

# Christianity is changing in South Africa as Pentecostal and indigenous churches grow—what's behind the trend?

May 14 2024, by Dion Forster

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[Studies](#) show that South Africa is one of only three countries in the world where religious participation [has increased](#) in recent years. The other two countries are Italy and the US.

The [2022 Census](#) data show that South Africa's Christian adherence has once again increased. However, the kinds of Christianity that are growing, and those that are declining, tell us some interesting things about the religious, cultural, social and political sentiments of South Africans.

Only 2.9% of the population claimed to have no religious views at all—this means that 96.1% of South Africans profess or practice some form of faith. Even though COVID-19 restrictions meant a [31% undercount](#) in the 2022 census, the trends are clear.

Christianity is the most popular religious affiliation, with 85.3% of South Africans identifying as Christian of [some kind or another](#). One simply needs to drive through any city or town in South Africa to see the [diversity](#) of "Christianities" on display. They range from cathedrals to store-front "miracle centers" to African indigenous communities worshipping in nature.

While there are some similarities in their general beliefs, one would hardly be able to say what a west African styled neo-Pentecostal community has in common with, for example, a [Dutch Reformed](#) church group. Or the beliefs of members of the [Zion Christian Church](#) (ZCC). They may all be labeled as Christian, but their beliefs and practices seem worlds apart.

In South Africa there has been a steady [decline in membership](#) of the so-called "mainline" Christian churches, such as the Methodists, Anglicans, Catholics or Dutch Reformed. At the same time, the country has seen the membership of African indigenous Christian groupings (such as the ZCC and the [Johane Masowe](#) and [Johane Marange](#) churches), and postcolonial Christian groupings (like prosperity and neo-Pentecostal groups) increasing significantly.

My research as a [public theologian](#) has focused on the religious, social and political changes in southern African Christianity for almost 30 years. Understanding a nation's religious beliefs helps explain the fabric of its society and also maps how that society changes.

And churches exert political influence. This is particularly evident at election time when [political leaders](#) attend mega churches to campaign for votes and be endorsed by church leaders.

Church leaders also attempt to shape politics. Some of the fastest growing Christian groupings in South Africa, for example, have pledged to "[shut down South Africa](#)" if corruption-tainted former president Jacob Zuma and his MK party don't win the 2024 national elections.

It's crucial to make sense of the worldviews of South Africa's diverse Christian churches, and understand the potential impact of their moral and theological beliefs on the country's collective future.

## **The colonial churches**

Like many things in South Africa, [religious traditions](#) have important links to a painful and racist [colonial](#) and [apartheid](#) history. My own religious tradition, [Methodism](#), was among the [earliest](#) colonial Christianities to arrive on the southern tip of Africa.

Early forms of British, Dutch and French Christianities that arrived in South Africa were as committed to their [cultural and political identities](#) as they were to their religious beliefs. [As historians](#) have shown, missionaries often mixed their religious beliefs with the political and economic interests of their countries.

This had [devastating effects](#) on the cultures, identities and religious beliefs of the indigenous African populations. African religion was [vilified as evil](#) and even labeled as [witchcraft](#). Local ethical systems were replaced by foreign western ideals. Languages, art and customs were eroded and replaced with foreign symbols and practices that alienated people from their histories.

So it's not surprising to see that these colonial Christian churches are being rejected in favor of postcolonial and African indigenous beliefs.

## **The new churches**

My [research shows](#) three broad reasons for the growth of these "new" churches over the past decades.

First, there are cultural reasons. There's growing interest among both ["ordinary" believers](#) and scholars in the [decolonisation](#) of religious beliefs and practices.

The largest proportion of South Africa's Christians (40.82%) are expressing a longing to [bring together](#) African identity and African philosophical systems with their religious beliefs. They're opting to join church communities that preach, sing and pray in African indigenous languages and that wear culturally appropriate clothing.

A notable debate is even taking place in South Africa's largest "mainline" Christian denomination. There's an appeal that Methodist

ministers who are also traditional healers ([ukuthwasa](#)) be allowed to practice as both at the same time.

Second, there are socio-economic reasons. As South Africa's predominantly [young population struggles](#) with poverty, unemployment and inadequate social provisions, there's a turn to churches that promise supernatural pathways to wealth and social prominence.

These churches, which often have links to either west African or [US prosperity gospels](#), have long abandoned the central elements of colonial Christianities—like religious vestments or liturgies that still pray for the King of England. They're devoting themselves to new forms of imperialism—like capitalism, individual liberty and identity politics.

Third, there are political reasons for the growth of these churches. Many South Africans have found the historical ties between "mainline" Christianity and political parties to be a disappointment. In the last parliamentary census, 63% of parliamentarians [indicated](#) they were members of the Methodist church. The church recently [posted](#) on [social media](#) that politicians should not be "given the mic" in [church](#) services.

As South Africans lose faith in the promises of politicians, they're also losing faith in the religious communities that seem to [uncritically support them](#).

## **Why this matters**

A history of Christianity offers [insights](#) into the hopes, dreams, frustrations and sorrows of South Africans. This can be seen in how religion has shifted along social, political and economic lines.

South Africans remain religious, and are growing in religiosity. Some of the forms of Christianity to which they are turning are politically

dangerous and economically harmful, while others offer the promise of a more authentically African way of believing and living. What people believe matters, and what they no longer believe matters too.

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