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**Conversions and Transformations:
Missiological Approaches to Religious Change**

A Missio political critique of National Prayer Breakfasts in Jamaica since 1981

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a missio-political lens to critique the thirty-six National Prayer Breakfasts that have been held in Jamaica since 1981, that an ecumenical group of clergy from mainline (older) churches and younger evangelical churches brought together leaders from varied backgrounds of church and state, political organisations, commerce and business to foster unity within the nation. According to Earl Thames, one of the pioneering members that envisioned and created this annual event, the objective was to, “influence them towards accepting and practising the principles of Christ”.¹ It began within a political context shaped by regional geo-political tensions between the USA and Cuba that resulted in local societal instability. The national Elections of 1981 resulted in political conflicts between the two dominant political parties that supported competing ideological and economic interests between communist Cuba and the USA within the Caribbean region. In response to the consequential negative societal challenges, an initiative from concerned Pastors advocated for the introduction of a National Prayer Breakfast, modelled on that which was held in the USA².

These ‘national’ prayer events have led to key questions being asked about their continuing relevance in the light of the changing religio-political, social and economic realities. The religious scene that was one dominated by churches with membership allegiance of over 76% of the population has been reduced to about 64% with consequential rise in the establishment of other faiths such as Islam and Rastafari. The changing social, political and economic landscape has also resulted in a shift from the dominance of Euro-centric mission founded churches to USA neo-conservative founded evangelical and charismatic churches. Jamaica with just fewer than 3 million people living within a small landmass of 10,991 km²³, it makes the country unique in having one of the highest numbers of churches per square kilometer.⁴ The systemic divisions and unhealthy competition among the churches have spilt over into the social and political realm.

This paper argues that the many years of holding the National Prayer Breakfast have unintentionally massaged and masked the fundamental challenges of economic inequalities and injustice that destabilizes the wellbeing of the nation. The same leaders that gather to pray were also by design or default preying⁵ on the people and creating systemic injustice. It could be argued that the partnership struck with the business sector to sponsor the National Prayer Breakfast has compromised the integrity of the project in speaking “Truth to Power” because it is the “powers” that pay the bills for hosting the event. Through the use of online documentary reports an examination will be made of the effectiveness of the NPBC to achieve its missional objectives within the changing socio-political and economic landscape of Jamaica since 1981.

¹ Earl Thames, *National Breakfast and Dons who hear from God*, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20150118/cleisure/cleisure2.html> Accessed 24/2/2016

² Ibib

³ 4,244 square miles

⁴ According to journalist Tamara-Scott Williams, Jamaica has too many churches per square mile numbering about 2.75 churches per square mile http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/columns/Time-for-church_8322467 Accessed 26/2/2016

⁵ Patria-Kaye Aarons, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/commentary/20160122/whats-point-prayer-breakfastst> Accessed 24/2/2016