

Barriers Limiting Christian Preaching to Muslims: A Case Study of MCK Nyambene Synod, Meru County

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Abstract

Evangelism involves sharing the Gospel message with non-Christians. Despite MCK Nyambene Synod's efforts to preach the word of God to the Muslim community, the body of Christ has experienced little success in converting Muslims to Christianity. This has hindered the growth of Christianity in the region. This study sought to investigate the factors that hinder preaching of the word of God to the Muslims within MCK Nyambene Synod, Kenya. The study employed a descriptive survey research design. The data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions with church members; and document analysis. A target population of 669 respondents was drawn from the MCK Nyambene Synod. Purposive and stratified sampling techniques were used to select eighty-nine (89) respondents comprising 1 Bishop, 19 ministers, 59 lay preachers, and 10 Muslims. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with direct evangelistic experience, while stratified sampling ensured representation across different circuits, age groups, and leadership roles. Thematic narrative approach was used to analyze the data. Results indicated that a significant need to equip Christians engaged in evangelism with essential skills to effectively reach out to Muslims. It was recommended that senior church leaders and academic institutions need to develop a curriculum meant to empower Christians involved in evangelism.

Keywords: *Christian preaching, Evangelism, Muslims, MCK Nyambene Synod, Meru County*

1.0 Introduction

Evangelism is a foundational mandate of the Christian faith, anchored on the words of Jesus Christ in the Great Commission: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*" (English Standard Version, Matt. 28:19–20). This directive emphasizes the global nature of the Church's mission to reach people of all tribes, languages, and religions with the gospel. However, the pathway from local outreach to global missions is neither simple nor uniform (Munir, 2021). It is often shaped by contextual realities such as cultural norms, political dynamics, and interfaith relations.

In the context of the Methodist Church in Kenya, particularly the MCK Nyambene Synod, evangelistic efforts have primarily focused on Christian communities, with relatively limited impact among non-Christian populations, such as Muslims. Factors such as cultural resistance, political sensitivities, and religious misconceptions, hinder effective Christian witnessing (Munir, 2021). These local challenges mirror broader global trends where Christianity-Islam interfaces are often characterized by deep-rooted barriers. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, Muslims constitute approximately 11.1% of Kenya's population, while Christians account for 83.1%. The eastern regions of Kenya, where the MCK Nyambene Synod is situated, comprises significant numbers of Muslim communities, yet sustained evangelism remains minimal (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2019). This reflects not only regional complexities, but also broader patterns evident across Africa and the globe at large. Studies exploring the difficulties of

Christian evangelism to Muslims globally identify recurring themes; such as cultural barriers, misunderstanding of Islamic theology, and inappropriate evangelistic methods. Strategies that fail to consider the religious worldview of Muslims often lead to ineffective communication and even reinforce existing divisions (Munir, 2021). In addition, many evangelists lack training in the contextualization of the process of presenting the gospel respectfully in a culturally diverse society, thereby limiting their reach-out and impact.

While these barriers manifest differently across different contexts, they offer a shared framework for understanding the complexities of Christian-Muslim engagement. From local settings like MCK Nyambene Synod to international mission fields, the Church must reflect critically and innovatively on its evangelistic practices to build bridges across religious divides. This study explores these issues more deeply, beginning with the local experiences in Kenya, and then expanding to the global reflections.

Within the MCK Nyambene Synod of the Methodist Church in Kenya, evangelism to Muslims has been ongoing, though with little success. Therefore, there is need to investigate the specific factors hindering evangelism to Muslims in this region. This study employed qualitative Methodologies, like interviews and focus group discussions, to gather evidence on the challenges faced by Christian evangelists in their outreach missions to Muslims. In Maua town, Meru County, there has been a significant rise in the number of Christians as well as people of other religions converting to Islam; yet there

is no observable trend of Muslims joining the Christian faith. The situation suggests that the efforts of believers in the MCK Nyambene Synod may be insufficient or lacking in effectiveness in as far as evangelism to Muslims is concerned (Nyambene Synod, 2020). Considering this trend, Christians should redouble their efforts to evangelize to the Muslims. It is also vital to identify the challenges that hinder evangelism missions and work towards effective strategies.

Recent studies have addressed the challenges hindering evangelism to Muslims within various regions of Kenya, particularly areas under the Methodist Church. For instance, a 2023 study by Numbi Ilunga Mpyana examined factors affecting evangelism to Muslims by the Africa Inland Church leaders in Marigat, Baringo County. The research identified several impediments, such as lack of knowledge about Islam among church leaders, insufficient teachings on Muslim evangelism within churches, cultural misunderstandings, inadequate commitment and biblical knowledge gaps among Christians, as well as a pervasive fear of the Muslims. These findings suggest that similar challenges may be present in the MCK Nyambene Synod of the Methodist Church in Kenya. Therefore, this study aims to explore the specific factors preventing believers from ministering to Muslims in the MCK Nyambene Synod context, building upon the insights from recent research (Mpyana, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

In an ideal setting, the Methodist Church in Kenya, Nyambene Synod would effectively carry out its evangelistic mission among all

communities within its jurisdiction, including the Muslim population. The result would be a balanced spiritual impact evidenced by mutual religious understanding, occasional conversions to Christianity, and a growing Christian community that includes former Muslims (Omondi, 2018; Kanyoro, 2017). Christian ministers would be well-trained to engage Muslims with sensitivity and theological soundness, overcoming cultural and doctrinal differences through constructive dialogue and relationship-building strategies.

“The study found that the factors hindering Christian evangelism to Muslims include: theological differences, cultural barriers, political factors and historical tensions.”

Despite the Synod’s robust efforts and outreach programs since its inception in 1999, there have been no conversions from Islam to Christianity, particularly in Maua town where there are significant Muslim populations. Conversely, conversions from Christianity to Islam have been observed, especially in urban centers like Maua. Out of 2,884 new members recorded between 2019 and 2020, none were Muslims. Cultural barriers, theological differences, and deep-seated mistrust between the two religious communities continue to hinder evangelistic efforts.

The disparity between the ideal and actual situation is significant and troubling. The fact that Christians are converting to Islam, while no reciprocal conversions occur suggests that not only is Christian evangelism to Muslims ineffective, but it may also be losing ground. This represents a critical spiritual and missional challenge for the MCK Nyambene Synod. It raises urgent concerns about the preparedness of Christian leaders to engage with Muslims and the need for tailored evangelistic strategies.

While general challenges to Muslim evangelism in Kenya have been documented, there is a gap in localized research, particularly in Maua town which is within MCK Nyambene Synod. Specific barriers such as the nature of mistrust, cultural resistance, and theological misunderstandings in the Maua context have not been thoroughly explored. There is limited research assessing whether Christian ministers and evangelists in the Synod are adequately trained or equipped to handle the complexity of Muslim evangelism (Kanyoro, 2017). No study has deeply investigated the elements that influence Muslim openness (or resistance) to the gospel in the study location. The study addresses a critical yet under-researched area by focusing on the specific barriers that hinder evangelism to Muslims in the MCK Nyambene Synod. Understanding and overcoming these barriers is essential to restoring the effectiveness of missionary efforts and achieving a more balanced spiritual engagement in the region.

Literature review

Literature highlights the various challenges faced by Christian evangelists in their efforts

to reach out to Muslims. One prominent study is by Akintola (2018) who in his dissertation titled *"The Challenges of Christian Evangelism to Muslims in Nigeria,"* identified key barriers to effective evangelism. These include language barriers, deep-rooted cultural differences, and the rise of religious extremism, all of which complicate the mission of spreading the Christian message in predominantly Muslim contexts. Akintola emphasizes that these challenges are not merely logistical, but also highly ideological, and shaped by historical grievances and mutual mistrust between the two faith communities.

In the Kenyan context, similar challenges have been observed. According to Onyango and Kagochi, in their study *"Challenges Facing Christian Evangelism to Muslims in Nairobi County, Kenya,"* language barriers and cultural differences are significant obstacles to evangelism (Kagochi, 2025). Additionally, political tensions particularly those involving religious identity and national security further complicate evangelistic work. These tensions create an environment of fear and suspicion, making it difficult for Christian evangelists to gain the trust of Muslim communities. The study also underscores the need for contextualized evangelism approach; that is, one that is sensitive to the socio-political and religious dynamics of the local environment.

The theoretical framework underpinning many of these studies is often grounded in intercultural communication theory. This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding and adapting to cultural differences in order to facilitate effective communication. In the context of Christian

evangelism to Muslims, intercultural communication theory suggests that evangelists must not only be fluent in language, but also in the cultural and religious nuances of their audience. Effective evangelism, therefore, requires more than theological training; it demands cultural intelligence, empathy, and the ability to navigate complex socio-religious landscapes. By applying this theoretical lens, researchers are able to explain why standard evangelistic methods may fail in Muslim contexts and propose more culturally appropriate strategies.

2.0 Materials and Methods

This study was conducted within the Methodist Church in Kenya, Nyambene Synod, an area with a notable Christian-Muslim population mix, making it a suitable location for exploring the challenges of Christian evangelism to Muslims. The choice of this setting allowed for contextual relevance and accessibility to the target population.

A descriptive survey research design was employed to systematically investigate the factors hindering Christian evangelism to Muslims. This design was appropriate for gathering detailed information on the current situation, analyzing attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of evangelists, and identifying the underlying causes of evangelistic challenges. The target population consisted of Methodist Church evangelists, clergy, lay preachers, and selected Muslim converts within the MCK Nyambene Synod. These individuals were selected because of their direct or indirect involvement in evangelistic efforts.

A sample size of 89 respondents was drawn from the target population using purposive and stratified random sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with direct evangelistic experience, while stratified sampling ensured representation across different circuits, age groups, and leadership roles. Data were collected using a combination of questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. The questionnaires provided quantitative data on patterns and frequency of evangelistic engagement, while interviews and focus groups yielded qualitative insights into personal experiences, perceptions, and contextual challenges.

To ensure validity, the instruments were reviewed by academic and field experts, and pilot-tested in Kaaga Synod which covers Meru town which has many Muslims. Reliability was assessed through internal consistency checks, including the use of Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire sections, which yielded an acceptable coefficient of 0.78. Data analysis followed both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), generating descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed thematically to extract key patterns and narratives.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were strictly observed. Participants gave informed consent, and their confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded. Sensitivity to religious and cultural contexts was maintained to avoid offense or misrepresentation. By integrating

these methodological elements, the study offers a comprehensive and credible examination of the barriers to Christian evangelism among Muslim communities in the MCK Nyambene Synod. The findings aim to inform both academic discourse and practical ministry strategies. This study builds on the findings of Oyewole's work (2020), "The Challenges of Christian Evangelism to Muslims in Nigeria," and the study by Onyango and Kagochi, "Challenges Facing Christian Evangelism to Muslims in Nairobi County, Kenya (Oyewole, 2020). The language barriers, cultural differences, and political tensions inform this study's exploration of these factors in Nyambene Synod, Meru County, enhancing its contextual relevance and depth. By combining insights from prior studies with robust methodological approaches, this research aims to provide actionable recommendations for overcoming challenges in Christian evangelism to Muslim communities in Kenya.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Response Rate

The study achieved impressively high response rates across both phases of data collection: 89.6% in the first phase, and 88% in the second phase. These figures significantly surpass the minimum threshold of 50% proposed by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), thereby reinforcing the robustness and generalizability of the findings. The high response rate indicates a strong engagement with the topic under study, suggesting that respondents found the issue barriers to Christian evangelism among Muslims both relevant and worthy of attention. It minimizes

the likelihood of non-response bias, which can skew research findings, thereby enhancing the reliability and credibility of the data.

The results affirm the effectiveness of using personalized distribution methods and the involvement of church leaders. These strategies promoted trust and increased the willingness of participants to provide honest and comprehensive responses. It highlights a best practice in church-based or faith-based research contexts, where relational and hierarchical structures can positively influence participation. Because of the high response rate, the study's findings can be considered statistically valid and representative of the broader population within the MCK Nyambene Synod. The high participation reflects not only strong data collection techniques but also a recognition by the respondents of the importance of the research. As such, any trends or themes emerging from the data can be interpreted with a high level of confidence.

Lack of Knowledge about Islam among Church Leaders and Ministers

One of the most significant barriers identified was the limited knowledge about Islam among MCK Nyambene Synod ministers and lay preachers. The study revealed that 92% of respondents had never attempted to evangelize to Muslims, largely due to uncertainty about Islamic beliefs and practices. The lack of theological training and interfaith knowledge has left many church leaders feeling unprepared to engage meaningfully with Muslims. This educational gap limits their confidence and ability to

communicate the Gospel effectively, especially in religiously pluralistic settings.

The findings further indicated that there is minimal focus on Muslim evangelism in church teachings, programs, or training sessions. Respondents noted that evangelism efforts, when present, are often generalized and not tailored to the unique context of reaching Muslims. Without specific biblical and theological instruction on how to witness to Muslims, many church members remain ill-equipped to carry out this mandate. As a result, there is little strategic preparation or encouragement for such mission work at the congregational level.

Inadequate Training on Evangelism to People of Other Faiths

Inadequate training and resources are significant hindrances to Christian missionary work among Muslims in the MCK Nyambene Synod. Many Christians in the region lack the necessary training and resources to engage in effective evangelism to Muslims (Mpyana, 2023). Lack of knowledge on Islam has made it difficult for Christians in the Methodist Church in Kenya Nyambene Synod to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ effectively to people of other religions.

According to Greg, evangelistic churches annually equip at least 10% of their members for outreach. Due to little training on evangelism, not many come to Christ. Ministers and lay preachers lack the ability to minister to the Muslims (Dennis, 2013). The clergy and lay preachers engaged in the outreach efforts have been lacking comprehensive training on how to engage with the Muslim community in the region

(Greg, 2015). Christians can be equipped through seminars and workshops.

Additionally, many Christians in the region lack language skills that are essential for effective evangelism. In the Nyambene Synod, they lack the ability to communicate with Muslims in their language, which has created a significant barrier to effective evangelism. They also lack appropriate evangelism materials such as tracts, videos, and books that are relevant to the Muslim community (Mpyana, 2023). There is a lack of training programs that are specifically designed to equip Christians endowed with the required expertise and insights for impactful outreach to Muslims (Carrier, 2016). Christians should be sufficiently prepared for the great and noble task through seminars and workshops. Consequently, while something need be done on the church leaders who do not lead people to Christ, the congregation in MCK Nyambene Synod needs to prepare its believers on how to evangelize the gospel of Jesus to everyone (Newton, 2004).

Inadequate Commitment and Biblical Knowledge among Christians

A concerning trend noted in the data was the low level of personal commitment to evangelism among Christians. Many respondents acknowledged that Christians in the Synod often lack both the passion and biblical depth required to engage in effective outreach. Spiritual apathy, coupled with limited scriptural literacy, means that the average believer may not feel capable of defending their faith or presenting the Gospel coherently, particularly in a cross-religious context.

A widespread fear of Muslims was reported among church members, with concerns ranging from fear of rejection, backlash, or persecution. This fear has been shaped by broader societal narratives and sometimes by isolated incidents of religious conflict or tension. Such fear discourages personal evangelism, especially among those who perceive Muslims as hostile or resistant to the Christian message. This emotional and psychological barrier has led to a near absence of conversions from Islam to Christianity in the Synod, despite the presence of many Muslims in the region (Abdul-Haqq, 1980).

Cultural Differences

Cultural differences is a major factor that hinders Christians from evangelizing to Muslims. In MCK Nyambene Synod, the cultural practices of the Muslim community in the area differ significantly from those of the Christian community. Cultural differences, therefore, create barriers to effective communication and understanding between the two communities (Mpyana, 2023; Omondi, 2018). For example, Muslims have perceived Christian evangelism as an attack on their cultural practices and beliefs, leading to hostility towards Christian evangelists. Similarly, the cultural divide between Christians and Muslims in MCK Nyambene Synod creates suspicion and mistrust between the two communities. This mistrust has made it difficult for Christians to build meaningful relationships with Muslims, which is a crucial aspect of effective evangelism (Omondi, 2018).

Some Christian evangelists in MCK Nyambene Synod use methods that are culturally inappropriate or insensitive to the

Muslim community. This has led to a negative response by Muslims, and has hindered the effectiveness of evangelistic efforts (Omondi, 2018). Effective evangelism in this context needs a comprehensive knowledge of Islamic convictions and practices, cultural sensitivity, and appropriate evangelistic methods that are relevant to the Muslim community. Understanding and application of culturally appropriate evangelistic strategies are necessary to bridge the divide and foster meaningful engagement between the two faith communities.

Religious Barriers

Theological differences are another factor that hinders evangelism. One participant remarked, "Muslims reject the divinity of Jesus Christ, which is foundational to our faith. This makes explaining our beliefs challenging." Another stated, "Salvation is a key point of divergence. Christians view it through Jesus Christ, but Muslims see it differently. This fundamental difference complicates our evangelistic mission." The study also found that religious barriers hinder Christians from evangelizing to Muslims. The participants reported that there are theological differences between Christianity and Islam that make it difficult to engage in evangelism. For example, one participant stated:

M2: "Muslims do not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, which is a central tenet of Christianity. It can be hard to explain our faith to them when we have such fundamental differences."

Another participant added:

M3: "The issue of salvation is also a barrier. Christians believe in salvation through faith

in Jesus Christ, but Muslims do not. It can be hard to evangelize to someone when you know that they do not believe in the same path to salvation."

To address these challenges, the Methodist Church in Kenya, Nyambene Synod, must prioritize understanding Islamic beliefs and practices, which would enable Christians to evangelize to the Muslims community residing within the study location.

4.0 Conclusion

The study found that several factors hinder Christian evangelism to Muslims in the MCK Nyambene Synod. These include theological differences between Christianity and Islam, cultural barriers, political factors, and historical tensions between Christians and Muslims. These factors have created an environment that is not conducive to effective evangelism among Muslims within the study location. However, despite these challenges, the study concludes that there are opportunities for Christians to adopt strategies for effective evangelism among Muslims. These strategies include building relationships with Muslims, understanding their worldview, and developing culturally relevant evangelistic strategies.

5.0 Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed: Ministers,

lay preachers and Christian evangelists preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in MCK Nyambene Synod should make a concerted effort to reach out to as many Muslims and people of other faiths with the gospel of Jesus Christ as possible. They should also endeavor to understand and respect Muslim culture to enhance their evangelism efforts. Employing culturally sensitive approaches can significantly help in overcoming barriers to effective communication and relationship-building. One effective strategy is to use local languages, such as Kimeru and Borana, when reaching out to Muslims. This not only demonstrates respect for their culture but also facilitates clearer and more meaningful interactions.

The study further recommends that the Presiding bishop, the Synod Bishops, the Superintend Ministers of the Methodist church in Kenya, to develop and implement training programs for its members, equipping them with the best methods to reach out to Muslims. Additionally, universities and colleges (KeMU, St. Paul's University) that train ministers of the gospel should incorporate comprehensive training on how to minister to people of other faiths. This holistic approach ensures that evangelists are well-prepared and respectful in their outreach efforts.

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