Chapter 10

Pentecostalising the Church of Scotland?
The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) and the Pentecostal Challenge in Kenya (1970–2010)

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Introduction

Over the last couple of years, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) has undergone significant changes within its internal structures and has witnessed important transformations, such as waves of Pentecostalization that have swept across most former mission churches in Kenya and other parts of the African continent (Parsitau 2007). These challenges have been brought about by the appeal of Pentecostal and charismatic groups for its members—especially, for the young. To curtail the drift of its youthful members to Pentecostal churches, the PCEA church embraced Pentecostal spirituality and its ethos as a survival strategy. This was taken a notch higher by its former moderator, Rev. Dr David Gathii who transformed the Presbyterian Church tremendously along Pentecostal lines, changed its century-old logo, went about demolishing century-old buildings claiming that they were demonic, and changed the church’s liturgy and mode of worship. These measures have created tremendous tensions within the PCEA as it struggles to achieve a delicate balance between inherited tradition and identity, on the one hand, and the need for self-preservation in the face of tremendous pressure to Pentecostalize and retain youthful members, on the other hand. This chapter examines these changes in the PCEA but first, I shall offer a brief historical examination of the former Church of Scotland as a background for appreciating the immensity of this challenge.

The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) in Historical Perspective

The PCEA is a large mainline protestant church in Kenya. It is an offspring of western mission initiatives from North American Presbyterianism and Scottish Presbyterianism. As a result of twentieth century historical mission dynamics, a vast majority of PCEA members are from the Kikuyu ethnic community, the largest, and perhaps most prosperous, enterprising ethnic group in Kenya.
The PCEA church itself boasts of a membership of over 4.3 millions and an annual growth rate estimated at about 5 percent. This means that about 12 percent of Kenyans are believed to be members of this huge religious giant. Yet, Kenyan Presbyterianism despite having North American roots appears to have borrowed heavily from Scottish Presbyterianism than American Presbyterianism.

The PCEA grew out of the work of Scottish missionaries from the Church of Scotland who arrived in Kenya in 1891. These missionaries had arrived from South Africa, where they had founded the Lovedale Mission, led by Rev. Dr James Stewart. In Kenya they first settled at Kibwezi, some 250 km from Mombassa, where they established a mission station called the East Africa Scottish Mission. In 1892, the first temporary church at Kibwezi was opened by Dr James Stewart, who also started the first school, with two pupils. In 1893 mission work was strengthened by the arrival of John Paterson, who introduced western agriculture and the first coffee seeds to the country. But owing to ambiguity of malaria at Kibwezi, and the danger posed by wild animals—resulting in the deaths of a number of missionaries—in 1894, these missionaries led by a Mr Thomson Watson went to Dagoreti, on the outskirts of Nairobi, to explore the feasibility of transferring the mission station to a less-threatening and safer environment. Consequently, the missionaries moved in 1898 from Kibwezi to Dagoretti, where they constituted themselves as the Church of Scotland Mission (CMS) and established the famous Church of the Torch (Thogoto, in Kikuyu).

In 1898 the church pitched camp at Kikuyu and began to spread the Gospel and convert locals to Christianity. It was from Kikuyu that the church spread to Nyeri (Tumu Tumu), Murang’a, and Kiambu. It is also within this period that the Church of Scotland introduced formal education and provision of healthcare for locals, leading to the establishment of Kikuyu Mission Hospital in 1908. In 1920, by the authority of the 1918 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, a form of church government was set up and inaugurated by the Very

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3. Unable to pronounce the word Scotland, the Kikuyu corrupted the word to Thogoto, as it is presently known.
4. Tumu Tumu situated in Nyeri on the slopes of Mt. Kenya and is regarded as the cradle of civilization by many Presbyterians as it was the place where Scottish Missionaries (Dr Ruffle Scott and Dr Arthur) planted the seeds of Christianity in the Mt. Kenya region, the home of the Kikuyu, the largest ethnic group in Kenya.