Ecclesial Futures
2026 – Volume 7 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

# Burial Sites, Growing Flocks: Rethinking Cemetery Ministry for Church Growth

Kwaku Boamah

## Abstract

For centuries, the need for accommodation has not just been a problem of the living but also the dead. This study examines how Christian burial practices and church-owned cemeteries in Ghana function not only as cultural rites but also as deliberate tools for mission and church growth. It is imperative to explore *how burial practices among Ghanaian Christians could contribute to church expansion, discipleship, and communal identity.* Employing historical analysis of early Christian funerary engagements and ethnographic data from selected Methodist Church Ghana cemeteries, the paper assesses how burial rites met African cultural hopes of being "buried among one's people" while concurrently strengthening Christian identity. Influenced by Reception Theory, Ritual Re-embedding, and Missional Ecclesiology, the study evaluates how inherited Christian burial practices can be re-explained within African philosophy to reach the church's mission. The study shows that well-managed church cemeteries could provide pastoral care, attract new members, or encourage the return of members. The paper concludes that burial ceremonies are not simply welfare services but a missiological touchpoint that nurtures community identity, discipleship, and sustainable church growth. Churches that deliberately include funerary care with pastoral care can transform mourning into mission, consolidating both faith and membership.

**Keywords**: Burial, Mission, Catacombs, Cemeteries, Church growth

## Introduction

The question of accommodation is not confined to the living but also extends to the dead. Churches with dedicated cemeteries and well-structured funeral services, therefore, often appeal to some individuals seeking assurance of a more organized burial arrangement and a serene burial site. Consequently, burial rites can serve not only as a reflection of faith but also as a critical factor influencing church membership and fostering growth. In some indigenous contexts, like Ghana, Christian converts

often feel a strong need to undergo such indigenous rites to mark their transitions. In this light, the church in Ghana finds it equally necessary to design alternative rituals for its members to fill the vacuum and not be left out of these cultural practices, which are indeed symbols of identity. Christians in Ghana are very concerned about commemorating the various stages of their lives as a mark of their religious self-identity, which is difficult to overlook in their acceptance of the Christian faith. The church in Africa, therefore, in its bid to provide an alternative to these practices, has devised new ways of addressing this existential identity of African Christians without compromising the values of the Christian faith. Since one of life`s most important transitions is death and burial, the indigenous African has an expectation to be buried amongst his people upon his demise. This expectation seems to have found its way into Ghanaian Christianity, where the person who is dying expects to be buried (sleep) amongst Christians or, at the very least, given a Christian burial.

The Early Church gave attention to the dead and the bereaved family. *Scientific American* (1888) argues that although they did not even have places of worship, they had their secret places of burial, called catacombs, which they sometimes used as worship sites during the pre-Constantinian period. Stark (1997: 82) observed that Christianity, with its approach of care, significantly shifted them from a marginal sect to a dominant religious organization in the Roman Empire, writing, "Christians nursed the sick and buried the dead." The first Christians handled the dead with utmost care, offering honourable burials which attracted non-Christians (Brown 1981: 5–6; Jensen 2005: 56–9). The Christians gained a lot of admiration from the public due to how well they prepared the corpse for burial, to the extent that, according to Wilken (2003), Pliny the Younger thought of Christianity as a funerary club and not a faith organization. The Christian attention to the dead and burial preparations won the hearts of many non-Christians in the Roman Empire to the Christian faith.

In some Ghanaian contexts, church cemeteries are seen as better managed than public ones, offering dignity and spiritual rest, due to regular communal care. Burial practices, notwithstanding, differ across denominations. While many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches do not conduct burials in their churches. Historic Mainline Churches[1] commonly hold funeral services in their chapels. Church-owned cemeteries are also more visible in rural contexts than in urban contexts. Therefore, this paper aims to contrast the African indigenous concept of the "hereafter", which

1 Historic Mainline Churches is intentionally used here to emphasize theologically and historically rooted identity of older mission-established churches in Africa (e.g., Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Catholic). This conceptual distinction is supported by recent scholarship, which calls for African mainline churches to reclaim their historic theological identity and not be reduced to sociological labels (Mokhutso 2025). The modifier Historic signals the retrieval of theological depth and continuity within African mainline Christianity.


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

influences funeral and burial practices, with the Christian apocalypse philosophies. These worldviews and practices help explain why and how cemeteries serve as evangelistic tools, especially in indigenous cultures. The paper examines the example of the early church to demonstrate how its funerary and burial practices attracted non-Christians to the faith. Boamah (2022) has suggested that the Christian shift from *superstitio* to *religio* by the fourth century was driven by their focus on the dead, rooted in an apocalyptic theme linked to their belief in the church militant and triumphant. The examples from the Early Church underscore the historical importance of funerary and burial rites in making Christianity appealing to non-Christians. Additionally, the paper evaluates the role of cemeteries in the modern African church in evangelization and discipleship. For this, two cemeteries owned by the Methodist Church Ghana in the capital are assessed to understand their impact on the church. Qualitative data are collected and analysed to evaluate how effectively these cemeteries help draw members to the church and the extent to which they benefit the church overall. This paper uses historical-ethnographic approaches to explore the longue durée of Christian funerary rites and their modern reawakening in Ghanaian Christian ministry. Historical sources (primary archaeological and patristic accounts and secondary scholarship on catacombs and cemetery development) are examined to understand how the Early Church increased its membership through its care for the dead. Ethnographic fieldwork was done at two Methodist Church Ghana cemeteries in Accra using purposive sampling: semi-structured interviews with twelve key informants (funeral-committee members, clergy, and long-standing congregants with the approval of the church), participant observation of two funerary events, interviews, and a review of church records and cemetery management documents.[2] Data were thematically analysed across sources. Trustworthiness was sought through prolonged engagement, respondent validation of key themes, and transparent acknowledgment of limitations.

The study draws on Reception Theory, Ritual Re-embedding, and Missional Ecclesiology to evaluate how Christian burial rites demonstrate both historical continuity and modern innovation. Reception Theory allows exploration of how early Christian burial practices, influenced by Roman socio-religious experiences, are reinterpreted within African contexts. It helps examine how such rites have been recontextualized into contemporary Ghanaian Christianity (Jauss 1982: 21–2) and how they serve as

2 Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Ghana, specifically from the Research and Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology. Permission was also sought from the leadership of the respective churches from which participants were recruited. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. Furthermore, in the presentation of the paper, respondents' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

strategic expressions of Missional Ecclesiology, strengthening community bonds and fostering church growth (Bosch 1991: 373–6; Newbigin 1989: 222–5). As Brown (1981: 88–91) suggests, the past gains significance when it is reshaped by new communities based on their needs and contexts. This ritual re-embedding explores how rituals like funerals and burial rites are adapted to fit new cultural settings (Grimes, 2014: 119–21). In Ghana, Christian burial rites are integrated into communal frameworks that blend indigenous worldviews with Christian theological forms, making them tools for missional outreach. Magezi and Magezi (2023: 6–9), from a South African pastoral care perspective, emphasize that contextualized rituals play a vital role in faith transmission and identity building. The Missional Ecclesiology approach views the Church's daily practices as strategies aligned with God's mission (Bosch 1991: 373–6). Consequently, burial rites function not only as acts of care but also as missional opportunities for public theology, evangelism, and community engagement. Maluleke (2020: 52) affirms that African churches should leverage their cultural practices for witness within a multicultural environment. These three frameworks of Reception Theory, Ritual Re-embedding, and Missional Ecclesiology collectively provide a foundation for the study by analysing modern burial rites through the lens of early Christian funeral traditions and examining how these ceremonies operate as intentional missional strategies within Ghanaian church life. They affirm that burial rites in Ghanaian Christianity are more than ceremonial obligations – they are historically rooted, socially embedded, and theologically strategic tools for church growth and spiritual development.

## The African Indigenous Concept of the Hereafter and Burial

Generally, the African indigenous worldview and many Christian traditions agree that life does not end at death (Mbiti 1969: 24–8, 151–60; Okwu 1979; Wright, 2003: 31–46, 129–206). Some indigenous Africans hold a perspective on the philosophy of life that views life as cyclical, rather than linear, where the spiritual and physical planes of reality are fundamentally two sides of the same coin. For example, the soul, also known as "the seed of the creator" (Okwu 1979: 22), is thus thought to exist in conscious, physical, and integrated connection with the material body during human life on earth. Dancy and Davis (2006) maintain that the African understanding of death is a bodily separation of the person from other individuals. They observe that to highlight this lasting separation, funeral customs and rituals are performed with great care to ensure that no disrespect is shown to the deceased.

In the primal African worldview, death is the final rite of passage that every person must experience. Ancestral reverence or "ancestor worship" (Dancy and Davis 2006: 192) is motivated by the concept that there is a spiritual plane of existence that is unobserved, unexplored, and unreachable to humans. The members


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

of the supernatural realm are seen as essential components of the material world. According to Mbiti (1969: 25), even the terminology used to discuss death and dying in different parts of the continent frequently suggests a kind of homegoing for the deceased. This is also supported by several traditions and rituals that are observed during funerals. Mbiti unequivocally insists, "the departed are not dead; they are alive". For instance, the Akans and Yorubas historically place personal or household items with the deceased as symbols of continuity beyond death (Mbiti 1969: 151–4). Mbiti (1969: 36) suggested that "death is death and the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual from mankind to spirithood" and placed a stress on the cyclical nature of life, which involves birth, puberty, marriage, reproduction, old age, death, and then rebirth, seeing the ancestors as deceased progenitors. Ekore and Lanre-Abass (2016) agree that becoming an ancestor after death is a desire shared by all people, and it is thought that this cannot be accomplished if a person did not live a meaningful life or if his or her life was cut short, as in the case of an accident or an unnatural death. Dovlo (1993: 50) wrote that

> *Salvation also consists of joining the ancestors after death. The ancestors form a community and inclusion in that community implies salvation. In this ancestral community, individual human identity is not fully lost but through becoming part of the community, one's identity is, in a sense, preserved.*

The African worldview holds that ancestors have lived through various experiences and have now become examples for the living. At death, they take on a different role as intermediaries between the living and the deities or even the Supreme Being. They make ethical proposals that become standards for living. Like the divinities, the ancestors have the power to punish or reward. Not just anyone can be an ancestor; the person should have lived a good and exemplary life, had children, died a good death, and been buried properly. Richard Werbner (2004: 139) noted that "ancestors become key players that influence the living".

## Ancestors as Living

A basic notion for the Ga and Akan tribes of Ghana is that funerals are important. Like many other African tribes, there is the belief that you should be buried amongst his/her people. There is a Ga adage that says: "*Shikpɔŋ kwaaa gbonyo*"; that `the earth does not reject a corpse`, while the Akans also maintain "*Asaase nkye funu*", suggesting that no land will reject a corpse. The two adages argue that one can be buried anywhere since Mother Earth does not discriminate when it comes to dead bodies. That notwithstanding, the Akans have an adage that implies "when birds die, their feathers are not buried in space", indicating that no matter where a person is, when he/she dies, the corpse must be brought "home" to lie with his /her ancestors. This is why people can


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

live in other cities or countries for decades, yet when they die, regardless of cost, their family members will yearn to carry their bodies back to their homeland for burial. A biblical example of this trend was that when Joseph was about to die, he made his children swear to him that they would carry his bones with them when they went to the promised land. So as the children of Israel moved across the desert, they carried the bones of Joseph along with them and laid them to final rest in the Promised Land.

Among some cultures, even if the body cannot be brought back, they shave the hair, cut the nails, and carry it in a matchbox (because it looks like a casket). The hair and nails are brought to the hometown of the deceased, where some burial rites are performed as though it were the whole body. The belief is that as the hair and nails are brought back, the spirit is laid to rest amongst his/her people. According to oral tradition, as also captured by Rattray (1927: 189–90) of the Ashantis, Okomfo Anokye, the powerful priest, shaved the hair and nails of notable royals and used them in rituals to incorporate the spirits of the chiefs into the Golden Stool, thereby uniting the Ashanti groups under one polity.

## Early Christianity as a Funerary Club

Brown (1981) argues in the early imperial period, cremation was a common Roman funerary practice, in which the body of the dead was burnt to ashes and deposited in a desired place. However, Yeomans (2008) suggests that around the mid-second century, the idea of burying the dead was already developing. It must be stressed that the Jews normally buried their dead, and these burial sites were normally at the outskirts of the town. These sites for burial became known as catacombs in the Roman Empire around this time. Yeomans (2008: 56) argues that the word "catacomb" was from the Greek *kata kymbas,* which means "by the hallows", which other scholars like BaheyEldin (2021) and Nicolai (2019) suggest refers to removing stones in a quarry to make it a hallowed pit. In later years, the Jews and Christians gave it a new meaning to imply a subterranean burial structure.

The Christian practice of funeral activities and burials dates back to when it emerged in the Roman environment. Given their care for those in need and desperate situations, the Christians seized every opportunity to show care to the general public, particularly in times of crisis and the death of a person. The way the Christians made time for the deceased and bereaved influenced Pliny the Younger to describe the Christians as a funerary club that gave their attention to the dead, according to Wilken (2003). Stark (1997) observed that Christians gave a great deal of attention to the dead, preparing the corpses even when their family members deserted them. Tlučková (2022) further shows that not only did the Christians show concern, but also supported the organization of the funeral and burial obligations for the dead. The show of concern was even felt in times of pandemics. Stark (1997: 82) maintained


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

that at the time of the Antonina Plague, when many were dying, and hope was lost, Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, who was in exile, observed that the Christians "were infested by others with the diseases, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many in bursting and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead." This shows the height of Christian care for the sick to the extent of taking over the death of the sick. This then invariably provided evangelistic results where the families of such persons were receptive to the faith, influenced by the level of care offered to their relatives in dire moments. Stark (1997: 83) wrote that in comparison to the non-Christians, Dionysius remarked that "the heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them onto the roads before they were dead and treating unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease." The Christians would not allow the corpse of a deceased to rot, but the non-Christians would leave the body unburied, thereby making the Christians attract the admiration of the general public to be part of this group of persons who believe in Christ.

In terms of burial, Nicolai (2019) and Beard, North, and Price (1998) argue that the Christians and Jews simply adopted what Gruen (2019: 201) described as an "inhumation" form of burial, which had just started in the mid-second century. It must be noted, however, that catacombs were not started originally by Christians or even the Jews, given that during the second century, the Romans themselves had started establishing some underground burial chambers which can be described as catacombs. Jews also used catacombs, and scholars today have identified about seven Jewish catacombs. Dunn (2015) argues that persecutions and martyrdoms built early Christian communal identity, including the adoption of secret burial spaces that established their identity and solidarity during times of marginalization. In an earlier work compiled by Antonio Bosio, Dunn (2015) identified about thirty subterranean galleries of Christian catacombs, and it is argued that over the years, forty more Christian catacombs have been found, showing the widespread nature and prominence of catacombs to Christian developments. Dunn (2015) argues that by the fourth century, the Christians had about a thousand-kilometre corridor of catacombs with space for about six million corpses.

> *To the casual observer, the Christian community in the cities of the Roman Empire appeared remarkably similar to religious associations such as the one described above or to a burial society such as the one at Lanuvium…To call Christianity a burial association was not a negative judgment. Indeed, such a characterisation helped people to place the Christian group within a familiar frame of reference and gave outsiders a sense of what went on in its meetings and what one could expect if one were to join. (Wilken 2003: 44–5)*


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

This remark essentially emphasizes the character of early Christianity as an organization that gave attention to the dead and showed great levels of care for the needs of the destitute. Yeomans (2008) even argues that there may be other Christian catacombs that are undercovered because the Christians largely buried the martyrs in church places and hence gave attention to these places. The development of these catacombs was not widely known because other scholars, such as BaheyEldin (2021) and Beard, North, and Price (1998), maintain that some Christians developed such places, possibly in their homes, as secret places only known to them.

Four of these major catacombs, as observed by BaheyEldin (2021), Gruen (2019), and Nicolai (2019), have become places of tourist visitation in Rome, including San Sebastiano, San Callisto, the Catacomb of Domitilla, and the Catacomb of Priscilla. The development of these catacombs was before the edict of Milan by Emperor Constantine, which tolerated Christian presence in the Roman Empire; hence, the catacombs were in secret places before Constantine. However, from the period of the toleration of the Christians when it became a Roman religion into the fourth century, the Christians stopped using the catacombs and instead buried their members around the church compounds. However, Jensen (2013: 317) notes that "burial in the Roman catacombs continued well into the sixth century, long after Christianity had gained imperial acceptance". Yeomans (2008) contends that Christians started developing cemeteries and, around the twelfth century, are argued to have forgotten about the catacombs. The development of Christian involvement in funerals and burials has therefore been a developing part of Christian evolution from its inception.

The early church showed much care for the dead, sometimes at the peril of their own lives, through the development of catacombs to the establishment of cemeteries. The church today, therefore, should build on these developments. Given the African worldview on the dead and the hereafter, the church today must give considerable attention to funerals and burials of members. The story should not just end here, but the church must develop comprehensive and impactful structures to nurture members in faith, like the early church examples.

## Mainline Churches and Burial

In terms of funerals and caring for the dead, the Historic Mainline Churches, for example, Presbyterians, have well-structured and laid-down regulations on how to handle such members. Upon the death of a member, the family of the deceased contacts the church for a suitable date, and the church becomes a major stakeholder in preparation for the burial.

Two examples illustrate some of the tensions around burial practices in Ghana today from the interviews. As a first example, the mother of a popular Ghanaian international charismatic preacher relayed during the interview his mother's request,


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

"Let me be buried by a Presbyterian minister."[3] A request like this affirms her worldview. This is crucial because, ideally, her son would like to do it in his church, but her stern request could be due to the liturgy and practices of the Presbyterians, which are different from the charismatics. The other possibility is that she was a Presbyterian but later joined her son's church. Therefore, seeking a Presbyterian to officiate at her funeral is "going back home". She was a Presbyterian but had joined her son's church yet did not want to disconnect from her Presbyterian Church, owing to her love for the Presbyterian hymns. Now she wanted to be buried by a Presbyterian minister. In another example, a dying mother told her children, "by all means and at all costs, make sure I am buried by the church when I die because a church burial is very important for my transition".[4] This is interesting because she considered that for her to be safely transitioned to the underworld, she must be buried by the church. The instructions are from a woman who was a queen mother, and who, before her enstoolment, was a leader in the Presbyterian Church.[5] She was not sure if the church would agree to bury her, and that as she was a member of the traditional authority, the church might be sidelined in her burial. She wanted the church involved because, perhaps, the church burial is more organized, orderly, and soothing to pave the way for a soul in transit. His son argues that she wanted to be buried also at the church's cemetery because of the clean and spacious ambience. The traditional authority, however, could not allow that because she was the queen mother and could not be allowed to "sleep" in a place not among her ancestors, who equally sat on her stool.

These examples exemplify the significance many African Christians attach to funeral and burial rites as a show of dignity, identity, and belonging, even in death. Therefore, it is significant who officiates the funeral and where the deceased is put to rest. These worldviews are influenced by indigenous attachments that also influence Christian practice. Consequently, the church is expected to be more conscious of members' transitional expectations, even at death, and to understand that burial places build communal attachments. From the interviews, therefore, many Ghanaian Christians like burial by the Historical Mainline Churches and cemeteries managed by churches. The Christian funeral ministry is not only of pastoral importance but also disciple-making.

3 Salome A.B., Interview 2, April 2025.
4 Mary R., Interview 1, April 2025.
5 Nana P. O., Interview 3, June 2025.


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

## Cemeteries and Interviews with Church Members

It looks as if the Ghanaian Christians, specifically, and African Christians generally, have in their approach to Christianity drawn on the notion of being buried properly and among their people. Based on the Christian doctrine that Christians who die are going to be with the Lord, Ghanaians who have converted to Christianity say they take this very seriously because they want to be buried in a "Christian cemetery". Based on the examples of the Presbyterian women from the interviews, consciously or unconsciously, when there is a proper burial in which the deceased is laid to rest by the church and at the church cemetery, the souls of the departed are believed to rest well. This perception explains the spike in the return of many people who had left the church for decades due to the inception of Pentecostalism. Furthermore, it also explains why many people who are very old and have grown up in the church insist, even when they have joined charismatic churches, that a Minister of the Historic Mainline church should bury them, which is why some of them want to have their membership or tithe cards to prove they are members.

In some cases, Ministers have denied certain families the opportunity to bring their dead or deceased relatives to the church for a church funeral. The reasons given are that such deceased persons had not been part of the church for a while, hence the ceremony could be done in nearby fields or parks. On many occasions, the deceased or sometimes their families have insisted that the dead should be brought to church and certain hymns should be sung for their souls to be at peace. From African philosophical thinking, death is a communal and moral transition where Ghanaian Christians desire funerary rituals, marked by singing, scripture, preaching, and prayer, as the definition of a befitting burial (Mbiti 1969; Gyekye 1996).

Quite unlike the charismatic churches, except for a few Pentecostal Churches, it is visibly observed in Ghana that the Historic Mainline Churches are very concerned about acquiring land for cemeteries as part of their presence in a community. Apart from getting plots of land to build chapels and educational infrastructure, they usually get a separate site on the outskirts of the community to be used as a cemetery. In an interaction with a member of a funeral and burial committee on why there is a need for church cemeteries, he remarked that it is essential for churches to have such facilities. He remarked that at the community cemetery where members of the community are buried, given the fact that it is managed by the traditional authority, sometimes some rituals take place there in cemeteries that are not Christian. The traditional authority poured libations, served mashed yams with eggs in a pot for the gods, and did other things that the Christian faith frowns on in their cemeteries. Therefore, having their members buried at such places affects the level of peaceful rest. Furthermore, the community cemeteries are usually unkempt and not well managed, but the Christian place is usually well kept in terms of the arrangements and weeding of the place, making it very serene and comfortable, not only for


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

the dead but also for the family members to easily locate the tomb of their beloved members.

Asked about how they acquired such plots of land, given the size and the location, a respondent from the interview explained that the traditional authority offered it to them for free upon request.[6] In most cases, the custodians of the lands, which are the traditional authorities, give such lands because they believe it is community members who will be buried there, and so they offer it freely to the churches to meet their needs. The churches then have to show appreciation for the benevolent gesture as a seal to the gift by paying a token. This token is not in payment for the donation but as a show of appreciation. The churches then have committees that manage their cemeteries and everything around them in the interest of the church. The funeral and burial committee then regulates the assets and reports every happening to the leadership of the church. The few members of such committees in different churches who interacted with us on this research affirm that the cemetery is seen as a property of the whole church; therefore, any member of the church anywhere desirous to be buried there could be allowed if all conditions are fulfilled.

In using the cemetery as an evangelistic touchpoint, members of the funeral and cemetery committee from the interview suggested that members of the church include people from various walks of life across the social strata.[7] They affirmed that members are very excited about the fact that the churches have these cemeteries. When asked if members would prefer to be buried in the church cemeteries or the community cemeteries, one of the respondents quickly retorded "ah, the church cemeteries are neat, serene, peaceful and organized".[8] It was further noted that in some cases, the cemetery has been used as a disciplinary tool. There was a case recounted by one of the funeral and burial committee members from the interview that a member of the church was engaged in behaviours noted as non-Christian. The member was cautioned (or told) that if he did not change, he would not be buried in the church's cemetery. This was the case of a recalcitrant member, but after the caution (or threat) by the church in this regard, he quickly amended his ways of doing things with the hope that he would not miss the pleasure of having his mortal remains at the Christian cemetery. On the other hand, however, some members of the church, recounted by the funeral committee in the interview, also expressed challenges with the happenings of the management of the cemeteries.[9] Such members have had to stop attending the churches because they feel unfairly

6 Gbawe, Focus Group, May 2025.
7 Nungua, Focus Group, May 2025.
8 Abraham A., Focus Group, May 2025.
9 Manfred S.B., Interview 6, April 2025; Sandra A. A., Interview 5, April 2025; Alfred R. E., Interview 4, April 2025.


Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

treated. A member complained that she stopped, but for some reason had to come back to the church.[10] Her case was due to the unpreparedness of the funeral and burial committee of the church to locate the place of burial of her late father, and the attitude of the committee in general. Some of the committee members accepted that they had heard rumours of some members of the church having some misgivings relative to the management of the cemeteries.

In light of these responses, it is very clear that members of the church are exceedingly happy about the hosting of cemeteries by the churches. However, there are concerns about the application and usage of the cemeteries. It is also clear that when applied very well, it has evangelistic capacity. However, it can also be a bane to the church if mismanaged. Given the pleasure of the members about the cemeteries, it is imperative that, like the case of the early church and given the indigenous worldview, the church in Africa leverage the acquisition of cemeteries, to win and disciple its members.

Jindra and Noret (2011) observed that in Africa, the events surrounding death are often described as the key cultural events of a locality and the context. They argue that "funerals are among the most significant public events in African societies" (Jindra and Noret 2011: 1). Entire neighbourhoods and villages come together with family members and friends who may have travelled to other localities and countries, and are expected to come back. In the context of funerals, for the typical African, many resources are pooled together for an elaborate ceremony. This is because it is believed that funerals and commemorations of deaths are a celebration of life, therefor in Ghana, when a prominent person or an elderly person dies, the obituary poster notes 'life well lived' or 'celebration of Life'. As such, it tends to be the largest and most expensive cultural event, which brings together multitudes of people from various locations, locally or from the diaspora.

## Conclusion

This study reveals that African funeral celebrations afford an important missional opportunity for the church's engagement with the community. Funerals entice large crowds, providing a significant avenue for witnessing. Nevertheless, an effective mission must go beyond evangelistic presence. Those who are won through funerals and cemetery practices must be intentionally discipled, following Jesus' model by attending to both spiritual and material needs of such converts.

Based on empirical data and interactions with historical reconstruction and ethnographic study, the study exposes a historical pattern in which Christian funerary care

10 Sandra A. A., Interview 5, April 2025.



Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef24904

has functioned as social witness. When church cemetery management is deliberately combined with pastoral care, it becomes an avenue of both quantitative and qualitative growth. This affirms Bosch's (1991) and Newbigin's (1989) vision of the church as intrinsically missional, while echoing Brown's (1981) positioning that funerary care in early Christianity embodied public theological witness. Furthermore, Grimes (2014) and Magezi and Magezi (2023) show that rituals re-embedded within local contexts become authoritative sites of identity formation and pastoral engagement, a reality echoed in Maluleke's (2020) call for culturally grounded African ecclesiology.

Attracting new members through burial services is, therefore, only the beginning. When burial practices are treated not merely as welfare services but as strategic pastoral and missional engagements, they become vital instruments of sustainable growth. By intentionally investing in discipleship and holistic care, churches can indeed turn mourning into mission, fostering enduring growth in both faith and community.

## About the Author

Kwaku Boamah is a Senior Lecturer in the Department for the Study of Religions, School of Arts, College of Humanities, University of Ghana, and a Research Fellow of UNISA, Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology in the College of Human Sciences. Contact: kwakuboamah@ug.edu.gh.

## References

BaheyEldin, D. M. 2021. Christ Representations in Early Christian Catacombs in Rome and Egypt. *Bulletin of the Center Papyrological Studies* 38 (1): 587–605.

Beard, M., N. John and P. Simon. 1998. *Religions of Rome.* Cambridge University Press.

Boamah, K. 2022. "The Early Church: Internal and external oppositions." In K. Boamah, E. E Novieto and I. Boaheng (eds), *Introduction to Christianity: An African reader*, 140–72. Sub-Saharan Publishers.

Bosch, D. J. 1991. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Brown, P. 1981. *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dancy, J., and W. D. Davis. 2006. "Key Topics on End-of-life Care. Derived from the last miles of the way home 2004 National Conference to improve end-of-life care for African Americans". *Family and Psychosocial Dimensions of Death and Dying in African Americans,* 187–211.

Dovlo, E. 1993. "Ancestors and Soteriology in African and Japanese Religions." *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 3 (1): 48–57.

Dunn, G. D. 2015. "Life in the Cemetery: Boniface I and the Catacomb of Maximus". *Augustinianum* 55 (1): 137–57. https://doi.org/10.5840/agstm20155516.

Ekore, R. I., and B. Lanre-Abass. 2016. "African Cultural Concept of Death and the Idea of Advance Care Directives." *Indian Journal of Palliative Care* 22 (4): 369–072, doi: 10.4103/0973.1075.191741.

Grimes, R. L. 2014. *The Craft of Ritual Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gruen, W. "Chip". 2019. "Roman Catacombs." In *The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries,* 201–20.
Gyekye, K. 1996. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction.* Accra: Sankofa.
Jauss, H. R. 1982. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Jensen, R. M. 2005. *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
———. 2013. *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy.* Harvard University Press.
Jindra, M., and Joel Noret. 2011. *African Funerals and Sociocultural Change: Funerals in Africa. Explorations of a social phenomenon.* Berghahn.
Magezi, V., and C. Magezi. 2023. "Pastoral Care and African Rituals: Exploring Ritual Engagement as Faith Formation in African Christianity", *HTS Theological Studies* 79 (1): 1–11. [DOI: 10.4102/hts.v79i1.8479]
Maluleke, T. S. 2020. "Decolonising Ecclesiology: African Mission in a Post-Christian Context", *Missionalia* 48 (1): 47–60. [DOI: 10.7832/48-1-329]
Mbiti, J. S. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy.* Johannesburg: Heinemann.
Mokhutso, .2025. "Reimagining Mainline Churches that are African", *Acta Theologica* 45 (2): 129–51.
Newbigin, L. 1989. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. London: SPCK.
Nicolai, V. F. 2019. "The catacombs". In *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology*, ed. R. C. William, T. W. Davis, and D. K. Pettegrew, 66–88. Oxford University Press.
Okwu, A. S. O. 1979. "Life, Death, Reincarnation, and Traditional Healing in Africa", *African Issues* 9 (3): 19–24.
Rattray, R. S. 1927. *Religion and Art in Ashanti.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
*Scientific American*. 1871. "The Catacombs of Rome." *Scientific American* 98. 276–79.
———. 1888. "The Roman Catacombs." *Scientific American,* 312.
Stark, R. 1997. *The Rise of Christianity: How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries.* HarperOne.
Werbner, R. 2004. *Reasonable, Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana: The Public Anthropology of Kalanga Elites*. Indiana University Press.
Wilken, R. L. 2003. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them.* Yale University Press.
Wright, N. T. 2003. *The Resurrection of the Son of God.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press,
Yeomans, S. 2008. "City of the Dead." *Archaeology,* 55–8.