



A Journal of the Faculty of Arts
Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

THE
INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL

**OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH
IN HUMANITIES (INJOCORH)**

ISSN 3026-9067

Volume 2 Number 1 2024

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A Historical Background of Proliferation of Churches in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper discusses the historical background of proliferation of churches in Nigeria. The study is informed by the alarming rate at which churches are springing up in Nigeria. The paper aims at tracing back to the root of church proliferation. The research utilizes a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on historical data, and adopts the primary and secondary sources, including religious texts, theological treatises, scholarly articles, and archival records. The records are examined to reconstruct the historical trajectory of the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. The study reveals that the history of church proliferation in Nigeria is divided into five periods which are: the period of introducing Latin Christianity in the 15th and 16th Centuries; the period of denominationalism and missionary activities in the 19th Century from 1842 onward; the period of evolution of independent Churches; the period of indigenous African churches; and the period of the birth of Charismatic and Pentecostal churches. Amongst others, it is established in this paper that the proliferation of churches in Nigeria is caused by selfish motive for financial prosperity, doctrinal disagreements and the quest for position and power. The work recommends that, instead of establishing more churches in the nation without tangible impact on the morality of members, pastors and church leaders should focus on preaching the gospel of Christ for the purpose of building the moral and spiritual lives of her members. More so, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should wake up to their responsibilities of controlling, regulating and punishing churches that contravene the set goals to the association. The study concludes that, although church proliferation has its positive impacts, the negative effects brought about by the proliferation of churches are overriding the good side of it which is reflecting in the current situation in the country where corruption and moral decadence are the order of the day.

Keywords: Proliferation, Church, Christianity, Nigeria, Denominationalism

Introduction

Christianity in Nigeria dates back to the 16th century when the Portuguese introduced Latin Christianity in Benin and Warri. Looking at Christianity from that early beginning to the present time, many stages of development had taken place resulting to the planting and growth of churches. Several Christian churches abound here and there. Hence, the study will look at the factors that facilitate the emergence and proliferation of churches in Nigeria.

The proliferation of churches in Nigeria today is as a result of numerical strength of churches. This rapid multiplication of churches according to Ibiyinka (2011) is borne out of the understanding that there is freedom of religious worship in Nigeria. The present rate of church proliferation in the country is such as having a minimum of fifty different churches on a street of few kilometers long, having some or more different churches sharing the same storey building in urban areas and cities where there is lack of space. This situation made a columnist of *The Nigeria Newspoint* in 2015 categorically assert that "Nigeria is a country with the largest number of churches per capital in the world" and that Nigeria has become a fertile soil for the growth of independent churches. Hence, this study examines the historical background of church proliferation in Nigeria.



Historical Background of Church Proliferation in Nigeria

The following are five periods which led to the proliferation of churches in Nigeria:

The Period of the Introduction of Latin Christianity

According to Adamolekun (1999:45), this period dates from the first contact of Europeans with the natives of the Delta region in 1472 till the close of the 18th Century, a period of about three hundred years. During this period, Christianity failed to gain any permanent foothold in Benin, Warri, Bonny and Calabar. Antonio Galvao, the 16th century historian, attributes the first Portuguese voyage through the Bight of Benin in 1472 to one Ruy de Sequira. The final settlement of the Portuguese in the Bight of Benin began in the 1480s through the availability of slave, just as gold was available in the Port of Elmina. Ryder (1969:24-25) asserts that the "Portuguese trade with Benin brought political ties, and under King John II, Christian missionaries were sent out with traders." Christianity was introduced into the kingdom of Benin by accident. It was accidental because the Portuguese were in the West Coast of Africa primarily to trade in gold, ivory, pepper and slave. As a Christian nation, they aimed at the ultimate conversion to the Catholic faith in their trading partners. Thus, King John II and the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church at home encouraged them. Secondly, the Portuguese sought the conversion of their native trading partners because, as Christians, they were looking for allies against Islam. The missionary activity in the 15th century was minimal because the commercial interest in trade in slave and pepper took prominence. However, the 16th century witnessed a remarkable interest in missionary activities on the part of the Portuguese. Because of this, Esigie (1504-1550), the Oba of Benin, sent an embassy to king Manuel of Portugal in 1514, and in the following year Christian priests arrived in Benin. Ryder (1961) records that churches were built, the Oba's son and some noblemen were baptised and started to learn how to read and write. Esigie's successor, Orhoghua, was said to have been educated by the Portuguese in their school and was baptised. However, by mid sixteenth century, the Itsekiris had become rivals to the Benin in slave trade, and, when the Portuguese missionaries were spurned in Benin in the period, they were welcomed by the Itsekiri rulers and the kingdom developed through the contact with the Europeans under the direction of the Bishop of Sao Tome, Gaspar Cao (Ryder, 1961:231-232).

Christianity was introduced to Warri by a company of Augustinian Monks sent to Warri, who founded a Christian settlement, named Santo Augustino. The first convert of the Augustinian missionaries was sent to Portugal in 1600 to be educated and returned to Warri some years later with a noble Portuguese wife and three priests. For the next two hundred years, Roman Catholic missionaries visited Warri, though intermittently, sometimes accompanying trading parties and oftentimes solely on their own. By the end of the 18th century, European trading vessels no longer visited Warri because of the decline in the volume of trade available to the Europeans in Warri. The characteristics of this period include: the Association of Missionary Enterprises with the buoyancy of trade, intermittency and long interval between the postings of missionaries, inadequacy in the number of missionaries available at any time and their lack of understanding of their job because they were not trained for it and lack of material support for the few missionaries available. Apart from language barrier, attention was directed to many places at the same time and the base was far from the field (Makozi & Ojo, 1882:7).

The Period of Denominationalism and Missionary Activities

Ajayi (1965) avers that this period started in 1840 when missionary bodies set up in Europe and America in the 18th century succeeded in converting Nigerians to Christianity and opened permanent mission stations among the people. The period was just after the abolition of the slave trade. The abolition of slave trade stimulated a fresh religious enthusiasm among the Europeans and the Americans with the support of the missionary bodies. This was a period of denominationalism when many churches from the British Isles and America sent missionaries to the coast and interior of Nigeria. The Anglicans, under the Church Missionary Society (CMS), were the first but the Niger Expedition through which they came in 1841 failed. However, the first successful penetration of a Christian mission into the interior of Nigeria was made in 1842, when the Wesleyan Methodists on the invitation of the freed slaves who had settled in



Badagry and Abeokuta, sent Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman and an assistant William de Craft and his wife from the Gold Coast (Ghana) to Badagry and, some months later, Henry Townsend to Abeokuta.

In the southern part of the country, in the old slave-trading town of Calabar, the Presbyterians sent Rev. Hope Masterton Waddell accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Edgerl A. Chishalm and E. Miller, who arrived in Calabar in April, 1846, to establish the Church of Scotland Mission. Their work was very successful because a Presbytery, the Presbytery of Biafra, was created in 1858. The American Baptist Mission began work in Nigeria in 1850. The Rev. Thomas J. Bowen, the pioneer missionary, established stations in Ijaiye and Ogbomoso. The Roman Catholicism, through the Society of the African Missions, came in 1862. The ex-slaves were organised and stations established in Lagos and Abeokuta. When the Italian priest, Father Broghero, visited Lagos in 1863, there was already a Catholic church in the Yoruba land. The Holy Ghost Fathers started work among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria in 1885 through Father Joseph Lutz working in Onitsha. Samuel A. Bill started the Qua Iboe Mission in the Qua Iboe River area in 1887; although it was not until 1891 that the Qua Iboe Church was established as an independent evangelical and interdenominational body. Mission works in the northern Nigeria started in 1893 through Rolland Bingham, Walter Gowans, and Thomas Kent. In 1904, the Sudan United Mission (SUM) joined the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in the mission work in the North, concentrating in the regions of Adamawa, Benue and Bornu (Crowther, 1978:113-114).

It is to be noted that this period was characterised by missionary activities based on denominations and limited to the southern part of the country. The missionaries who came were trained and really prepared, though many were swallowed up by the climate. The language barrier that had existed was reduced to the minimum by the use of interpreters and the missionaries themselves learning the language; Trained Nigerian ministers started to emerge; churches and later schools and hospitals were established. More importantly, baptism was conducted for the converts as an indelible mark for the new faith they had embraced and the old ways they had forsaken.

The Period of Evolution of Independent Churches

This period was the evolution of African Independent Churches (AIC) as from the late 19th century as protestant movements against the marginalisation of the indigenes within the foreign missions. This began apparently as a consequence of the nationalistic spirit that was awakened by the partitioning of Africa in 1885, which set in motion a new phase of European colonial activities (Kalu, 1978:337).

Dada (1986) observes that the yearning for democracy and self-government and the discriminatory practices of the white church leaders provoked very sharp reactions from the Lagos elites and also from Edward W. Blyden and James Johnson. The culmination of this unheard protest was the establishment of the United African Church (UNA) in Lagos in September 1891. This was really the first indigenous church in Nigeria. The native Baptist church, though established in 1888, earlier than UNA, was only African in its leadership, every other thing in the church was American. This was because the attempt to form a native Baptist church was not directed purely to an African church, but as a mild protest against the intransigence of Rev. W.J. David, the Baptist missionary in Lagos at that time, with the hope of effecting a re-union with the American Baptist Mission in the future. Therefore, it is no surprise when, in 1894, the native Baptists were brought back into association with the American Baptist Mission (Dada, 1986:12).

In 1901, the African Bethel Church Incorporated was constituted in Ebute Metta, Lagos, by some members of St. Paul's Breadfruit Church, Lagos, who had become dissatisfied with the administration of the church by the white leaders. A similar situation led to the formulation of the United African Methodist Church (Eleja) in 1917, after seceding from the Methodist Church, Ereko, and Lagos. Although, African churches came into existence as a result of agitation for African leadership in the church and a protest against the condemnation of certain African cultural practices by European missionaries. However, they remained one in practice, liturgy, and ministerial orders with their parent bodies (Babatunde, 2000:55).

The Period of Indigenous African Churches



This period gave birth to Nigerian indigenous churches, a phenomenon of the Aladura Movement in the 1920s to 1940s. This was a period of the Christian faith as practiced in Nigeria by Nigerians which reflected the diversified and aggregated cultural and geographical outlook of Nigerians. This movement was essentially a 20th century phenomenon and it represented, as observed by Omoyajowo (1982:5), “[A] reaction against the European complexion of the Western-oriented churches with their completely prefabricated theology and Christianity from their own perspective and to worship as Christian.” Omoyajowo went further to say that this movement came with the experience of direct communication with the Holy Spirit. The churches that started from this movement according to their own official etiology had different origins but they had the common goal and desire to evangelise Africa using their own methods. The movement started immediately after the First World War. Adamolekun (2012:7) avers that the influenza epidemic that broke out in the southern part of Nigeria in 1918 rendered Western medicine impotent and the churches were closed by a government decree to curtail the spread of the epidemic. However, from St. Saviour’s Anglican Church, Ijebu-Ode, and a nearby village, Isonyin, J.B. Shadare and a young school mistress, Sophia Odunlami, respectively received visions on how the epidemic could be cured. This culminated in the establishment of the Faith Tabernacle in 1923. According to Shionwu (2012:5), by a similar experience the Cherubim and Seraphim Society was founded in 1925 by Late Moses Orimolade and Christianah Abiodun Akinsowo (later Captain Abiodun Emmanuel). The two churches grew side by side until 1930 when some members of the Faith Tabernacle appealed to the Apostolic Church in Great Britain for missionaries. In 1930, two apostles and a prophet were sent to Nigeria. In 1931, seven Nigerians were ordained as apostles; then the teachings of the Apostolic Church were accepted and the Apostolic Church became established in Nigeria while a few other members continued as Faith Tabernacle. Later, disagreements over the use of medicine, both native and Western, and resentments for the European leadership in the Apostolic Church forced some members, notable among them - David Odubanjo, I.B. Akinyele and Joseph Ayodele Babalola - to found the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) in 1940. About the same time, Joseph Osintelu began the Church of the Lord (Aladura) and, in 1932, Major Lawrence established the Holy Flock of Christ after rescinding his membership of the Cherubim and Seraphim. CAC was established by Joseph Ayo Babalola in 1940. The indigenous churches in this category have many characteristics in common: The founders had at one time or the other been members of the mission churches; they claimed to receive direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit in establishing the churches; they all had a strong belief in the efficacy of prayers and in emotional and noisy services; they arose from big towns in the Yoruba land, then spreading to other parts of the country (Babatunde, 1999:18).

The Period of Charismatic Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches

According to Kalu (2004:337), the revival of the 1930s had effects on African churches. The increase in the population of Christians in the country up till 1935 modified the church order. In the increasing population, some Christians slipped from the traditional network of pastoral oversight, care and discipline and re-grouped themselves into religious societies as evangelical Christian groups or churches. Akin (2015) describes this period as new trends in Nigerian Christianity by saying that “[T]he re-grouping of minority Christians in the name of Africanisation or indigenisation was the beginning of sectarianism in Nigeria. There emerged different churches in the 1970s upward because strained relationship between the youth and the established churches because of what was regarded as a lukewarm attitude to evangelism. The revival of culture and the exposure of many youths to education in Britain and America brought changes to the old order of Christianity. The establishment of more secondary schools and universities after the Nigerian civil war exposed the youth to many youthful activities. Ishola and Ayegboyin (1997) observe that the church was not left out as sectarian evangelical groups emerged as a result of the important roles youths were playing in all spheres of national life. The “1970s also witnessed the greatest influx of American Christian literature into the country” (Ishola & Ayegboyin, 1997). These literature came from American gossellers and freelance evangelists such as T.L. Osborn, Oral Roberts, Billy Graham, Kenneth Hagin, Gordon Lindsay, Morris Cerullo and many others. Some of the above-named evangelists visited Nigeria and conducted crusades while some sent their tracts and booklets freely



to the country. For example, in 1973, Reggy Thomas of the Revival Fires and T.L. Osborn conducted crusades in Ibadan while Brothers Argemiro of the Free Gospel Mission conducted revival in Lagos. The year came to an end with a powerful crusade conducted by Morris Cerullo on December 15th, 1973, in Ibadan. A prominent feature of these crusades which gave rise to the emergence of separatist evangelical Christian groups was instances of divine healing, the baptism of the Holy Spirit and other Pentecostal manifestations, which appealed mostly to the youths that formed the majority of the population of the crowd gathering at these crusades. The revivals and crusades were the avenues through which Pentecostalism was introduced into the country. The resultant effect of the crusades and revivals was the spirit of protests from the youths in the established churches in which they complained that their parents' churches were not spiritual enough; new churches thus spring up here and there with different purposes. Among the churches that were established on the basis of the explanation made above are: The Redeemed Christian Church of God, The Deeper Life Bible Church, Evangelical Church of Yahmey, The Church of God, Mission Agape Church, End Time Evangelical Ministry, Christian Charismatic Ministries (CCM) and Born Again Gospel Church. Some churches were established for genuine reason of evangelism (for example, The Deeper Life Bible Church, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, The Christian Charismatic Ministry (CCM) and The Gospel Faith Mission) while some were established for commercial purposes. This scenario led to the birth of proliferation of churches (Ishola & Ayegboyin, 1997:26-27). The churches that developed as a result of the revivals and crusades were so many to the extent that, in the early 1990s, there was a debate among Christian Council in Nigeria on the concern of the mushroom churches springing up here and there without any root or base. The idea to curtail the indiscriminate establishment of churches was later abandoned. The persecution of Christians by the Muslims especially in the North led to the formation of the Christian Association of Nigeria (Oshintelu, 2007:61). This association united all Christian churches without any discrimination. The Christian Association of Nigeria is divided into different groups namely: Roman Catholic Church (RCM), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN); The Organisation of African Indigenous churches OAIC), The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) and Tekas. Each group established and expanded their churches. The establishment of Christian Association of Nigeria has led to the birth, growth, spread, and development of churches in Nigeria. The proliferation of churches led to the existence of churches everywhere in Nigerian society especially in Southern Nigeria (Ojo, 1992:161-162).

The Problem of Proliferation of Churches at a Glance

Adetoyese (nd: 2) asserts that the pace at which churches are spreading is like a wildfire. In some places, there is freedom of worship, places of worship are full, pilgrimages are over-booked and there is evidence of religious expansion all over the places. In other words, it is obvious for public evaluation today that there are so many churches today. Churches are noted to be springing up at an alarming and unprecedented rate in all available spaces, shops and uncompleted buildings. Worship services come up in warehouses, hotels, abandoned cinema buildings, studios and other public places. It is a common sight to see a minimum of fifty different churches on a street of four kilometers long. This may paint a terrible picture, but such is the present spate of church proliferation and planting in the country.

In a statement made by Ogidi (1997:11) using Nigeria as a case study here, he categorically asserts that, "Nigeria is a country with easily the largest number of churches per capita in the world." Fayomi (1979:55) also describes Nigeria as "a fertile soil for the growth of independent churches." In urban cities and even rural areas, six or more different churches could make do with a single building because of the lack of space and accommodation. Such is the agitation for leadership: nobody wants to serve; everybody wants to be the founder, general overseer and a master having many people to serve him. For this reason, they engineer little quarrel in their present church, take few people (members) along to establish their own church. According to Shionwu (2012:4), some churches were calling their congregations "customers" and bury all sort of things including life cows in order to attract people which led to having fifteen churches on the same street bearing different names.

Some factors as noted by Falayi (1998) for church proliferation include rapid evangelisation, beliefs and practices, genuine thirst for spiritual nourishment, theological issues, fanaticism and leadership tussles.



The major church proliferation was observed at the end of 1973 revivals and crusades that served as a venue through which Pentecostalism got introduced into the country.

Negative Effects of Church Proliferation in Nigeria

- i. **Personality clashes:** Proliferation in so many cases has led to clashes between churches and personalities. There have been a lot of controversies/disagreements and contention between ministers.
- ii. **Unhealthy competition for converts:** Another demerit of church proliferation is that there are competitions for converts as each of the churches struggle to get their members. In so many cases, some indigenous churches will not give room for evangelism, crusade or revival on their vicinity because of the fear of losing their members to other churches.
- iii. **Homiletical Propaganda:** There have been homiletical disagreements among churches. For example, the Jehovah Witnesses postulate that there are over fifty thousand errors in the entire Bible (Oshinetelu, 2007:24).
- iv. **Lack of unity:** Another factor is that the proliferation of churches has led to conflict and disunity among churches. This is so because some churches are of the opinion that their church is the best and will never accept to be inferior to other churches both in service, doctrinal beliefs, standard and the likes. As a matter of fact, this disagreement has even affected the arm formed in order to bring the churches back to unity. It was reported recently that the election of the interdenominational presidential post in a body became problem and almost cause a crisis between congregations (Joseph, 2017).

Conclusion

The society is witnessing the proliferation of churches which has brought changes in values, created job employment, Western education by establishing both elementary and tertiary institution and the establishment of hospitals. However, the negative effects brought about by the proliferation of churches are overriding the good side of it which is reflecting in the current situation in the country where corruption and moral decadence are the order of the day. It is sad and disheartening that the springing up of churches nowadays fails to stop or reduce moral decadence in the society which ought to be the major impact of churches in our society. Many people were using the spreading of churches like wildfire as a means of livelihood which flicks in our society for not becoming upright and not peaceful. Undoubtedly, if caution is not taken, many denominations would go into extinction because the upcoming generation of pastors would also see reasons for the establishment of their own denomination.

Recommendations

Based on the outcome of the research and points raised in this study, the study will like to recommend the following:

- i. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in conjunction with other Christian bodies in Nigeria should encourage denominational unity and collaborations.
- ii. There should be laid down principles guiding the establishment of a church. On the one hand, in the early church history, church was not just founded on the ground of being called or being a convert but it is done under the authority of apostleship.
- iii. Church leaders and pastors should subscribe for proper theological education and training instead of leading followers blindly.
- iv. The seminaries and bible colleges where pastors are trained, should review and redefine their curricula. There should be unity with what Evangelicals are teaching and what Pentecostals are teaching, irrespective of their denominational differences.



- v. Followers should not be moved by performances of miracles but by the infallible truth of the scriptures. If this is followed, many fake pastors who use diabolic means to do miracles and compel followership would no longer be able to merchandise the gospel for personal aggrandisement.
- vi. Christian youths should be patient with the older generation of pastors and parents who they feel are not tongue speaking, spirit filled and miracle workers.

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