

# The Experience of the Church with MCP: The Evangelical Perspective

Bishop Joshua HK Banda  
Northmead Assembly of God Church, Zambia

## Historical Evolution- Who is an Evangelical?

In his seminal publication, Al Tizon (2008) aptly highlights the Greek linguistic root of the term *evangelical* as one that “simply refers to someone who believes the *euangelion*.”<sup>1</sup> And, citing Orlando Costas, Tizon (1986) adds that an evangelical is one who has a “burning passion for the communication of the Gospel.”<sup>2</sup> Taking into account the fairly eventful and sometimes complex historical progression of the evangelical movement, Tizon clarifies as follows:

The term came into historical prominence during the Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther, who first used it to describe ‘all Christians who believed the Gospel was the basis of salvation by grace’.<sup>3</sup> To be evangelical meant affirming the classical Reformation leitmotifs of the *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*. By implication, it also meant rejecting Roman Catholicism as ‘evangelical’ became the label for those who protested against the abuses of the church in Rome.

Although similar to David Bebbington’s “quadrilateral of priorities of Evangelicalism”<sup>4</sup> and basic description of evangelicalism as the “Protestant Christian theological stream which began in Great Britain in the 1730s,”<sup>5</sup> Al Tizon however, summarizes more plainly the “identity marks” of evangelicals as:

1. The desire to maintain the fidelity of the Bible
2. The belief that God in Christ is accessible by faith alone, which results in salvation
3. The goal to lead a holy, moral, disciplined life as a result of that salvation
4. The passion to share the good news with every one everywhere, and
5. A critical posture towards any version of the Christian faith that may be perceived to be unbiblical, impersonal, powerless over sin and lacking in missionary zeal.

## Evangelicals in the Context of HIV and AIDS Prevention Efforts in Zambia

---

<sup>1</sup> Tizon, A. (2008). *Transformation after Lausanne: Radical evangelical mission in global-local perspective*. Oxford: Regnum Books International.

<sup>2</sup> Tizon, A. (1986). Evangelical theology in the two thirds world. In Branson, M.L. & Padilla, C. R. (Eds), *Conflict and context: Hermeneutics in the Americas* (pp. 312). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

<sup>3</sup> Wickeri, P. L., Tizon, A. & Yim, H. M. (2000). A survey of evangelical missiological concerns with particular reference to Asia. In Wickeri, P.L. (Ed.). *The people of God among all God’s people* (pp.291). London: Council of World Mission.

<sup>4</sup> *Biblicism*: a particular regard for the Bible (e.g. all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages); *Crucicentrism*: a focus on the atoning work of Christ on the cross; *Conversionism*: the belief that human beings need to be converted; *Activism*: the belief that the Gospel needs to be expressed in effort.

<sup>5</sup> Bebbington, D.W. (1989). *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: A history from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Noll, M.A. (2003). *The Rise of evangelicalism: The age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.

The official fraternal umbrella body under which evangelicals are organized in Zambia is the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ) which has been in existence for a little over 45 years. Its membership spans hundreds of affiliate church denominations, independent ministries and faith-based organizations. The EFZ secretariat is led by an Executive Director who coordinates its various ministry outreaches and developmental projects and ultimately reports to an elective board. Through its Development Committee which at the time of the publication of this article I am privileged to chair, the EFZ has undertaken massive developmental projects generally and significant HIV prevention interventions in particular.

Most of the HIV interventions have been implemented through EFZ's member churches and organizations. However, specific programmatic steps aimed at tackling MCPs have only emerged more steadily in the last few years. I have often encapsulated a snapshot of the evolving progression of the evangelical response to HIV and AIDS in general by tabulating it under three distinct phases:

- The “early days” of HIV and AIDS in Zambia (1984 -1990) when the Church response was somewhat sporadic and incidental and largely confined to its health and educational institutions;
- The awakening of a “latent conscience” (1991-2000) when awareness began to grow following increasing calls for greater involvement of faith-based institutions in specific HIV and ADS interventions; and
- The constructive engagement of Church congregations (2001- Present).

## **A Closer look at MCPs**

### ***Definition***

Multiple concurrent partnerships can be defined as having two or more sexual partnerships that overlap in time. Such sexual relationships can accelerate the transmission of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, in a population. They are regarded as the *key drivers* behind the generalized epidemic in Africa.

### ***Sexual Partner Reduction***

Epidemiological modelling suggests that even a relatively small reduction in MCPs would break up extensive sexual networks and could significantly slow the spread of HIV in the sexually active population. Various research findings have shown that having concurrent partners greatly increases HIV transmission compared to sequential or serial partnerships because new infections can spread much more rapidly through the sexual network when its members are simultaneously connected.

Therefore, the ultimate goal of all HIV prevention initiatives must be to reduce HIV incidence. To maximize prevention outcomes around MCPs, the following two outcomes need to be prioritized:

- A reduction in multiple and concurrent partnerships through social and behavioural change; and
- A reduction in the transmission of HIV within multiple and concurrent partnerships as well as within known discordant relationships, including through consistent correct use of

male or female condoms. The range of prioritized measures must also include male circumcision along with HIV testing and treatment adherence.

### ***MCPs in Zambia***

The Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS, 2007) revealed that 2 % of women and 20% of men between 15 and 49 reported having sex with two or more partners in the 12 months preceding the survey. Additionally, 17% of women and 38% of men surveyed reported that they had had sex in the previous 12 months with someone other than their spouse. The following figures illustrate the distribution of the said activities in most parts of the country:

### ***Percentage of Men and Women with Multiple Sexual Partners in Past 12 mos.***

<b>Province</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Lusaka	25.1 %	1.5%
Northwestern	24.4%	3.1%
Northern	10.1%	0.01%
Southern	31.4%	0.8%
Eastern	25%	1.2%
Copperbelt	14.9%	2.5%
Western	24.3%	4.1%

*Source: ZDHS Preliminary Report 2007*

### **Zambia qualitative survey Findings- Calendar Data Results**

<b>Percentage of partnership types by gender</b>			
<b>PARTNERSHIP TYPE</b>	<b>MALE (N=122)</b>	<b>FEMALE (N=162)</b>	<b>TOTAL (N=282)*</b>
Concurrent within calendar month	21.30%	29.26%	26.61%
Concurrent within 21 days	71.94%	46.30%	59.60%
Concurrent within 60 days	77.44%	48.77%	61.60%
Overlapping Concurrency	81.92%	66.00%	77.29%

*\*information missing for 6 participants*

*Concurrency in Zambia 2010*

## Reasons for MCP in Zambia

CODE	ALL (N= 136)	MALE (N= 63)	FEMALE (N= 76)
Faithful_Non-Sex	47 (35%)	19 (30%)	28 (37%)
Backup	14 (10%)	8 (13%)	6 (8%)
Dissatisfaction	26 (19%)	13 (21%)	13 (17%)
Greedy-Sex	19 (14%)	15 (24%)	4 (5%)
Revenge Gossip	19 (14%)	1 (2%)	17 (23%)
Alcohol	26 (19%)	12 (19%)	14 (19%)
Influence	35 (26%)	24 (38%)	11 (15%)
Mobile	42 (31%)	24 (38%)	20 (26%)
Money	70 (51%)	19 (30%)	51 (67%)
Struggle	31 (23%)	3 (5%)	28 (37%)
Sexual-Violence	15 (11%)	3 (5%)	12 (16%)
Trans-Sex	46 (34%)	33 (52%)	35 (46%)

*Concurrency in Zambia 2010*

### Conclusions from these Data

It is observable that overlapping concurrency is prevalent. In this case, the situation amounts to the startling finding that about half of the people talked to in the one on one interviews had had overlapping concurrent relationships in the 12 months preceding the survey. Notable also is the fact that concurrency is higher for men than women. It is further noted that people who had had more than one sexual partner in the 12 months prior to the survey tended to have concurrent, rather than sequential, partners.

Other significant conclusions are that people perceived “being faithful” to mean being supportive and respectful, while it was also perceived that a person could have other sex partners and still behave in a faithful way toward each partner. Quite prominent as well was the perceived importance of maintaining one’s respect and household.

In terms of reasons advanced for concurrency, money was described as a factor in people having more than one sex partner. Other reasons ranged from “struggle” (i.e. difficulty in satisfying basic needs) to desires for material goods as well as transactional sex. Alcohol consumption was cited as a contributing factor to multiple partnerships and higher risk sexual activity (e.g. no condom usage).

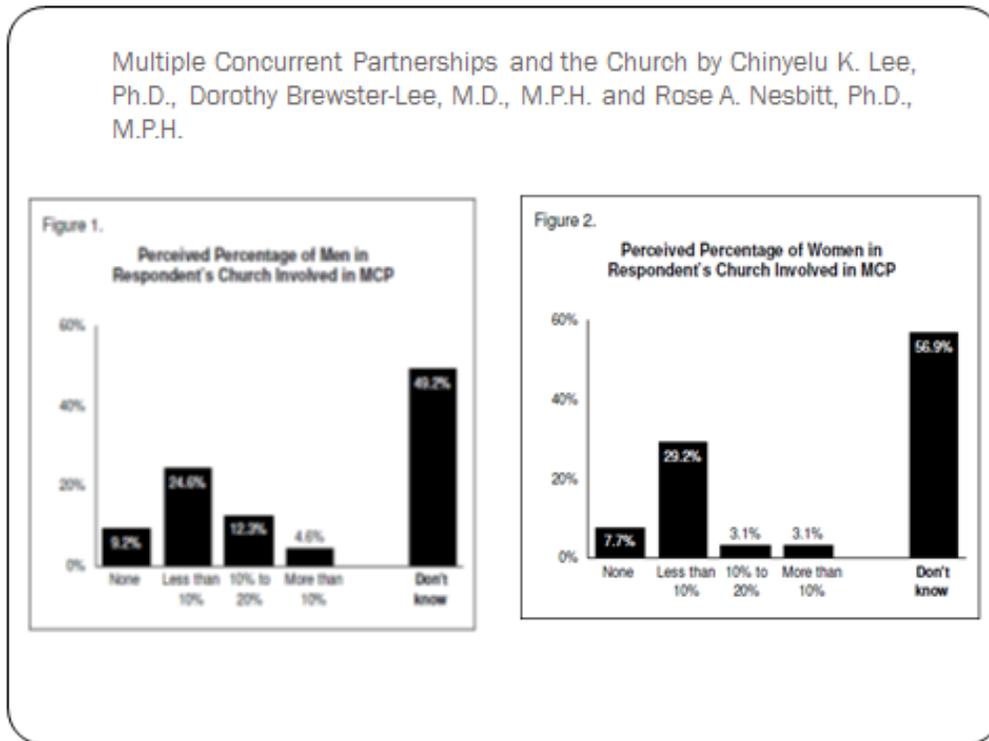
### MCPs and Evangelicals

The case of evangelicals in respect to MCPs is somewhat of an understudied arena. However, a report by Lee, Brewster and Nesbitt (2009) which collected data from religious leaders and faith-based organizations in western, southern, and eastern Africa as well as across denominations found that evangelicals were less likely to perceive MCPs as a problem within their congregations. The report holds that most of those surveyed tended to explain MCPs by drawing on gender stereotypes, saying that women participated in such partnerships for economic reasons

while men's "natural and social impulses" drove them to seek multiple partners.<sup>6</sup> While the researchers in this report recommended that more research be done to ascertain the level and effectiveness of MCP programming within the religious sector, they specifically registered, among other findings, the following:

Members of evangelical churches were significantly more likely than those from other faiths to report that MCPs were not a major problem in their congregations, with more than half reporting that less than 10% of men and women engaged in MCPs. They also estimated that slightly more men may be engaging in MCPs than women. According to the report, these figures were similar for those who, although not evangelical, reported attending or holding church services multiple times a week.

The tables below illustrate further the related findings:



<sup>6</sup> Lee, C. K., Brewster, D. & Nesbitt, R. A. (2009). *Multiple concurrent partnerships and the church: Assessing the attitudes and perceptions of community leaders of faith*. Kampala, Uganda: PACANet.

Table 6.

**Presence of Church Activities that Address MCP**

	<i>Church leaders speak about MCP in my congregation.</i>	<i>I received premarital counseling from church</i>	<i>Church premarital counseling effectively addressed extramarital relationships</i>	<i>I have attended a training on faithfulness in marriage.</i>
<b>Total</b>	41.5%	54.7%	39.6%	37.7%
<b>Male</b>	33.3%*	51.3%	35.9%	33.3%
<b>Female</b>	60.0%*	64.3%	50.0%	50.0%
<b>Region</b>				
<b>SADC</b>	46.7%	63.6%	45.5%	45.5%
<b>Non-SADC Africa</b>	45.2%	54.3%	42.9%	37.1%
<b>Europe &amp; North America</b>	12.5%	42.9%	14.3%	28.6%
<b>Rural</b>	33.3%	50.0%	50.0%	16.7%
<b>Peri-urban</b>	33.3%	37.5%	25.0%	25.0%
<b>Urban</b>	43.2%	59.5%	43.2%	40.5%
<b>Single</b>	58.3%	—	—	—
<b>Married</b>	36.5%	—	—	—
<b>Catholic</b>	42.9%	66.7%	66.7%	33.3%
<b>Mainline Protestant</b>	27.3%*	48.3%	31.0%	31.0%
<b>Evangelical</b>	63.6%**	68.4%	52.6%	52.6%
<b>Religious Services</b>				
<b>Weekly or less</b>	26.2%***	42.9%*	25.7%**	26.6%
<b>More than once weekly</b>	69.6%***	77.8%*	66.7%**	55.6%

\* denotes p<.05; \*\* denotes p<.01; and \*\*\* denotes p<.001.

**Present Practice, Theology, and Future Interventions**

Over the years, evangelical churches have maintained unanimity on calling MCPs specifically sinful and ungodly morally, socially and other wise. Doctrines and practices have revolved strongly around the biblical belief and prescription that God created one man for one woman, forming the only true foundation of marriage as God instituted it. Evangelical theology in respect to marriage is thus anchored on such biblical roots. In this regard, many evangelical church leaders have consistently preached strong messages against sexual immorality.

Parishioners who fail morally by violating these biblical ideals face various levels of disciplinary action which is, sometimes, quite stern. If they persist in sexual immorality without repentance, they are de-flocked and/ or in some cases “handed over to Satan” (1 Corinthians 5:1-5) as a last resort. The negative implication of these measures, unfortunately, is the fact that stigmatization of the erring parishioner becomes the inevitable result. Clearly, this is more by default than design.

Notwithstanding the above stance, messages of “fire and brimstone” appear slightly moderated in many a pulpit, raising concern in some quarters of Christendom that this may be a sign of compromise. This is especially so in the face of growing consciousness for so called “political correctness” to avoid controversy while creating a platform for interventions. On the other hand, it is felt that the growing awareness regarding the need for the Church to continue engaging constructively in HIV and AIDS interventions in general is a sign of long awaited progress. The balance remains in the fact that HIV and AIDS are present day realities that affect the Church as much as any other segment of the population, necessitating the Church to respond holistically to meet social human needs so presented by the scourge by applying the personification of the love of Christ. Stigma and discrimination must be eliminated through the application of acceptance

and forgiveness found in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such positive social action is what James in chapter 1:27 commended as “pure and undefiled religion.”

Helping the afflicted as a result of MCPs is not equal to condoning or abetting sin. The norm in terms of biblical standards is still that good behavior, and specifically marital fidelity, is strongly encouraged and rewarded. Along with this, doctrinal purity and practice will remain largely uncompromised.

### **Benefits of Evangelical Teachings**

All said and done, there is need to highlight some important benefits accruing from evangelical teachings. First, adherence to God’s ordinances necessarily affords one and all potential protection from STIs generally, and HIV and AIDS in particular. Second, there is great reward of inner peace in keeping oneself morally pure which results in an improved sense of well-being and most likely, a positively consequential improved quality of life. The opposite of this would be hardship, for the scriptures say, “the way of transgressors is hard” (Proverbs 13:15).

Third, adherence to biblical guidance is a safeguard against unwanted pregnancies, which in some cases have resulted in unsafe abortions, especially among young people. Fourth, there is the sure benefit of stable family life. Children who are born in such stable families have a good environment in which to grow within the marriage context. Fifth, the very noble act of discouraging MCPs will help to drastically reduce new infections associated with sexual transmission lines of HIV.

Recently, we had the rare opportunity to host the former president of Botswana, His Excellency Festus Mogae, who apart from being my counterpart as Chairman of his country’s National AIDS Council, is Chairman of Champions for an HIV Free Africa, a high level team composed of former African heads of State and other eminent persons. While paying a courtesy call on the Zambian President, Mr. Rupiah Bwezani Banda, Mr. Mogae said, “The number one priority in the fight against HIV/AIDS is *prevention*.” Then he went on to say, “The number two priority is *prevention*, and the number three priority is *prevention*!” I could not agree more.

A sixth benefit is that there will be significant mitigation of the negative impacts of a broken society that is otherwise already inundated with an increased number of orphans, child and single-headed households, societal disharmony, etc. Seventh, there will be significant economic gain for the nation(s) in the sense that work productivity will go up owing to decreased new infections and reduced absenteeism from work.

Going forward into the future, evangelicals will do well to continue abhorring MCPs, utilizing the comparative advantage of its well respected moral based teachings of chastity and marital fidelity. Evangelicals will also need to re-profile the all-important role of couple counseling, whilst helping those affected and infected by HIV. Additionally, there is need to engage in operations research in order to employ evidence-based HIV and AIDS interventions targeted towards MCPs. The fight is winnable, and every genuine effort will make a difference!