

Living the Gospel in Global Growth

Where: Seoul, Korea

When: Monday, 27 October 2025

1. Executive Summary / Abstract

This report provides a comprehensive summary of the plenary session on Living the Gospel in Global Growth. The session featured three distinct but interconnected presentations that collectively painted a picture of a movement experiencing unprecedented growth and a seismic demographic shift towards the Global South. The core message is one of profound opportunity mingled with critical challenges. Globally, the evangelical community now exceeds 650 million adherents and has been a majority-world movement for over a generation, fundamentally reshaping its cultural, ethnic, and theological expression. The speakers highlighted Africa as the epicentre of this transformation, a continent characterised by a "youth bulge," a rising educated middle class, and a dynamic, growing church. This explosive growth, however, has created a severe leadership deficit. A staggering majority of pastors and church leaders in Africa, potentially over 90%, lack formal biblical and theological training, leaving churches vulnerable to syncretism, heresy, and poor spiritual guidance. The panel's overarching conclusion is a call to action for the global church: to recognise and embrace its new demographic reality and to urgently address the leadership training crisis by investing in innovative, accessible, and contextually appropriate educational models that can sustain and deepen the faith of this burgeoning Christian community.

2. Detailed Summary of Plenary Session Content

The plenary session offered a powerful, data-driven, and impassioned analysis of the current state and future trajectory of the global evangelical church. The narrative arc of the session moved from a wide-angle, global perspective to a focused examination of the African continent, culminating in a specific and urgent call to address the critical need for leadership development.

Global Evangelicalism: A Diverse and Growing Majority-World Movement

Jason Mandrake of Operation World initiated the session by outlining the "shape and contours" of global evangelicalism today. His central thesis was that the evangelical movement is defined by its vast numbers, its consistent growth, and its profound diversity. He stated that the global evangelical community now numbers over 650 million people, making it a significant proportion of global Christianity. This community is not static but is expanding through natural reproduction, evangelism, and a process he termed "evangelicalisation," where existing Christians adopt a more evangelical expression of faith.

Crucially, Mandrake emphasised that for its entire history, evangelicalism has grown at a rate faster than general population growth. This has resulted in a dramatic demographic shift. While in 1960, evangelicals constituted only 8% of the global Christian body, today they represent over 25%. The most significant aspect of this transformation is the geographical shift in its centre of gravity. Mandrake declared that the notion of evangelicalism as a "white man's religion" is an artefact of the past. Since as early as 1980, evangelicals have been a majority-world movement, with approximately 70% of adherents now living in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This means, he noted, that most people alive today were born into a world where evangelicalism was already predominantly non-Western.

This reality carries profound implications. The first is the pressing need for discipleship. Rapid numerical growth must be matched with robust pastoral training and leadership development to

ensure the spiritual health of fast-growing churches. Mandrake then explored the multi-faceted diversity of the movement. Evangelicals are diverse geographically (present in every nation), ethnically (reflecting a gospel for all peoples), and generationally, with strong retention of faith among young people, particularly in Africa. This diversity also extends to denominational and theological distinctives, which he argued should be seen as a source of strength rather than division.

However, Mandrake did not shy away from the complexities and challenges facing the movement. He acknowledged that the term "evangelical" is often misunderstood, used unfairly, and has been compromised by political co-option and the moral failures of its adherents. He asserted that the community has often "failed to live up to the gospel that we preach," leading to a damaged reputation. Despite this, he concluded on a note of hope, reminding the audience that the core identity of evangelicalism is rooted in the "good news", the gospel of Jesus, which remains its central and unifying message.

The African Continent: Eschatological Hope on the Rise

Building on this global context, Wanjiru Githo presented a compelling case for Africa as the current frontier of Christian growth and societal transformation. Titled "Beyond Optimism, Eschatological Hope for a Continent on the Rise," her presentation framed Africa's current trajectory as a "seismic demographic transformation." She identified three key trends shaping the continent's future.

First is population growth, specifically the "youth bulge," with over 50% of Africa's population being under 20 years old. This, she argued, represents a pivotal moment. Managed well, it could become a "demographic dividend," unleashing immense economic and social potential. Managed poorly, it risks becoming a "demographic time bomb." Wanjiru stressed the church's role in transforming the "banal optimism" of youth into "concrete gospel hope."

Second, she pointed to the rise of an educated workforce and an aspiring middle class, with over 34% of the population now considered middle class or heading in that direction. This counters outdated narratives of a continent solely defined by poverty and underdevelopment. Third, she highlighted Africa's globally connected citizenry. Through technology and the internet, Africa is no longer culturally isolated but is an active participant in global conversations and opportunities.

Wanjiru directly challenged the narrative of Africa being overpopulated, noting its vast landmass could contain China, the USA, India, and all of Europe. Instead, she positioned it as a continent of immense potential, a "breadbasket of the world." She connected this contemporary reality to biblical prophecy, citing the passage, "Ethiopia, representing Africa, will stretch out her hands to God." The church's growth is a testament to this, with vast numbers of evangelicals (185 million), Catholics, and Anglicans. Significantly, she shared findings from an African leadership study revealing that pastors and marketplace Christian leaders are the "most trusted leaders on the African continent," filling a vacuum often left by civic and political failures.

Her closing call to action was for a "reimagined missional eschatology" for Africa. Drawing from Jesus' observation that "the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few," she urged a three-pronged strategy: first, to engage existing churches and networks rather than starting new initiatives; second, to support well-established, faith-inspired communities already working towards social transformation; and third, to invest in quality education, both theological and secular, that is "imbued by Christian hope."

The Leadership Crisis: An Urgent Need for Training

David Taunus of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa provided the final, and perhaps most sobering, presentation. He brought the preceding discussions into sharp focus by presenting preliminary data on the state of pastoral leadership in Africa. He began by listing the critical issues confronting the African church: syncretism, the prosperity gospel, division, poor biblical preaching, corruption, and heresy. He argued these challenges are a direct consequence of a severe leadership training deficit.

Citing anecdotal estimates that 90% of pastors in Africa lack formal biblical and theological training, Taunus shared preliminary results from a pilot study in Kenya and Tanzania that support this figure. The research indicated that over 90% of African church leaders are under-trained (defined as not having a bachelor's-level degree in theology). A staggering 79.5% do not possess a bachelor's degree of any kind, while only 20.5% have any formal biblical or theological education.

The primary barrier preventing pastors from receiving training is financial, with 87.9% of respondents identifying it as their main hindrance. Other significant barriers included a lack of access to quality institutions (23.6%) and time or scheduling conflicts (27.4%).

In response to this crisis, Taunus issued a powerful challenge for the evangelical community to "begin imagining a fresh theological education." This new model, he argued, must be accessible, affordable, and flexible, removing traditional barriers of time and access. He advocated for a shift away from exclusively formal, four-year degree programmes towards non-formal and vernacular models that take theological education directly to the local church and community. He shared the personal story of his father, a pastor who planted many churches but would not have qualified for formal theological education. Such leaders, he contended, are the backbone of the church, and new pathways must be created to equip them. The central message was clear: the rapidly growing church in Africa cannot wait for leaders to come to residential institutions; the institutions must find innovative ways to go to the leaders.

4. Primary Arguments, Key Principles, and Theological Points

Global Evangelical Trends

- **Numerical Strength and Growth:** The global evangelical community is a formidable force of over 650 million people and has consistently grown faster than the world's general population.
- **Shift to the Global South:** Since 1980, evangelicalism has been a majority-world movement, with around 70% of its adherents in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The old stereotype of a Western, white religion is factually incorrect.
- **Theological Core:** The unifying identity of evangelicals, despite vast diversity, is a shared commitment to *evangelisation*, the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- **Multi-faceted Diversity:** The movement's strength lies in its diversity, which is geographic, ethnic, generational, denominational, and expressed through a wide array of social and missional engagements.

- **Compromised Witness:** The term "evangelical" has been damaged by political agendas and the moral and ethical failures of Christians, necessitating humility and a renewed commitment to living out the gospel.

The African Context: A Continent on the Rise

- **Demographic Opportunity:** Africa's "youth bulge" is a pivotal demographic moment that can either be a "dividend" for growth or a "time bomb" of instability. The church has a key role in shaping this future.
- **Socio-Economic Transformation:** The continent is experiencing the rise of an educated workforce and a growing middle class, coupled with unprecedented global connectivity through technology.
- **Spiritual Vitality:** Africa is an epicentre of church growth and spiritual hunger. Pastors and Christian leaders are among the most trusted figures in society, holding significant influence.
- **Biblical Fulfilment:** The current spiritual and social transformations in Africa can be seen as a modern fulfilment of biblical hope for the continent.
- **Abundant Harvest, Few Labourers:** The missiological challenge in Africa is not a lack of spiritual openness but a critical shortage of equipped leaders to disciple the vast number of new believers.

The Leadership and Training Imperative

- **The Training Crisis:** An overwhelming majority of pastors in Africa (estimated at over 90%) lack formal biblical and theological training, which directly contributes to widespread theological error, syncretism, and unhealthy church practices.
- **Barriers to Education:** The primary obstacles to formal training are financial constraints, lack of physical access to institutions, and the inflexibility of traditional educational models.
- **A Call for Innovation:** The scale of the need requires a "fresh theological education", new models that are affordable, accessible, decentralised, and offered in local languages and contexts.
- **Valuing Non-Formal Training:** The church must recognise and equip leaders like David Taunus's father, effective, proven ministers who may lack formal academic qualifications but are vital to the church's mission. Education must be taken *to* the leaders in their communities.

Invitation for Further Contribution

Your voice is a vital part of this global conversation. We invite you to add your reflections, insights, and questions to this discussion by visiting the following link: <https://weafeedback.com/monday-27/>

1. Scroll down to the Panel session titles,
2. When ready, select 'Start Recording' and provide your input (responding to the questions below.
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As an attendee you are invited to use these questions as a starting point to add your insights and reflections on the plenary session's content:

1. **The Necessity of Biblical Mandates:** How do biblical mandates, such as the Great Commission, govern our current strategies for global church growth and engagement?
2. **Equipping vs. Developing Leaders:** Considering the explosive growth (and the continuous addition of new believers), what is the most effective approach: focusing on equipping a steady stream of existing biblical leaders, or actively developing *new* leaders from the grassroots, as exemplified in 2 Timothy 2:1-2?
3. **Spiritual and Practical Encouragement:** Of the challenges and barriers shared by the speakers, what is your spiritual and practical encouragement to all of us as we move forward?

5. Conclusion and Call to Action

The plenary session presented a clear and undeniable conclusion: the future of evangelicalism is being forged in the cities and villages of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The explosive growth of the church, particularly in Africa, is not a future projection but a present reality that demands the attention of the entire global Christian community. This reality requires a fundamental reorientation, moving away from outdated, Western-centric models of mission and partnership towards a collaborative posture of mutual learning and support.

The primary call to action derived from the presentations is an urgent imperative to address the leadership development crisis. The very health and sustainability of this remarkable work of God are at risk if the millions of new believers are not guided by biblically grounded, spiritually mature, and well-equipped leaders. The global church, therefore, must prioritise its resources, creativity, and personnel towards building capacity in theological education across the Global South. This involves investing in existing institutions, but more critically, it means innovating and championing new, flexible, and accessible training pathways that can equip hundreds of thousands of pastors where they are, in a language they understand, and at a cost they can afford. The harvest is truly plentiful; the urgent task now is to labour together in equipping the harvesters.

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