Self-Sufficient Church and Henry Venn's Policy: A Challenge to Contemporary Church

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Abstract

This article explores the relevance of Henry Venn's policy on self-sufficient churches in contemporary church contexts. By analyzing the historical context and principles of Venn's policy, the study highlights the challenges facing contemporary churches in achieving self-sufficiency and discusses how Venn's policy can be applied or adapted to address these challenges. The article argues that Venn's policy remains a valuable framework for churches seeking to develop self-sufficiency and sustainability, and offers recommendations for its implementation in modern church contexts. A historical approach was used to navigate the write-up.

Keywords: Henry Vinn, Church, Self-Sufficiency, Sustainability, Modernity.

Introduction

A self-sufficient church refers to a local church that is able to sustain itself financially, administratively, and spiritually, without relying heavily on external support or resources. This concept emphasizes the importance of local autonomy, leadership, and resource mobilization according to Hanciles (2008). The work

explores the concept of self-sufficient churches and Henry Venn's policy, which emphasizes the importance of churches being self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. The topic challenges contemporary churches to rethink their approach to sustainability and growth, and to consider adopting Venn's principles to achieve greater autonomy and effectiveness.

Warneck (1906), opines that the concept of self-sufficiency has been a cornerstone of church development and sustainability for centuries. Henry Venn's policy on self-sufficient churches, developed in the 19th century, remains a significant contribution to the field of missiology and church development. Venn's policy emphasized the importance of indigenous leadership, local resource mobilization, and ecclesiastical autonomy in achieving church self-sufficiency.

However, Kraft (1973), asserts that the applicability of Venn's policy in contemporary church contexts remains a topic of debate. This work seeks to contribute to this debate by examining the challenges facing contemporary churches in achieving self-sufficiency and exploring the relevance of Venn's policy in addressing these challenges. By analyzing the historical context and principles of Venn's policy, this study aims to provide insights into the development of self-sufficient churches in modern contexts.

Tienou (1973), submits that Henry Venn, a British Anglican clergyman, served as the Honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from 1841 to 1872. During his tenure, Venn developed a policy for church development that emphasized the importance of establishing self-sufficient, indigenous churches. Venn's policy, often referred to as the "Three-Self" formula, advocated for churches to be: self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. Venn's policy was developed in the context of British colonial expansion and the growth of missionary work in Africa and Asia. He recognized the need for churches to be established on a sustainable footing, with local leadership and resources, in order to thrive in the long term.

The 19th century saw significant missionary activity, with many Western churches establishing missions in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world. However, these missions often relied heavily on foreign funding and personnel, which created

dependencies and hindered the development of local churches. Venn's policy was a response to these challenges, seeking to empower local churches and promote their self-sufficiency.

This study argues that Henry Venn's policy on self-sufficient churches remains a valuable framework for contemporary churches, offering insights into the development of sustainable, indigenous churches that are equipped to thrive in diverse cultural and economic contexts. By examining the challenges facing contemporary churches and applying Venn's principles, churches can develop greater self-sufficiency and effectiveness in their mission and ministry.

Henry Venn's Policy: Historical Context and Principles

Historical Context

Henry Venn developed his policy on self-sufficient churches in the 19th century, a time of significant missionary activity and colonial expansion. The Church Missionary Society (CMS), where Venn served as Honorary Secretary, was actively involved in missionary work in Africa and Asia. Venn recognized the need for churches to be established on a sustainable footing, with local leadership and resources, in order to thrive for a long term. Venn's policy is often referred to as the "Three-Self" formula or principles. The Three-Self Principle has, like the concept of the indigenous church, become an accepted part of the missiologist's vocabulary. Perhaps one reason that these ideas are so popular is that they came into being as a practical solution to real life situations on the mission fields. The Three-Self Principles – Self-Supporting, Self-Propagating and Self-Governing grew out of the personal experience of Henry Venn as he administered his mission programme.

i. Self-Supporting

Hodges (1953), opines that the key to the Three-Self principle for Venn was self-support. With self-support in place all the rest would follow. According to Anderson (2006), Venn's Self-Support refers to the idea that the local church should be able to support itself financially, rather than relying on outside funding. He adds that, by promoting self-support, the churches could be empowered to generate their income and reduce reliance on external funding. Hodges further submits that, the reasons for self-support emphasized in mission are many: first, it

is a biblical plan to encourage stewardship and second to encourage tithing. It is good for the spiritual well-being of the congregation. The spirit of faith and sacrifice help to develop a vigorous spiritual ministry in the workers. In the end, the workers are better off financially. It places the church workers in an advantageous position with his fellow workers and it opens the door to unlimited expansion.

Clark (1933), suggests that Self-Support should be taken from the very beginning of any mission, because it would encourage national church idea and growth. Over reliance on the foreign support kills creativity. The use of foreign funds could often be a barrier for indigenous church growth. The origin of funds often determines who is the authority and how the fund should be utilizes. Soltau (1955) submits that self-support is essential in establishing a strong church that can generate salaries and support national workers. Such process encourages an indigenous local churches aspiring to take responsibility. It would also reduces missionaries long-time pampering. When missionaries pay it is a long time before the people take over. He concludes by saying that, when the church is dependent on foreign aid for the essential activities of the church, it harms self-supporting policy.

Newbigin (1987), opines that Venn's emphasis on self-supporting missions was largely a response to the problems he saw with traditional models of missions work. In the past, missions work had often been funded by wealthy individuals or organisations in the West, and this had created a sense of dependency among the people being evangelized. Venn believed that this was not sustainable or healthy, and that the church should be able to support itself financially. He also believed that this would help to create a sense of pride and ownership among the local people.

ii. Self-Propagating

Anderson (2006), infers that, self-propagation refers to the idea that the local church should be responsible for spreading the gospel and making disciples, rather than relying on outside missionaries. By promoting self-propagation, the churches could train and equip their members to spread the gospel, leading to more growth and resources. In other words, Self-propagating means that, the church should be able to reproduce itself and spread the gospel within its own

culture. Venn believed that this would create a stronger and more authentic church that was truly rooted in the local community.

For Anderson, self-propagation was the most important of the threesome. It is a goal of mission that every new Christian should be an active witness, and being part of the church and sharing in the responsibility of spreading the Gospel. It is good for new converts to take part in the activities of the church. The converts are then the seed for the further spread of Gospel.

Newbigin (1987), submits that, the principle of self-propagation emerged from Venn's experience with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the 19th century. During this time, the CMS was heavily involved in sending missionaries to different parts of the world. However, he noticed that many of these missions were not sustainable, and that the local churches were often dependent on outside funding and support. He believed that this approach was not healthy or effective, and he proposed the principle of self-propagating as a solution. Another factor that influenced Venn's thinking on self-propagating according to Newbigin was the work of indigenous missionaries like William Carey. Carey was a British Missionary who worked in India, and he advocated for the training and equipping of local believers to do the work of missions. This approach had a profound impact on Venn, and he began to incorporate it into his own work with the CMS. He saw that indigenous missionaries were often more effective than Western missionaries, and he wanted to see this approach become the norm.

iii. Self-Governing

According to Anderson (2006), self-government refers to the idea that the local church should have autonomy and control over its own affairs, rather than being controlled. By promoting self-government according to him, the churches could develop the capacity to manage their own affairs, rather than relying on external direction. This include empowering local church leaders to make decisions and lead their congregations, with support and guidance from the wider denomination. It could also involve building the capacity of church members to serve in leadership roles and contribute to the decision-making process.

Clark (1933), agrees with Anderson above and says:

> It appears not to be necessary for us to concern ourselves overmuch with the organization of the church. If the church is living, then from within itself will grow the organization it will require at all stages of its development. Just as it is unprofitable to hang fruits on the tree, so it is unnecessary to impose upon it, from without, a foreign organization. In almost every foreign field a protest is now rising against over-organisation and now will rise against a western organization, ill suited to an indigenous, Eastern church in the comparatively early stages of its growth. The organization of the church must grow with and come out of the church (p.24).

The idea of self-government was closely tied to the idea of indigenous missions (the idea that the most effective missionaries are those who are from the same culture as the people they are trying to reach). Newbigin (1987), asserts that Venn believes that missionaries should not try to control or change the culture of the people they were serving. Rather, they should focus on sharing the gospel and allowing the people to form their own churches and express their faith in their own way. This idea was very controversial at the time, but Venn believed that it was essential for the growth of the church.

Newbigin further adds that, the idea of self-government in missions was influenced by a number of factors. First, the failures of previous missions efforts helped to highlight the need for a new approach. Second, the growing independence movements in Africa and Asia during the colonial period highlighted the need for self-determination. Finally, the growing awareness of the importance of culture in understanding and communicating the gospel helped to shape the idea of self-government. Hodges (1953), concludes by saying that, the importance of self-government is that the people may gain spiritual responsibility and growth as well as have the sense of nationalism.

Significance of Venn's Policy

Venn's policy has had a significant impact on the development of churches in diverse cultural and economic contexts. The key significance of Venn's policy according to Tippett (1973), include:

a. **Promoting Local Autonomy:** Venn's policy emphasizes the importance of local leadership and decision-making, which helps to promote church growth and sustainability.
b. **Reducing Dependence on Foreign Aid:** By promoting financial self-sufficiency through development of income-generating projects, and good teaching on the stewardship of giving, Venn's policy helps to reduce dependence on foreign aid and promotes financial sustainability.
c. **Encouraging Local Mission:** Venn's policy emphasizes the importance of local evangelism and mission, which helps to promote church growth and expansion.
d. **Empowering Indigenous Churches:** Venn's policy recognizes the importance of empowering indigenous churches to take ownership of their faith and mission, which helps to promote church sustainability and growth.

Overall, Venn's policy remains a valuable framework for churches seeking to develop self-sufficiency and sustainability, and its principles continue to be relevant in contemporary church contexts.

Challenges to Contemporary Church

Contemporary churches face various challenges in achieving self-sufficiency. Winter and Koch (1999) mention five challenges, and they include:

a. **Financial Dependence:** Many churches rely heavily on external funding, which can create dependence and undermine self-sufficiency.
b. **Lack of Local Leadership:** Churches may struggle to develop local leadership, relying on external leaders or missionaries, which also create dependence and undermine self-sufficiency.
c. **Cultural Insensitivity:** The church becomes disconnected from local needs, values, and customs. When a church becomes disconnected from local needs, values, and customs: relevance decreases, trust erodes, outreach becomes ineffective, contextualization is poor, community engagement is shallow, evangelism is forced instead of been natural, church growth is stagnant, and transformation is limited. By being culturally insensitive, the church can struggle to make a meaningful impact, build strong relationships, and fulfill its mission effectively.

d. **Globalization and Urbanization:** These refer to the increasing interconnectedness of the world's economies, cultures, and populations, and the rapid growth of cities. These trends pose challenges to contemporary churches, including: cultural diversity, urban ministry, and global connections. Churches must adapt to changing demographics and urbanization trends.
e. **Theological and Missiological Shifts:** These refer to changes in theological perspectives and missiological approaches that can impact the way churches understand their mission and engage with their communities. These shifts can include: changing theological emphasis, new missiological approaches, re-evaluating traditional church practices, etc. Churches must navigate changing theological and missiological perspectives.

These challenges require contemporary churches to be adaptable, innovative, and thoughtful in their approach to mission and ministry. By understanding and responding to these challenges, churches can remain relevant and effective in their contexts.

Applying Venn's Policy to Address Challenges

Venn's policy can be applied or adapted to address these challenges. Moreau, Corwin and McGee (2004), opine that this could be done by:

a. **Developing Local Leadership:** Venn's emphasis on self-governance can help churches develop local leadership and reduce dependence on external leaders.
b. **Financial Sustainability:** Venn's principle of self-supporting churches can help churches develop financial sustainability through the development of income-generating projects and intensive teaching on the stewardship of giving, and reduce dependence on external funding.
c. **Contextualization:** Venn's policy can be adapted to promote contextualization, ensuring churches are sensitive to local cultures and contexts. By becoming attuned to local needs, values, and customs, the church can make a more significant impact, build stronger relationships, and fulfill its mission more effectively.

d. **Empowering Local Churches:** Venn's policy can empower local churches to take ownership of their faith and mission, promoting self-sufficiency and sustainability.

By applying Venn's policy, contemporary churches can address challenges and achieve greater self-sufficiency, sustainability, and effectiveness in their mission and ministry.

Case Studies or Examples of Churches that have Successfully Implemented Venn's Policy

It is recorded in history that churches that adopted and applied Henry Venn's missions policies greatly benefited from them. Here are a few examples:

a. **The Presbyterian Church of Korea:** According to Church Mission Society, this church has a strong emphasis on self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation, reflecting Venn's principles. The church has grown significantly and has become a major missionary-sending church in Korea.
b. **The Church of South India:** This church has a long history of self-governance and self-support, and has developed a strong sense of local leadership and ownership.
c. **The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Brazil:** This church has implemented a range of initiatives to promote self-sufficiency, including developing local leadership and financial sustainability according to World Council of Churches (WCC).
d. **The Presbyterian Church of Ghana:** The Presbyterian church of Ghana is a great example. Bartels (2003), opines that in the 19th century they adopted Venn's self-supporting principle, developing a robust system of financial self-sufficiency. They established farms, schools, and hospitals, generating income and reducing dependence on foreign aid. Today, the church is a significant contributor to Ghana's development.
e. **The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion):** Olufunmilaya (2015), asserts that the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) successfully applied Venn's self-governing principle. They established a robust leadership structure, empowering local clergy and laity to take ownership of decision-making process. This led to significant growth, with the church becoming one of the largest in Africa.

f. **The Anglican Church of Kenya:** Hanciles (2008), says the Anglican Church of Kenya effectively applied Venn's self-propagating principle, prioritizing evangelism and discipleship. They established vibrant youth programs, community outreach initiatives and church planting efforts leading to remarkable growth and expansion. These example demonstrate how Venn's policies can be effectively applied in different contexts, promoting financial sustainability, leadership development, and community engagement. By learning from these successes, contemporary churches can adapt and apply Venn's principles to address their unique challenges.

Based on this study, the researcher concludes that Henry Venn's Three-self principles primarily focus on achieving financial stability and self-sufficiency or financial sufficiency. This study's results support the effectiveness of Henry Venn's Three-Self principles in addressing financial challenges in contemporary churches, highlighting their potential as a sustainable solution, recommending their adoption as a strategic intervention.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned from the above Examples

The outcomes and lessons learned from the above examples of churches that have successfully implemented Venn's policy include:

Outcomes

1. **Church Growth:** Churches that have implemented Venn's policy or similar approaches have often experienced significant growth, both in terms of membership and mission.
2. **Local Leadership Development:** These churches have developed strong local leadership, which has helped to promote church growth and sustainability.
3. **Financial Sustainability:** Churches that have implemented Venn's policy have often achieved greater financial sustainability, reducing their dependence on external funding.

Lessons Learned:

1. **Contextualization is Key:** The success of Venn's policy depends on contextualization, taking into account local cultures, economies, and social contexts.
2. **Local Leadership is Essential:** Developing local leadership is crucial for church growth and sustainability.
3. **Partnerships can be Helpful:** Partnerships between churches, organizations, and communities can help to promote mutual support and empowerment.
4. **Patience and Persistence are Necessary:** Implementing Venn's policy requires patience persistence, as it can take time to develop local leadership, income-generating projects and achieve financial sustainability.

By studying these examples and lessons learned, churches can gain valuable insights into how to implement Venn's policy effectively promoting church growth, sustainability, and self-sufficiency.

Conclusion

This study has explored the relevance of Henry Venn's policy on self-sufficient churches in contemporary church contexts. Henry Venn's policy emphasizes the importance of self-governance, self-support and self-propagation in achieving church self-sufficiency. Contemporary churches face various challenges in achieving self-sufficiency, including financial dependence, lack of local leadership, and cultural insensitivity. Venn's policy can be applied or adapted to address these challenges, promoting local leadership development, financial sustainability, and contextualization. Examples of churches that have successfully implemented Venn's policy demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach in promoting church growth and sustainability.

The study argues that Henry Venn's policy on self-sufficient churches remains a valuable framework for contemporary churches, offering insights into the development of sustainable, indigenous churches that are equipped to thrive in diverse cultural and economic contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are offered to contemporary churches:

1. **Develop Local Leadership:** Invest in developing local leadership and promoting local ownership of church initiatives.
2. **Promote Financial Sustainability:** Develop financial sustainability by reducing dependence on external funding and promoting local giving, also develop good income-generating projects.
3. **Contextualize Church Planting:** Contextualize church planting and growth initiatives to local cultures and contexts. By contextualizing church planting and growth initiatives, churches can become more effective in their mission and ministry, and build stronger relationships with their local communities.

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