Growth of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion): fishing for converts, but are there holes in the net?

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the emerging debate and revaluation of the growth and membership of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion). Building on literature which has shown that the Church is unlikely to have nearly the membership of more than 18 million that it usually claims, this paper considers evidence of conversion to and defection from Anglican identification in Nigeria. The analysis uses data from the Pew Research Centre Tolerance and Conflict survey (2010), the only high quality nationally representative survey that asks about religious identification in which the respondent was raised and their current identification. It examines converts to Anglican identities in Nigeria, as well as the adopted identities of those who leave Anglicanism behind them. The study finds evidence of a net loss, primarily to Pentecostalism. This lends added weight to the argument that the growth of the Church of Nigeria in the past few decades has been primarily through natural increase (surplus of births over deaths) and not from converts, which are a net loss to the church.

Much has been made of Philip Jenkins' (2011) trope of the southward shift in the centre of gravity of global Christianity. While Jenkin's metaphor is, on balance, a good one, it has encouraged some over-generalisation. Particular cases have on occasion been seen in terms of the metaphor without sufficient nuance, and commentators often conflate proportional growth of religious change with the absolute growth of demographic change. While the numerical decline of Anglicanism in the global north has been very well documented (cf Davie 2014; Voas 2017), claims about the numerical strength of Anglicanism in sub-Saharan Africa general, and Nigeria in particular, have more often been the product of assertions and assumptions than of systematic examination of sound data sources.

The numerical strength of Anglicanism in Nigeria is often claimed, both by Nigerian church leaders, and by Anglican conservatives elsewhere, as evidence that growth in converts comes from its commitment to 'biblical orthodoxy' for which a conservative position on homosexuality has, for several decades, been the litmus test. By contrast the declining membership of The Church of England, The Episcopal Churches of Scotland and America, and the Anglican Church of Canada are taken as the fruit of 'liberalism' (Britain and McKinnon 2018). The church regularly claims for itself a membership of more than 18 million members, making it the largest province in the Anglican Communion. Extrapolating from these claims, the compilers of the World Christian Database go further and estimate that there were 22 million members in 2015 (Johnson and Zurlo 2020: 593). Advocates of 'biblical orthodoxy' in the west often take The Church of Nigeria as a successful example for Anglicans abroad to uphold. Leaders of the Church of Nigeria have also appeared keen to take on the mantle of leadership for the conservative Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON) and the global "Anglican Realignment" (McKinnon and Brittain 2021), and to be seen as a leading voice of Christianity in Nigeria. The analysis presented here suggests that, insofar as those arguments rest on the church's growth by attracting converts, Nigeria may not be quite the successful model its advocates claim.

Literature Review

Recently the church of Nigeria's membership claims and the scholarly reception of them has been subject to reassessment and an emerging debate (Muñoz 2016; Goodhew 2017; McKinnon 2020).

Daniel Muñoz (2016) first highlighted the need for reconsideration of the assumed size of Church of Nigeria membership as part of his examination of the changing global centre of gravity of the Anglican Communion. While Muñoz did not dispute the church's claims to have more than 18 million members, he did offer evidence from a range of data sources that regular participants, a group he calls the 'inner circle of membership,' is just a fraction of this, at just over 1.1 million people (86). Unsatisfied with some of the methodology in Muñoz study, in an earlier paper I came at the question from a different angle (McKinnon 2020). I did not consider membership or participation of the Anglican populations of five sub-Saharan African countries, of which Nigeria was one. Instead, I used statistically representative surveys to estimate the proportion of the national population that identify themselves as Anglican. This research used all of the high-quality survey data that was available for considering the question: rounds 4 through 6 of the Afrobarometer survey, and the data from the Pew Research Centre's Tolerance and Tension project (Lugo and Cooperman 2010). All four surveys had between 3.1% and 5.3% of the population identifying as Anglican; taking a weighted average, I estimated that 4% of the Nigerian population identified as Anglican (7.6 million people in 2015).

In earlier work (McKinnon 2020) I accepted the WCD estimate for the proportion of Anglicans who identify as Anglican in 1970 (5.2% of the population). On that basis, I assumed that the growth of the Church of Nigeria had likely more or less kept pace with population growth, neither gaining nor losing 'market share' over the last half-century. The present analysis re-examines that assumption, considering if it may have been overly optimistic. While it is likely impossible to re-evaluate the number of Nigerian Anglicans for 1970s retrospectively, one of the surveys employed in the earlier analysis can used to consider growth or decline, even if it can only provide a rough indicator.

Data and Method

The consideration of proportional church growth or decline is made much more difficult in the context of explosive population growth across the sub-continent. Scholarly consideration of the question has also been hindered by a lack of census data, and a difficult environment for conducting nationally representative surveys (Jerven 2013). Where surveys have been conducted to high professional standards, they have often not often included the necessary variables that allow estimates of the size of religious denominations, let alone to assess change over time. The Pew Research Centre Tolerance and Conflict study (2010) is the only available survey that allows an examination of the difference between the religion in which respondents report having been raised, and how they understand their religious identity at the time of the survey to the level of religious denomination. These two variables permit us to examine the relative growth and decline of Anglican identities, holding constant the absolute growth that comes from natural population increase. By analysing movement both into and out of Anglican identities, we are able to look at losses to other religious groups as well as converts to Anglicanism from other religious identifications; we are also able to gain a purchase on the big picture, which gives indication of relative decline.

The Pew Research Centre's project on Islam and Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa (Pew Forum 2010; Lugo and Cooperman 2010) conducted nationally representative surveys in 19 countries across sub-Saharan Africa with a view to examining relations between Muslims and Christians. Princeton Survey Research Associates International conducted face-to-face surveys with non-institutionalised respondents over the age of 18 selected by means of a stratified random sample (Lugo and Cooperman 2010: 65). Standard weights supplied with the dataset were applied, though analyses also checked unweighted data, and the weightings make little substantive difference to the findings presented and none to their statistical significance.

Working from information provided by each respondent about themselves, we can gain a rough picture of religious switching, including where new Anglicans are coming from (what was the religious tradition of their upbringing), and where those who are leaving are going. We are able to calculate growth or decline by cross-tabulating those who report being raised as Anglicans with those who report identifying as Anglican at the time of the survey in 2008. This is an admittedly somewhat crude indicator, and it is unfortunate that more recent data is not available. This is the only nationally

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representative survey that asks respondents about both present and childhood religious identification at the denominational level, allowing an analysis of conversion as a factor in church growth and decline in Nigeria. Some caution also needs to be exercised because of the small number of Anglicans in the study (82 raised as Anglican, 67 currently identifying as Anglican). This is, however, an inevitable challenge with studying any religious group that makes up only a small proportion of the population without oversampling when the survey is fielded. Given the representative sample, however, the results are reliable, and the small number of Anglicans does not affect credibility of the overall findings.

The data will allow consideration of change over the life-course of respondents to the date at which they respond to the survey, but does not allow the analysis to pinpoint the time at which the change of reported identity occurs. Therefore, the data allows for the determination of percentage increase or decrease, but without any precision over what time-period that change has taken place (except in the roughest possible terms, given the age of the respondent at the time of the survey). Given the small proportion of Anglicans in the Nigerian sample, a more fine-grained analysis than is provided here is not possible.

The survey asks about religious identity using a two-step process. Respondents are asked 'What is your present religion, if any?'; those who answer that they are Christian, are then probed what 'denomination or church, if any, [they] identify with most closely.' (A parallel question is asked of those who identify as Muslim, but we do not deal with differences among Muslims here). The two variables were combined here to allow us to consider Muslims and Traditional worshippers and no religion alongside the various Christian religious identifications. Consistent with the secondary literature showing stability of religious blocks in Nigeria, where changing fortunes of these blocks is driven above all by differential rates of natural increase (McKinnon 2021), in this sample there are no individuals who have switched between Anglicanism and either Islam or traditional worship (which is in any case a very small proportion of the population). The survey instrument was originally designed to collect secondary identifications, recognising that religious commitments are more likely to be multiple in sub-Saharan Africa compared with the West. Very few respondents provided secondary identifications; the Pew Research centre dropped this question across all of the national surveys due to

problems with analytic viability and concerns over respondents' confidentiality. The survey questions about religious identification can only be taken as indicators of a respondent's primary religious identification.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents frequencies for two variables with current religious identification and childhood religion. The table shows a small decline (1%) between respondents who report being raised as Anglicans (5.4%) relative to those who currently identify as Anglican (4.4%). With a 99% confidence interval of 1.4% we can be relatively certain that this represents a very good ballpark estimate of the current proportion of Anglicans in Nigeria. The overall figure of current affiliation is remarkably consistent with results from the four waves of the Afro-barometer analysed by McKinnon (2020). We can be much less certain on the basis of the frequencies of these two variables alone that we can be sure that we are seeing a decline in the proportion of Anglicans in the population. We will test the statistical significance of the change when we look at a crosstabulation of the two variables in table 3, below.

[table 1 about here]

Looking at the other categories of religious identity that appear in table 1, we also note substantial growth of Pentecostalism. If we compare those who now identify primarily as Pentecostal (12.2%) with those who report having been raised Pentecostal (7.3%), we note an increase amounting to 5% of the total population of Nigeria. This is the only category of religious identity to show much growth due to switching over the lifespan of the respondents. We will surmise that Pentecostal gains have come above all from Anglicans (down 1%) and Catholics (down 3%), combined with very small gains made from picking up adherents from elsewhere, as there are no other categories that have experienced much by way of losses from which they could have come. Despite the well-known dynamism of what we might refer the Nigeria religious field (Marshall 2009), the groupings themselves appear to be remarkably stable. We cannot know from these frequencies how much flows

between the categories has produced the stable outcomes, however, or the extent to which different categories are gaining some as well as losing others at the same time.

Table 2 provides a first look at the intersection of the religious denomination in which the respondent was raised cross-tabulated with present religious identification. Given that it shows all religious switching, and that the table contains a large number of empty cells, it is unsuitable for testing the significance of relationships observed. The statistical significance of change in Anglican identification will be calculated and considered below. Table 2 does, however, give a useful overview of movement into and out of all of the religious categories as presented on the table.

[table 2 about here]

With respect to Anglicanism, the first thing to note is that, of those who were raised as Anglicans, 70% still identify as Anglican at the time of the survey. Interestingly, (and consistent with the literature) there are is no observable movement between Anglicanism and the categories of African Initiated Churches (AICs), Islam or traditional religion. In other words, there are no respondents who currently identify as Anglican who report being raised in AICS, as Muslims or as Traditional worshippers. Likewise, there are no respondents who currently identify with AICs, as Muslim or Traditional worshippers who report having been raised as Anglican. Of course this is not to say that there are no defectors to, or converts from, these traditions, only that the numbers are proportionately very small, such that none appear in the sample. While there is no observable movement from those whose childhood religion is reported as other/don't know/refused to Anglicanism, there is a small amount of movement in the other direction; 4% of those who were raised as Anglican now fall into this ill-defined non-category of non-religion.

Consistent with accounts of qualitative research with Anglican leaders across sub-Saharan Africa (Brittain and McKinnon 2018) the biggest outflow of those raised as Anglicans to another tradition is converts to Pentecostalism, representing almost 20% of those raised as Anglicans. Conversely, only 2% of those that report being raised as Pentecostal currently identify as Anglican. The flows to and from Catholicism are much more closely balanced. Of those raised Anglican, 4 (5%)

have converted Catholicism; conversely, and 4 (2%) individuals in the sample who were raised as Roman Catholics have adopted Anglican identities. Only 1% of those raised as Anglican have joined other Protestant groups, and of those who currently identify as Anglican, 3% were raised in other Protestant Churches.

The relationships in Table 2 cannot be meaningfully subjected to tests of statistical significance, and need to be treated with caution, for three reasons. First empty cells interfere with the calculation of tests of statistical significance, such as the Chi-squared test. If we collapse the categories into a table with anything more than 2x2 dimensions, we would end up with multiple cells with expected frequencies of less than 5, which would still be problematic. Second, in a test of significance based on table 2, all of the categories would contribute to the test of a statistically significant relationship. In this paper, we are not interested in the relationship between all of the categories of the variables, but only in the effect of converts to and apostates from Anglican identity. Finally, we are not interested in the correlation between the religious tradition in which a respondent is raised with their current religious identity. We know these are highly associated. What we need is a test of significance not based on the independence of the variables, but rather the difference between two states of the same phenomena--in this case, religious identification at two different time period. McNemar's test is the most appropriate test of significance for this purpose, and it assumes two dichotomous variables.

Since we are primarily interested in the statistical significance of conversions to and defections from Anglicanism, a two by two table will suffice. This allows us to avoid the problem of small and/or empty cells, and also allows us to test the relationship using McNemar's test, which requires a 2x2 table (Agresti 2012: 415). We can also calculate confidence intervals for the difference in proportions of defections from, and conversions to, Anglicanism. McNemar's test is sometimes, not entirely accurately, referred to as a within-subjects Chi-square test. While the test uses the chi-squared values for one degree of freedom to establish a p value, unlike a chi-squared test, which tests for independence of two variables, McNemar's test considers the consistency of proportions across two cross-tabulated dichotomous variables. The test has been more widely used in biomedical research,

but a number of studies have demonstrated the utility of McNemar's test for social scientific research. For example, McCarthy and Hagan (1991) used McNemar's test to compare the likelihood of homeless youth having committed crimes before or after leaving home; Klaassen and Peter used McNemar's test to compare inter-rater reliability in a content analysis of gender stereotypes in online pornography (2015); and Uggen and colleagues used McNemar's test for a study of prejudice against job applicants with very minor criminal records in a matched-pair study (Uggen et al 2014).

McNemar's test is particularly appropriate here, given that we are trying to assess the extent of adoption or rejection of Anglican identities between childhood and the time of the survey. The high level of correlation between Anglican identity at childhood and at the time of the survey is of interest only as a baseline. Thus cells of concordant pairs are of less theoretical interest than the discordant pairs, which here are converts to, or defectors from, Anglican identity. McNemar's test and confidence were both calculated in R; McNemar's test was used without correction, which is unnecessary for a large sample. Confidence intervals were calculated using the equation provided by Agresti (2012: 414), with R coding from Thompson (2009; see appendix A).

[Table 3 about here]

Table 3 shows, the proportion of Nigerians who are not and have never been Anglican in cell A (94%), and those who were raised Anglican and currently report identifying as Anglican in cell D (3.7%). Those who were raised Anglican, but now report identifying as something else appear in cell B (1.6%); those who were not raised as Anglican, but now report identifying as Anglican appear in cell C (0.5%).

In proportional terms, Anglicans are losing ground relative to other religious groups, predominantly, as we saw in table 2, to Pentecostalism. The results of the two by two table are statistically significant; with McNemar's chi-squared value of 6.8182 on 1 degree of freedom, the p-value is .0009. This provides a very high degree of certainty that the data represents a real loss of Anglican identification in Nigeria, with less than 1 chance in a thousand that the result is the product of random error.

The confidence interval for the change in proportions on the two by two table used for a McNemar test (Agresti 2012; Thompson 2008) gives us an estimate of the likely extent of net defection from identification with the Anglican Church of Nigeria. We can be 95% confident that the net loss has been between 1.7% and 0.2% of the total population of Nigeria (not only of the population of Anglicans in Nigeria). This is a small change in percentage terms, though given the estimated size of the population of Nigeria, it amounts to a considerable number of people. Expressed in terms of the estimated population of the country in 2008 (United Nations Population Division 2019), this amounts a net of between 2,588,957 defectors from Anglican identities at the upper end, and 374,527 at the lower end.

While the Pew Forum survey provides the best available data for assessing the proportional decline of Anglican identification in Nigeria, it is not without its limitations. While the small proportion of Anglicans and the standard national sample size means that an analysis would not be able to make good use of more sophisticated measures, the questions nevertheless impose fairly strict limits on what we can know about the scope of the change. While we know how many switched with a fairly good degree accuracy, we cannot know on the basis of this data, when they switched.. We can only say that the proportional decline in the number of Anglicans has occurred over the lifetime of the respondents at some point after they turned 18. Thus, we are unable to use the data here to calculate an overall annual rate of proportional decline (or compare it to the rate of natural increase); we are also unable to predict future change, even if the overall proportional downward trajectory is clearly in evidence.

Conclusion

Our analysis does not address active participation in the church, but the rather more passive identification with the church, and not all who identify with the church will participate in it. There is little question that identification with the Church of Nigeria is growing in terms of absolute numbers. The data analysed here also makes it clear that where there is growth, it is not coming from a surplus of conversions over defections, but from natural increase (more births than deaths) among Anglicans,

as in the general population. Unless Anglicans are having substantially more children than on average –which is highly unlikely, given the falling birthrate among all those who identify as Christian in Nigeria (McKinnon 2021)—this will mean that the church is growing at a slower rate than the population as a whole. Given the rate of population increase, this still means that every year there will be many more Anglicans in Nigeria than there were the year before. But it seems certain that, assuming the trajectory evident in the year of the survey, year on year there this increase has been dwarfed by the number of Pentecostals, who are growing both by natural increase, benefitting from their competition with other Christian churches (as shown here, with Anglicanism). On the evidence presented here, those who claim that 'biblical orthodoxy' is a recipe for growth from converts, would be best advised not to hold up The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) as a case that proves their point.

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Appendix A: R script for table 3 with McNemar and 95% confidence intervals[1]

Anglican

  <-matrix(c(1432, 9, 24, 57),

     nrow = 2,

     dimnames = list("Identify now" = c("Other", "Anglican"),

          "raised" = c("Other", "Anglican")))

Anglican

mcnemar.test(Anglican, correct=FALSE)

Anglican.prop<-prop.table(Anglican)

Anglican.prop

prop.diff<-margin.table(Anglican.prop, 2) [1] -margin.table(Anglican.prop,1) [1]

off.diag<-diag(Anglican.prop [1:2, 2:1])

prop.diff + c(-1,1)*qnorm(.975)*sqrt((sum(off.diag -diff(off.diag)^2) / sum(Anglican)))

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[1] Drawing Thomson (2009) for confidence intervals.

Table 1: Frequencies for childhood religion and current religious identification in Nigeria

	childhood religion		**current religion**	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Anglican	82	5.4	67	4.4
Pentecostal	111	7.3	186	12.2
Catholic	309	20.3	260	17.0
Other Protestant	93	6.1	95	6.2
AIC	57	3.7	54	3.6
Muslim	799	52.5	802	52.4
Traditionalist	20	1.3	14	0.9
Other/DK/none	51	3.4	52	3.4
Total	1523	100.0	1531	100.0

Religious denomination

Source: Pew Research Centre. 2010. Tolerance and Tension. Publicly available machine readable data file.

Table 2: Childhood Religious Identification by Current Religious Identification for Nigeria

Current Religious Identification

	Anglican	Pentecostal	Catholic	Other Protestant	African Initiated (AIC)	Muslim	Traditional	Other DK None	(N)
Anglican	70%	20%	5%	1%	0%	0%	0%	4%	(81)
Pentecostal	2%	84%	6%	4%	1%	0%	0%	3%	(112)
Catholic	2%	16%	76%	3%	1%	1%	0%	2%	(309)
Other Protestant	2%	17%	1%	69%	1%	9%	0%	1%	(94)
African Initiated (AIC)	0%	11%	0%	4%	77%	4%	0%	5%	(57)
Muslim	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	97%	0%	1%	(798)
Traditional	0%	0%	29%	5%	0%	10%	57%	0%	(21)
Other/DK/None	0%	6%	8%	23%	6%	8%	0%	51%	(53)

Childhood Religious Identification

Source: Pew Research Centre. 2010. Tolerance and Tension. Publicly available machine-readable data file.

TABLE 3: PROPORTION OF CURRENT ANGLICAN IDENTIFIED BY RAISED ANGLICAN

		CHILDHOOD RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION		
N. = 1522		Other	Anglican	Total
CURRENT RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION	Other	0.9409	0.0158	0.9566
	Anglican	0.0059	0.0375	0.0434
	Total	0.9468	0.0532	1.0000

McNemar's chi-squared = 6.8182, df = 1, p-value = 0.009023 (two tailed)

95% confidence interval   -0.017219832   -0.002491075

Source: Pew Research Centre. 2010. Tolerance and Tension. Publicly available machine-readable data file. R script for calculation of McNemar and Confidence intervals is included in Appendix A