

When God Closes a Door, Somewhere God Opens a Window: 2023 Report on Orbis Books to the Africa Region

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New Vernon, New Jersey, USA
17 January, 2023

NOTE: This 2023 Report was for the Maryknoll Society of Priests and Brothers Africa Region Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya in January, 2023. It was presented on an online Zoom Call. It presupposes the comments and suggestions made in previous reports.

In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s perhaps the best known Broadway Musical in Catholic circles in Eastern Africa was the *Sound of Music* (original play 1959). The movie version (1965) was shown and reshowed in Catholic convents, religious houses and seminaries everywhere. Julie Andrews was much loved. There is the famous scene when Maria is leaving the convent and says goodbye to the Mother Superior who says that Maria does not have a vocation to religious life but has a special call in the outside world. Then the Mother Superior gives the memorable line *When God closes a door, somewhere God opens a window*.

This saying provides a good metaphor for reading the signs of the times today. Certainly we have plenty of closed doors in the Africa Region: the effects of Covid 19 coronavirus pandemic; the dramatic decrease in the number of Maryknoll priests and Brothers in the Africa Region; aging membership; and moving out of Ndoleleji Parish and Buza Parish.

But we also have some new open windows/new opportunities. Here are five:

1. Orbis Books in our Maryknoll Formation and Education Program

There are many creative ways that we can use [Orbis Books](#). John Waldrep describes how he is using *The Misfits: Haunting the Human, Unveiling the Divine* by Larry Lewis in conjunction with the novel *The Power and the Glory* in our Formation Program in Nairobi in 2023. Many of the newer Orbis Books are in our Library at the Maryknoll Society House in Nairobi.

The African Maryknoll seminarians and prospects use Orbis Books in their papers, Long Essays and reports in various schools – Tangaza, Hekima, Apostles of Jesus Seminary, Catholic Theological Union (CTU), etc. I have worked with some of our seminarians on papers on [Small Christian Communities](#) that use several of my Orbis Books such as *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment* and *Towards an African Narrative Theology*. An example is the paper: *Low Participation of Young People in Young People Small Christian Communities (YPSCCs): A Case Study of St. Austin's Parish, Msongari, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya*.

Our newest Maryknoll priest, John Siyumbu, gave these two examples of his papers at CTU:

- a. Midterm Examination in the Course “Theology and Spirituality of the Religious Priesthood.” Spring 2022. Kenan B. Osborne, *Orders and Ministry* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006).
- b. Final Examination in the Course “Trinity and Mission: The God of Jesus Christ.” Spring 2022. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, "The Mad Preacher and the Three Persons in One God" in *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008).

Other seminarians have used Orbis Books by Mike Kirwen, Larry Lewis, John Sivalon and myself as well as African theologians such as Laurenti Magesa and Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator in their papers, Long Essays and reports on African culture and African theology.

2. Two Growing Initiatives in African Theology in the USA:

- a. Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology (CWCIT). DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois. Nigerian diocesan priest theologian and Orbis author Father Stan Ilo is spearheading many creative networks, conferences and publishing activities through:

Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network (PACTPAN)

[Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network | Facebook](#)

African Catholic Voices (online Podcast interviews)

[African Catholic Voices \(buzzsprout.com\)](#)

Ilo edited the important volume *Handbook of African Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2022) that contains 50 essays/chapters by scholars, specialists and practitioners. It is arranged in five sections: History and Mission; Formation, Education and Communications; Church and Society; The Body, Health and Healing. An African Edition will be published in two volumes in Nairobi in 2023 by CUEA Press. It includes Joseph Healey, “Small Christian Communities in Africa: Histories, Themes, Development and Challenges,” Small Christian Communities (SCCs) Global Collaborative Website, retrieved on 17 January, 2023, [scc_histories_themes.pdf \(smallchristiancommunities.org\)](#)

- b. Nigerian Jesuit priest theologian and Orbis author Father Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ, known to many as “Bator,” has been appointed to Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in Los Angeles, California, USA. He will hold the Endowed Charles S. Casassa Chair of Catholic Social Values at the rank of Clinical Professor and through this Chair be the Distinguished Scholar of African Theology in the Department of Theological Studies at LMU’s Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts. Bator will begin his new mission in the Fall Semester of 2023. We hope Bator will jumpstart new interest, teaching, writing and publishing in African Theology. Bator is a strong supporter of the Small Christian Communities Model of Church that he likes to call “a new way of becoming church” and “the church in the neighborhood.”

3. Orbis Books in the Synodal Process in Africa

Orbis Books African authors and books are deeply involved in the “Synodal Process” in Africa including deeper listening and discernment in the Holy Spirit. These authors include Paul Bere, Anne Béatrice Faye, Stan Ilo, Philomena Mwaura, Joséé Ngalula, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator and Nicholaus Segeja. The African Continental Synod Assembly will be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 1 -- 6 March 2023. We are looking forward to the Orbis Book in 2023 of *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality* -- writings by Pope Francis with an introduction by Sister Nathalie Becquart. Using our earlier metaphor, in an interview with the *Vatican News* Cardinal Mario Grech said: “With the naming of Sister Nathalie Becquart and her possibility of participating with the right to vote [in the Synod of Bishops on “Synodality” in October, 2023], a door is being opened.”

4. Orbis Books’ New Windows in 2023

a. Orbis Books believes it has strong momentum heading into 2023. The General Council of the Maryknoll Society believes that Orbis makes a valuable contribution to mission education and is worth the expenditure. Hopefully there will be more co-publishing with Christian Publishing Houses in Africa and on-demand printing (POD).

b. We live in a Digital World. New windows are opening for Orbis Books through the internet; world wide web; social media such as Zoom, Google Meets, Skype, What’sApp and YouTube; platforms such as webinars, podcasts and blogs; and different types of networking. One example is the online “One on One” Podcast series where Robert Ellsberg interviews Orbis Books authors on YouTube [One On One - YouTube](#)

5. Challenges in 2023

Two challenges for Orbis Books in Africa in 2023:

- a. Research shows that 97 % of the buyers of Orbis Books live in the USA. How are we going to get more Africans living in Africa to buy Orbis Books – either the paperback or Ebook edition? An obstacle is that African readers living in an African country such as Kenya and possessing only a National Credit Card cannot buy Orbis Books online through Orbis, Amazon and other websites. They need an International Credit Card that many don’t have.
- b. How are we going to connect and network with potential new African authors of Orbis Books living in Africa especially younger authors and especially African women? Certainly the social media and the internet are essential for networking. Perhaps the presence of Maryknoll African seminarians at Tangaza, Hekima and CTU will open a new window of opportunity.

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