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Contact: Robert Priest  
Professor of Mission and Anthropology  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
847.317.8137  
[rpriest@tiu.edu](mailto:rpriest@tiu.edu)  
[www.tiu.edu](http://www.tiu.edu)  
[www.henrycenter.org/witchcraft-accusations](http://www.henrycenter.org/witchcraft-accusations)

***Church Leaders and Theologians Tackle Challenge of Witchcraft and Witch Accusations in Africa***

Deerfield, Il., April 5 — Fifty Christian scholars and church leaders, a majority from Africa (Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania), but including participants from Asia, Europe, and North America, gathered at Africa International University (AIU) in Nairobi early last month to discuss how the church should respond to witchcraft and to witch accusations. While a variety of secular human rights groups have organized against witch accusations and violence, this historic gathering marks the first large-scale, international and interdenominational effort within the church and within the framework of Christian theology to address the growing presence of witch accusations and violence.

Health problems, death, infertility, and financial problems are widely attributed to “witches” thought to be acting through evil occult power. Elderly women are the ones most often alleged to be witches. Orphaned children are another vulnerable group, often willing to falsely confess to practicing witchcraft. Rev. Haruna Tukurah, a Nigerian pastor with ECWA (Evangelical Church Winning All), reported that 250 out of the 300 children in the orphanage he ran had been accused of being witches. Even pastors are often accused of being witches.

The consequences of witch accusations are devastating, ranging from social ostracism to exile from one’s community to beatings and murder. According to Tanzanian police records, in Sukumaland alone more than 200 women (mostly elderly widows) are lynched as witches each year. Those most frequently mistreated as witches are also society’s most vulnerable: the elderly, widows, orphans, and strangers. Dr. John Jusu, Dean of the School of Professional Studies at AIU, stressed that these are precisely the categories of people whom God calls on us to protect.

Dr. Timothy Nyasulu, Synod Moderator and Education Secretary of the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia, Malawi (the largest Presbyterian church in Africa), highlighted the role of traditional diviners in witch accusations, reporting statistics on 586 church members (from ten congregations over ten years) who

received church discipline for consulting diviners when they felt someone had bewitched them. Diviners are often more accessible than either health services or police. They may be motivated by hope of profits to tell their clients that a family member or neighbor has caused the sickness or misfortune. Christian “prophets” and “prayer centers” also frequently endorse witch accusations. Henock Banda reported on his research into “child witches” of Malawi, and said that when pastors pray for or attempt to exorcise accused “witches” this sometimes has the effect of providing pastoral endorsement to the charge that they are witches, rather than freeing them in the eyes of the community.

Some alleged witches seek exorcism, often after confessing under duress. Dr. Opoku Onyinah, Chancellor of Pentecost University College, Accra, Ghana, and Chairman of the largest Protestant denomination in Ghana, the Church of Pentecost, cautioned that discernment is required and that exorcism is often inappropriate because the accused is neither a witch nor a person possessed by demons but a person suffering psychological and social problems.

Researchers suggested that “neo-traditional witchcraft” was the most appropriate term for the contemporary phenomenon because both traditional and modern influences contribute. Contemporary influences such as Nollywood movies and the popular Ghanaian film genre that was analyzed by Professor Asamoah-Gyadu of Trinity Theological Seminary in Accra, were cited as contributing causes. Deliverance ministries and the prosperity gospel (sometimes influenced by ministries from the USA) also reinforce the belief that witches are harming others through evil supernatural means.

The assumption that witchcraft fears would wither away with increasing access to modern education has proven flawed. The wearing of amulets as protection against witchcraft is common among even Christian high school students in Kenya, as demonstrated by Justus Mutuku, Chaplain at Kabarak University. According to Nigerian theologian Dr. Samuel Kunhiyop who is currently serving as General Secretary of ECWA – a denomination with over 5 million regular attenders – there is currently a “wildfire” of witch accusations across all denominations.

How to understand the role of the demonic either in the lives of accused “witches” or in the “accusers” was a matter of discussion. Many African church leaders stress that “witchcraft is real,” and many African Christians pray regularly that God will protect them from the attacks of witches.

Meeting in small groups, participants shared case studies and identified theological and Biblical themes that can inform our understandings of witchcraft, can help counter witch accusations, and can underpin pastoral counseling. Biblical and theological scholars guided initial reflection on critical passages and doctrines. Plans were brainstormed for further research and writing, for curricular development, for partnering together and with others to turn the tide on the modern epidemic of witch accusations and violence, and for finding additional funding to help make all this possible.

The conference was sponsored by the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) in Deerfield, Illinois as part of TEDS’ partnership with Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) of AIU. The conference organizers were Dr. Robert Priest, Professor of Mission and Anthropology at TEDS, Dr. Tite Tiénou, Senior Vice President and Dean at TEDS, Dr. James Nkansah-Obrempong, Dean of NEGST, and Dr. Steve Rasmussen, Lecturer in Missions and Intercultural Studies at AIU.

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three centers. An educational ministry of the Evangelical Free Church of America, TEDS is located in Deerfield, Illinois, with regional centers in South Chicago, Florida, and California, and extension sites throughout the Midwest. TIU has more than 2,800 students from 45 countries and throughout the United States. TIU exists to educate men and women to engage in God's redemptive work in the world by cultivating academic excellence, Christian faithfulness, and lifelong learning.