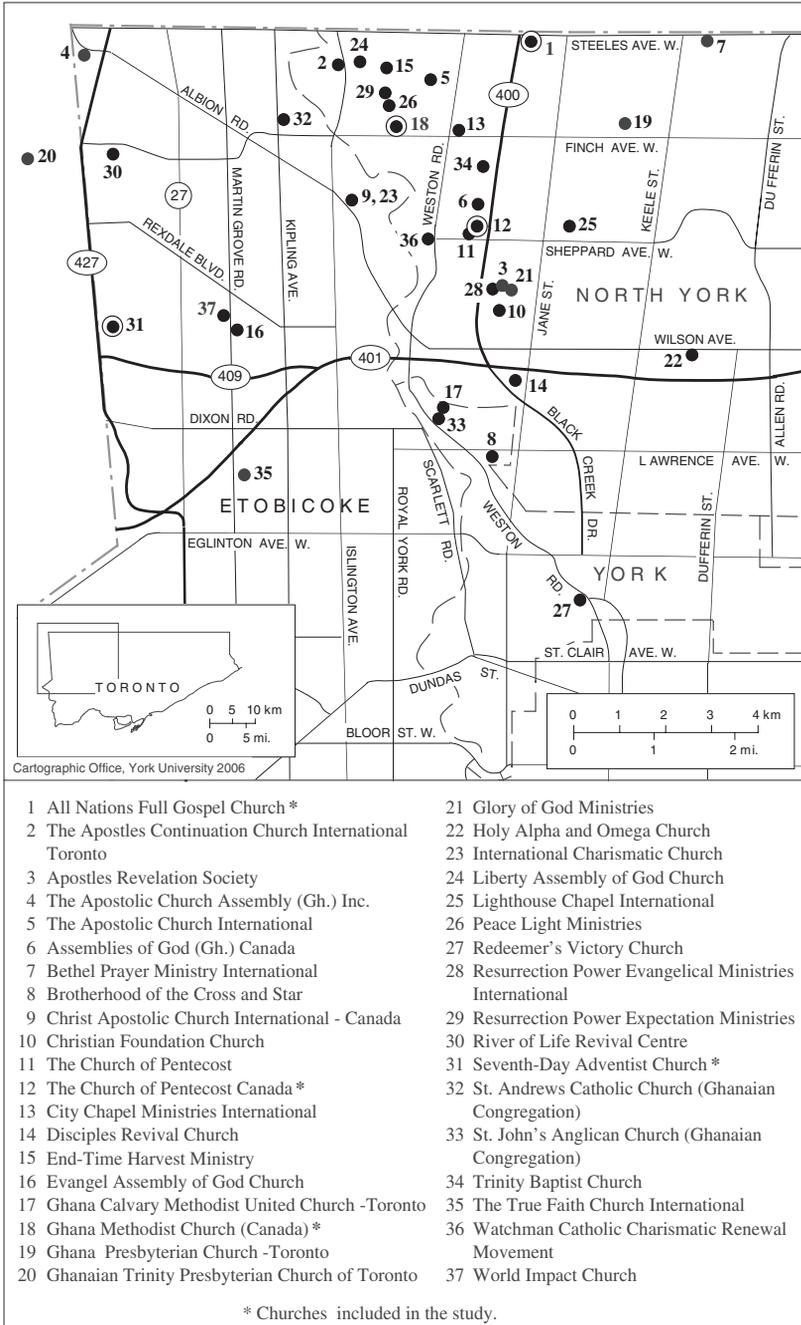
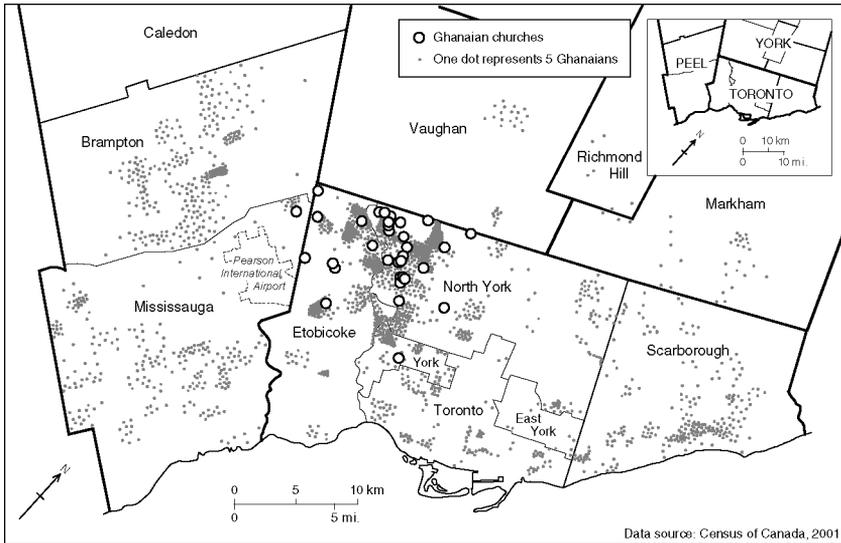


Figure 1 The Locations of Ghanaian Immigrant Churches in Toronto



*Figure 2* The residential pattern of Ghanaians vis-à-vis the location of Ghanaian immigrant churches in the City of Toronto and the Regional Municipality of Peel

of the spirit’ – i.e., glossolalia, prophecy, and healing powers.<sup>30</sup> However, the Charismatic ministries see themselves as modern versions of the Pentecostals: they are more recent, more urban, relatively middle-class oriented, and more aggressive in their use of “prosperity gospel” and its attendant preoccupation with business, finance, employment, and upward social mobility.

Even though Ghanaians have been in Toronto since the late 1960s, it was not until the 1980s that they began to form various ethnic and township associations.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the same is true of all the four Ghanaian immigrant churches in our study, the foundations of which are traceable to the late 1980s and the early 1990s when there appeared to be a critical mass of Ghanaians for the sustainability of these churches.

The narratives on how the four churches in our study started are strikingly similar. Each began with a small group of people – ranging from ten, in the cases of the SDA and Methodist churches, to about twenty-five, in the cases of ANFG and the Church of Pentecost – who felt the need to establish their own church for a variety of reasons, including the urge to worship and interact with people of similar cultural backgrounds; the drive to use the

<sup>30</sup> Most Pentecostal churches, unlike Charismatic ones, believe in speaking in tongues.

<sup>31</sup> Owusu 2000.

church to assist Ghanaians in the city; the feeling of alienation, cultural insensitivity, and racism from mainstream churches; and the urge to use the church to mobilize Ghanaian diasporic resources for economic development back home. While the proliferation of African-Initiated Churches in some European cities have been attributed primarily to conscious efforts by continental Africans to engage in missionary expansion in Europe, or ‘mission-reverse’,<sup>32</sup> the situation among Ghanaian churches in Toronto is different: Here, the churches are mostly founded by people seeking to create a religious space for the (re)production of their cultural identity, and for insulation from racism and the individualistic tendencies of mainstream Canadians.<sup>33</sup>

None of the four churches reported receiving any help, monetary or otherwise, from Ghana to facilitate their formation; the only exception in this case was the Methodist Church, which received guidance from the Methodist Church headquarters in Accra, Ghana. Nonetheless, some, including the Ghana Methodist Church and the Church of Pentecost, have since sought official recognition from their cognate headquarters in Ghana, not only to boost their legitimacy among the Ghanaians in Toronto, but also to solidify their ecumenical ties and to facilitate their development activities in Ghana. Even the ANFG Church – a Ghanaian-initiated, independent church founded in Toronto – now have strong transnational connections with Ghana for similar reasons. We also found that none of the churches received any assistance from a church or religious organization within Canada to help their formation, but this has not stopped the SDA Church, in particular, to formally structure itself under the umbrella of the Ontario Conference of SDA Churches. Beside such formal ties, some Ghanaian immigrant churches have developed informal connections (albeit weak, if not symbolic, in some cases) with other Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian churches in Toronto and across Canada. For instance, the Church of Pentecost has an affiliation with the Victoria International Church in Hamilton, Ontario, and some partnership programs with the Canada Christian College in Toronto. Also, the SDA Church boasts of regular participation in both SDA and non-SDA musical concerts in and around Toronto, while the Ghana Methodist Church has ongoing religious, social, and musical connections with the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Canada in Toronto.

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<sup>32</sup>) Adogame 2004, ter Haar 1998.

<sup>33</sup>) The fact that some of Ghanaian-Initiated Churches, notably, the All Nations Full Gospel Church, is currently engaged in extensive missionary activities worldwide does not in any way undermine this argument.

No account of the Ghanaian immigrant churches – and, indeed, of the growing Pentecostal/Charismatic movements among Africans in general – can fail to acknowledge the high visibility of women as devoted members. In fact, the leaders of the churches in our study estimate the proportion of their respective female congregants to be around 58 to 60 percent. At the same time, women are often relegated to low- and mid-level leadership positions, dealing mostly with traditional women’s roles involving children, the youth, social services, music, cooking, cleaning and custodianship. Even though none of the churches barred women from their priesthood, or other top congregational roles, only the ANFG Church has women in high, co-pastoral positions – and even here, the top-ranked woman happens to be a co-senior pastor with her own husband. In the absence of literature on the status of women in immigrant churches in Canada, it is hard to properly contextualize this finding. Nonetheless, studies from the United States<sup>34</sup> suggest that immigrant churches tend to be *surprisingly* male-dominated. The emphasis on ‘surprisingly’ here is deliberate: one would expect immigrant women to assume higher leadership roles, given their immigration-induced “enhanced consciousness of, and sometimes resistance to, the inequalities they confront on the basis of their gender”.<sup>35</sup>

There are indications that the reconfiguration of traditional gender roles of power and privilege underway in many Ghanaian immigrant households in Toronto, in response to the socio-economic and cultural realities of Canada, favours women, to some extent.<sup>36</sup> If this correction to the male-female power differentials is indeed occurring, then one would expect it to spill over to the Ghanaian immigrant churches in no time. But then, as Ebaugh and Chafetz aptly point out:

To the extent that male congregants perceive themselves to have suffered status loss in the process of immigration, they try to recoup their sense of worth through incumbency in prestigious congregational roles. Traditional cultural and often, but not always, religious norms provide them with preferential access to such roles, and women are therefore mostly left with whatever roles men cannot or do not wish to fill.<sup>37</sup>

The SDA Church, like its cognates world over, conducts its main weekly service on Saturdays, while the other three churches hold theirs on Sundays.

<sup>34</sup>) Kim 1996, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000.

<sup>35</sup>) Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000.

<sup>36</sup>) Wong 2000.

<sup>37</sup>) Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, p. 69.

Beside the main service, they all have at least one more bible studies or informal prayer gathering in the week, either in the church premise or in small groups or ‘cells’ which meet in private homes. Also, all of the churches have a number of church groups, committees, ministries – e.g., youth ministries, women’s fellowships, men’s fellowship, singing bands, choirs, etc. – which meet at various times during the week. All the four churches in our study have had to re-organize their main service and other church activities to fit the stringent demands of the Canadian working week.

The small group or ‘cell’ system<sup>38</sup> is used to enhance scheduling flexibility among members. Another scheduling technique commonly deployed by nearly all the churches is to put as many of their church activities as possible on their main worship day so as to free up the working week days for members’ family and labor market responsibilities. Three out of the four churches in our sample conduct their church services and other religious education classes either in Twi only or in both Twi and English, using interpreters from time to time, depending on the audience and the occasion. While Ghana is a multi-ethnic, polyglot nation, the overwhelming majority of the people in the southern half of the country,<sup>39</sup> from where most of the Ghanaian immigrants in Canada hail, speak the Akan language of Twi.

We must note that some of the people who are proficient and, consequently, able to worship in Twi have their own native languages, such as the Ga and Ewe languages, which are native to people from the Greater Accra Region and the Volta Region, respectively. Thus, while the common use of Twi in the Ghanaian immigrant churches enhances the sense of solidarity and commitment among their members, one can speculate that such a move is not without any contestation. As Ebaugh and Chafetz point out: “Differences in native language, and in dialects of the same language, often constitutes the bases for segregation among immigrant members, and not infrequently for inter-generational strains and tension.”<sup>40</sup> We must also note that many of the 1.5 and second generations of Ghanaians do not even have the cultural competence and the linguistic proficiency to comprehend, let alone appreciate, a full church service in Twi, only. It is in this context that some of the churches use English, in addition to Twi, for their main services and programs (see Table 1).

<sup>38</sup>) The cells are groups of 3 to 8 individuals or families that meet in private homes for bible studies.

<sup>39</sup>) This stretches from the Brong Ahafo Region southwards to the Greater Accra Region along the coast.

<sup>40</sup>) Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, p. 100.

**Table 1** Key characteristics of Ghanaian immigrant churches in Toronto, 2006

<i>Characteristics</i>	SDA	Methodist	ANFG	Pentecost
<i>Year established</i>	1992	1998	1986	1990
<i>Congregation size</i>	400	450	1500–2000	300 (English)* 500 (Twi)
<i>Percentage of Ghanaians</i>	95–100%	95–100%	70–75%	95–100%
<i>Language(s) of service</i>	Twi & English	Twi	English	Twi & English
<i>Own the place of worship</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Recording of main service</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Any assistance from Ghana to form this church</i>	No	Yes	No	No
<i>Institutional/ecumenical links with a church in Ghana</i>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Any assistance from Canada to form this church</i>	No	No	No	No
<i>Qualification of Current Head Pastor</i>	Univ. degree and ordained	Univ. degree & ordained	Univ. degree and ordained	Univ. Degree and ordained
<i>Selection of leaders</i>	By elections	By appointment and elections	By appointment	By appointment and elections
<i>Have written constitution</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Women in leadership</i>	Nursery overseer, usher, choir/singing band leader.	Youth pastor, nursery overseer, usher, custodian, Sunday school teacher.	Pastor, assistant pastor, nursery overseer, usher, development manager, Sunday school teacher, choir leader.	Treasurer, nursery overseer, Sunday school teacher, choir/singing band leader.

\* The Church of Pentecost has two congregations, one of which uses English for its services, while the other uses Twi.

Source: Fieldwork, July 2005–May 2006.

While there are some variations in the worship and liturgical styles of the churches we studied, they share some common features, of which the prevalence of vibrant, instrument-backed music, together with rhythmic, spontaneous clapping and dancing, is worthy of note. The songs and hymns used in these churches also vary somewhat, but their collective tilt towards religious Afro-pop music – *a-la-Kirk Franklin*<sup>41</sup> – can hardly escape even the most cursory observer. Another common feature among the churches is the high incidence of tithing/offering during church services. Charity offerings – or “collections,” in the parlance of Ghanaian churches – is often taken twice, or even more, during a single church service. Most of the sermons, prayers, and announcements in the churches have discernable socio-economic and political content with clear implications for the lives of the immigrants they serve. Themes such as immigration policy, voting rights, employment, education, racial discrimination, and youth crime feature prominently in their sermons.

Another striking feature of the Ghanaian immigrant churches relates to the extent to which their members dressed-up for church services: Suit and tie, stylish western middle-class dresses, and high-fashion traditional African/Ghanaian attires seem to be the ‘dress code’ for nearly all of them. This dress code, combined with the common use of African-flavored religious pop music in the midst of intense clapping and dancing, often conjures an image of a social celebration rather than a solemn church service.<sup>42</sup> On the whole, the worship styles of the churches in our study were far more interactive, with considerable involvement of the congregation in even the delivery of sermons, than one could find in most mainstream Canadian churches.

## Functions

The provision of social services by immigrant congregations has, quite counter-intuitively, been problematic. While most congregations provide social services for their members, some are of the view that such undertakings are unbecoming of religious institutions. Ebaugh and Chafetz, for instance, note in their study of immigrant congregations in the Greater

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<sup>41</sup> Kirk Franklin is a platinum-selling African-American musician, well-known for blending R & B and hip-hop with gospel music.

<sup>42</sup> No offense intended.

Houston Metropolitan Area in Texas that almost half of the thirteen congregations in their sample provide few, if any, formally organized social services for their members.<sup>43</sup> The scanty literature on the subject in the Canadian context suggests that most (but, certainly, not all) immigrant congregations provide social services to meet the settlement needs of their members.<sup>44</sup> Although the struggle to meet settlement needs may characterize all new immigrants in Canada's history, there is no disputing that highly racialized minority immigrant groups with limited economic resources, such as Ghanaians in Toronto, face far more difficult settlement challenges, and, consequently, may need even more of such social services. Unsurprisingly, all the four churches in our study approached their social services with a sense of urgency. To them, these services have unambiguous implications for the very survival of their members and, implicitly, their churches.

The churches in our study provide a variety of social services, ranging from English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, marriage counseling, financial and legal assistance, to conflict resolution, mentoring, sports and summer school programs for the youth (Table 2). The ANFG Church provides, by far, the most comprehensive list of services, followed by the Church of Pentecost, the Methodist Church and SDA, in that order; incidentally – or, perhaps, understandably – this order corresponds somewhat with their respective congregation sizes. Quite expectedly, some of the churches (e.g., the Methodist Church and the Church of Pentecost) reported paying special attention to the new immigrants amongst them when it comes to service provision. New immigrants are sought after by the pastor, church leaders, and sometimes individual congregants, and offered food, clothing, transportation, and guidance in their search for employment, housing, healthcare and children's schools to facilitate their settlement in their new environment.

*Table 2* Social services provided by Ghanaian immigrant churches

Social services	SDA	Methodist	ANFG	Pentecost
<i>English as a Second Language (ESL) classes</i>			✓	
<i>Helping members find jobs</i>	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Helping members find housing</i>		✓	✓	

<sup>43</sup> Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000.

<sup>44</sup> McDonough and Hoodfar 2005, Banerjee and Coward 2005.

Table 2 (cont.)

Social services	SDA	Methodist	ANFG	Pentecost
<i>Marriage counseling</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Giving loans/financial support</i>			✓	✓
<i>Giving ride/help with transportation</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Legal assistance</i>			✓	
<i>Help with immigration/refugee applications</i>			✓	
<i>Conflict resolution</i>			✓	✓
<i>Help with internet access and computer use</i>			✓	
<i>Mentoring/tutoring</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Naming/Christening of newborn babies</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Help with birthday celebrations</i>	✓	✓		✓
<i>Weddings</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Sports programs</i>			✓	✓
<i>Summer school programs</i>			✓	✓
<i>Bereavement/funeral assistance</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓

✓ = Services provided

Source: Field interviews, July 2005–May 2006.

Unlike the situation in some mainstream Canadian churches, the need for such material assistance is real, given the relatively low income background of many of the new immigrant among these congregations. Add to this the recent neo-liberal cuts in social services across Canada, and one would readily appreciate the need for, and the burdens imposed by, such social services in any immigrant church whose members are mostly from a developing country such as Ghana.

To the specific question of whether or not these social services are offered to Ghanaians who are non-members, all the four churches in our study responded affirmatively. Similarly, we noted that all the churches provide services such as marriage and general counseling, banquet facilities, funeral services, food (bank) drive, and some financial support to charity organizations and needy members of the broader Canadian public.

We also noted that the social and charity activities of the four churches extend beyond Canada to the home country (i.e., Ghana) and elsewhere. Monetary and material resources – e.g., computers, used clothing, hospital equipments, books and other school supplies – are often shipped to support various development initiatives in Ghana, in particular. More specifically we noted that the ANFG Church runs a comprehensive Women’s Development Center at a university the church has established in Koforidua in the Eastern Region of Ghana; the SDA Church has provided financial assistance to the SDA Valley View University in Oyibi, near Accra; the Methodist Church has provided financial remittance to the main hospital in Wenchi, in the Brong Ahafo Region; and the Church of Pentecost has given financial support to sister-churches not only in Ghana, but also in Guyana, Brazil, and Guinea-Bissau.

In addition to the preceding functions, the Ghanaian immigrant churches serve as an important conduit not only for social status enhancement, especially among Ghanaian immigrant males, many of whom assume leadership roles, but also for ethnic (re)production and social capital formation among the Ghanaian community. The churches serve as the social and physical space in which many Ghanaians develop social network and transmit their Ghanaian cultural heritage, in terms of ethnic food, clothing, music, dance, language, and other cultural imaginaries and representations to their children. It is in the context of such cultural reproduction that the extensive use of Twi bibles and hymn books, native attires, Ghanaian flag, and musical instruments among the churches becomes commonsensical.

To enhance the participation of the second and subsequent generations of Ghanaians in these churches, all the congregations have active youth-specific ministries and programs, most of which include some combination of counseling, field trips, mentoring, tutorials, Ghanaian language/culture training, and sports programs. All the four churches indicated that the young people amongst them are actively engaged in their activities. It bears stressing, though, that when it comes to their dealings with the youth, the Ghanaian immigrant churches are invariably compelled to perform the balancing act of making themselves attractive to the youth, with the use of English in most youth ministries and programs, while at the same time promoting the Ghanaian heritage among the youth, with special language and cultural classes, sometimes in a native language.

A fairly similar dialectic plays out with regards to the Ghanaian immigrant churches’ *Janus-face* involvement in the integration of Ghanaians into Canadian society. With the provision of a wide range of social services, these churches help newcomers to adapt to life in Toronto. At the same

time these churches seem to promote ethnic differentiation and the formation of ethnic enclaves, albeit inadvertently, which undermine the integration of new immigrants into the broader Canadian society. Habermas, for one, notes in his *Religion and Rationality* that: “in an age of accelerating homogenization and simultaneous manufacturing of difference... religions are articulated as the last refuge of unadulterated difference, the last reservoir of cultural autonomy.”<sup>45</sup> While the responses of the four churches’ leadership to the pointed question of whether or not immigrant churches make it difficult for newcomers to integrate into the Canadian society were somewhat ambiguous, they all seem to acknowledge that immigrant churches weaken the integration process of immigrants, somewhat. This is how the leadership of the Methodist Church expressed this sentiment:

We understand to some extent that maintaining strong ties among church members of an ethnically homogeneous group will definitely make it difficult for our church members to expand their social network outside our ethnic group. However, our social and community outreach programs aim at bringing members closer to information networks so as to enable them establish networks with other ethnic groups.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, the leadership of the Church of Pentecost observed that: “It is mostly true, especially for the first generation immigrant. However, the second and subsequent generation immigrants tend to integrate well through education and other social programs.”<sup>47</sup> Before bringing the analysis to close, we, in the next section, subject our empirical findings to a more nuanced interpretation to enhance our understanding of the features and roles of migrant churches in diaspora.

## Discussion

So far we have shed some light on the features and functions of Ghanaian immigrant churches in the Toronto area, using *empirical* data from four churches. Among other things, we noted that even though Ghanaians have been in Toronto since the 1960s, it was not until the 1980s that they attained the critical mass of people to establish their own churches. The geneses of the four churches we studied were quite similar. For one thing, the foundations of all of them hinged, not so much on the desire for a ‘mis-

<sup>45</sup> Habermas 2002, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with the Methodist Church Leadership (November, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Interview with the Church of Pentecost Leadership (November, 2006).

sion reverse', as on attempts to find familiar spaces to worship in their own language and to reproduce their ethnicity. What are the implications of these empirical findings for our understanding of how Ghanaian immigrants use religion to maintain their cultural identity; to amplify their human and religious rights; and to facilitate their settlement in Canada? What could be said beyond the empirical data about whether migrant religion fosters cultural pluralism or just feeds into the formation of ethnic enclaves? Does migrant religion have significant negative undertones that need to be unearthed, or it has always been in the service of 'ultimate good,' and the formation of social capital? These are just few examples of the issues for which we need to go beyond the face-value of our empirical findings to shed some interpretative light upon.

The cold reception which often awaits immigrants of colour in Canadian churches is the immediate, if not the main, impetus for the establishment of independent churches among Ghanaians. While some may see the proliferation of African- or Ghanaian-led churches as evidence of tolerance in Canadian society, others, who are more cynical, may attribute the phenomenon to "even the more pressing need on the part of the majority to preserve *its* own identity," and therefore content to have minority groups segregate themselves into their respective churches.<sup>48</sup> The question to ponder is: Would these Ghanaians find it necessary to assert their cultural identity and human and religious rights through their churches, if they were accepted as simply Christians in Canada?

The irony of major Western democracies, including Canada, coexisting, in practice, with racism is now well-known.<sup>49</sup> This, together with what Richard Falk sees as "one of the great paradoxes of the progress of human right thinking," by which prominent Western nations somehow "believe that human rights are only relevant for other countries,"<sup>50</sup> underpins the racism so common in even reputable nations, including Canada. Perhaps more disturbing is the racial insensitivity exhibited by mainstream churches towards their ethnic Christian counterparts. As Gerrie ter Haar noted in her analysis of African Christians in Europe, conditioned by the missionary prejudice of the past and the legacies of slavery and colonialization, many contemporary mainstream churches see Africans only as people imbued with Black spirituality, and in need of both spiritual and material help, and

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<sup>48</sup> ter Haar 1998 (emphasis in original).

<sup>49</sup> Charles Mills 1997.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Falk 2000, p. 57.

not as people to learn from. Even so, wouldn't it be in the interest of true Christian teachings to reach out to these African Christians in a substantive way, rather than through the mere symbolism of joint music festivals and multicultural potlucks. This lack of acceptance comes as a shock to most Christian of African origin who immigrate to the West, pushing many to establish their own ethnic churches, and some to even renounce their Christian faith altogether.

In the interest of a balanced analysis, though, it is only fair to acknowledge that the immigrant churches themselves are not beyond reproach. Most, like the Ghanaian ones in our study, have some built-in power imbalances, regarding gender, class, citizenship status, immigrant generation, and even ethnicity – all of which call for critical deconstruction if these churches were to serve their diasporic communities better. Notwithstanding their positive contributions to the Ghanaian diasporic community, many of the churches are still engaged in some of the gender oppressions implicated in the Ghanaian traditional culture. As we saw, while women hold some leadership positions in the church, they generally play 'second fiddle' to men, and perform most of the activities associated with children's ministry, child care, cooking, and cleaning.<sup>51</sup>

A corollary of this power disparity concerns the problem of 'minorities within the minority.'<sup>52</sup> As we noted, most of the members of the Ghanaian congregations are Twi-speaking Akan. Thus, the non-Twi speaking members, as small as their numbers may be, in these churches have to submit to the cultural heritage of their Akan counterparts. For one thing, language classes for children and other cultural program are generally conducted in Twi. The difficult question in such a situation becomes: How large should the sub-minorities be, before they could expect some recognition of their rights? The same difficulty could be extended to the relationships between the youth and the adults; and the first generation members and their second or third generation counterparts. Who has the right to speak for the congregation as a whole, especially when it comes to its dealings with the broader Canadian society? Intra-group disparity in social class is yet another

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<sup>51</sup> An anecdote from a visit by the present author to one of the Sunday services of a church in the study would reinforce this gender bias. That week's announcement included an invitation for all men to come out on the coming Saturday for a general cleaning of the church and its grounds. Then to the author's utter surprise, a statement was added to the effect that 'as we all know, the men cannot clean the toilets; and that the women have agreed to do that for us.'

<sup>52</sup> For more on this basic human rights issue, see Gould 2004.

problem to contend with. This is especially the case with Ghanaian immigrant churches, given the high level of conspicuous consumption displayed by members of these churches during their weekly services, in terms of flamboyant clothing outfits, shoes, and jewelries, not to mention the subtle and not-so-subtle show of wealth through financial pledges and other ‘competitive’ fund-raising activities in the churches.

Whether immigrant churches foster or undermine the settlement and incorporation of immigrants is, arguably, the most dialectical, if not the thorniest, issue of all – hence the use of *Janus-face* to describe the matter earlier on. Evidently, the cold reception accorded many Africans in Canada feeds into the mushrooming of immigrant churches. Add to this, the promotion of multiculturalism in Canadian public policy and discourse – and the concomitant reification of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’, especially when dealing with matters concerning African immigrants – and one would appreciate the growing ethnocentrism and inward-looking tendencies among immigrant groups in Canada. Through various charity and community outreach activities, members of the Ghanaian immigrant churches are able to connect, socially, with other Canadians. Still, the general lack of interest in, and awareness of, Africans and their religious activities, has compelled many Ghanaians in Toronto to recoil into their ethnic enclaves/churches. Arguably, members of these Ghanaian churches function better in the broader Canadian society, than they would otherwise do, because of the social capital and the religious and material support they get from these churches. At the same time, these churches increase the social isolation of their members from the broader Canadian society, by accentuating their self-reliance (as a group) and, implicitly, reducing their social participation outside of the Ghanaian diasporic community – there lies the difficult dialectics of the immigrant church vis-à-vis immigrants’ incorporation.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown how Ghanaians in Toronto use their churches not only for spiritual support, but also for the formation of social capital and the reproduction of their cultural identity. The four churches studied exhibited some commonalities, not the least of which are the higher proportion of women among their congregations; the preponderance of the ‘prosperity gospel’ and other socially-relevant themes in their preaching; their preferences for Afro-pop music and dance; and their reliance on small groups or ‘cells’ for scheduling flexibility among their members. The social

services provided by the churches are not much different, either. At the same time, there were some noteworthy differences among the churches, most of which were attributable, at least in part, to the variations in their congregation sizes, religious doctrines, organizational structure, and their ecumenical and transnational ties with cognate churches in Ghana and elsewhere. Of all the churches studied, the All Nations Full Gospel seems to be the one making the most effort to insert itself into the international religious map, with an extensive use of electronic mediated networking strategies and multi-ethnic, multinational membership. Overall the Ghanaian immigrant churches place discernable emphasis on their social services and, despite, or as a consequence of, their socio-economic and spatial marginalization, their members have managed to reproduce their identity and garner material, emotional, and spiritual support through the churches.

The implications of our empirical findings for our understanding of the roles of immigrant churches in fostering immigrant integration, in promoting cultural pluralism, and in negotiating the internal power imbalances, regarding class, gender, and ethnicity have been explored, to some extent. There are still some pertinent questions crying out loud for future research. For instance: Are there any cross-cultural transfers of religious practices and rituals between Ghanaian immigrant churches and the mainstream churches in Canada? And if so, what are the mechanisms of these transfers? Similarly, what is the nature of such transfers, if any, between the Ghanaian immigrant churches and their cognates back home? Considering that immigrant churches and many other government agencies (and non-governmental organizations) share a common goal of facilitating the settlement of immigrants, to what extent can these entities work together in pursuance of this goal, without infringing upon the usual separation of church from State? Given that the visible minority immigrant population in Canada is expected to grow in the future, it is about time policy makers and social scientists began to show more interest in immigrant churches – arguably, the most dominant, well-organized, and stable institution among many immigrant communities.

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