

MAIN TRENDS IN THE CHURCH GROWTH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

The paper discusses the main trends in history of church growth and development in Nigeria. The methodology adopted is historical approach. The history of church growth and development in Nigeria is divided into five periods namely: 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. It is established in the paper that church growth led to numerical strength of churches as seen in the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. It is observed that the dramatic rise of charismatic and Pentecostal movement led to the emergence of new churches and evangelical groups. The work suggested the establishment of more churches and the practice of ethical and moral teachings of the Bible. It concludes by recommending that church growth and development should not be based on orthodoxy but orthopraxis in order to change African society for better.

Keywords: Trends, Church Growth, Development, Nigeria

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. We will look at the factors that facilitate the emergence and growth of churches in Nigeria.

The main objective of this work is to discuss the history of church growth in Nigeria. To achieve this objective, the history of the church in Nigeria is divided into five periods namely; one, the period of introducing Latin Christianity in the 15th and 16th centuries; Two, the period of Denominationalism and missionary activities in the 19th century from 1842 onward; three, the period of evolution of Independent churches, Four, the period of Indigenous African Churches; and Five, the period of the birth of charismatic and Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. It is to be noted that the birth of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which divided the Christian church to five major groups aided the growth of the church in Nigeria. The period between 1980 to 2010 is remarkable as it witnessed the spread, growth and spread of churches in Nigeria. The work ended with suggestion and recommendation. It is established in this work that church growth led to numerical strength of churches as seen in the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. The work ended with suggestion and recommendation. It is established in this work that church growth led to numerical strength of churches as seen in the spring up of churches in Nigeria today.

The period of the Introduction of Latin Christianity

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”. At this period, “Christianity failed to gain any permanent foothold in Benin , Warri, Bonny, and Calabar”.¹ Antonio Galvao, the 16th century historian, attributed the first Portuguese voyage through the Bight of Benin to one Ruy de Sequeira in 1472. 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. “Portuguese trade with Benin brought political ties, and under king John II, Christian missionaries were sent out with traders”².

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, the king 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”³.

Missionary activity in the 15th century was minimal because the overriding 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. Egharevba⁴ recorded that churches were built, the Oba's son and some noblemen were baptized 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 baptized.

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 contact with the Europeans under the direction of the Bishop of SaoTome, Gasper Cao (1556-1565, 1571-1574). Christianity was introduced to Warri by a company of Augustinian Monks sent to Warri, who founded a Christian settlement, named Santo Augustino. The first success 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"⁵ visited Warri, though intermittently, sometimes accompanying trading parties and often times 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, 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. For example, Sao Tome was made the base for missions to Fernando po, Elmina, Principe, Warri, Ughoton, and Inland town of Benin.

In addition, from the warri experience, the proselytizing effect of the Roman Catholic Missionaries was minimized by their high death rate because of the unhealthy climate only the palaces or courts were touched by the missions and attempts of the Portuguese or Italian priests were stories of Jesus and not Christianity based on the Scripture. All the above characteristics led to the failure and natural death of the mission.

The period of Denominationalism and Missionary Activities.

This period started from 1840 when missionary bodies set up in Europe and America in the 18th century⁶ 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 Americans. With the support of the missionary bodies. “The freed slaves in places like Sierra Leone and Abeokuta encouraged missionary enterprises⁷. 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 in which they came in 1841 failed. However, the first successful penetration of 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 at 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 more southern part of the country, on the Cross River 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 at Ijaiye and Ogbomoso. The Roman Catholicism, through the Society of the African Missions, came in 1862. The ex-slaves were organized and stations established in Lagos and Abeokuta. When the Italian Priest, Father Broghero, visited Lagos in 1863, there was a catholic church in Yorubaland. The Holy Ghose Fathers started work among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria in 1885 through Father Joseph Lutz working at Onitsha. Samuel A. Bill started the Qua Iboe Mission in the Qua Iboe River area from 1887, though it was not until 1891 that the Qua Iboe church was established as an Independent evangelical and inter-denominational body.

Mission work in Northern Nigerian 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.

It is to be noted that this period was characterized by missionaries activities being 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 erected. More importantly, baptism was administered to 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 as from the late 19th century as “protest movements against the marginalization of the indigenes within the foreign mission”⁸. This began apparently in consequence of the nationalistic spirit that was awakened by the partition of Africa in 1885, which set in motion a new phase of European colonial activities. “The yearning for democracy and self government”⁹ and the discriminatory practices of the white church leaders provoked very sharp reactions from the Lagos elite 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 on 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 the 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”¹⁰ 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.

In 1901, the African Bethel church incorporated¹¹ was constituted in Ebute Metta, Lagos by some members of St. Paul’s Breadfruit church, Lagos, who had become dissatisfied with 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, 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, yet they remained one in practice, liturgy, and ministerial orders with their parent bodies.

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 was suited to 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:

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 ¹²

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 evangelize Africa by their own methods. The movement started immediately after the First World War. 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” ¹³. By a similar experience the Cherubum and Seraphum Society was founded in 1925 by Late Moses Orimolade and Christianah Abiodun Akinsowo (later Captain Abiodun Emmanuel) ¹⁴

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 Nigerian, while a few other members continued as Faith Tabernacle. Later, “disagreement over the use of medicine, both native and Western, ¹⁵ and resentment over the European leadership in the Apostolic church forced some members, notable among them were “David Odubanjo, I.B. Akinyele and Joseph Ayodele Babalola to ¹⁶ found the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) in 1940”. About the same time Joseph Osintelu began the Church of the Lord (Aladura)” ¹⁷ and in 1932, Major Lawrence established the Holy Flock of

Christ, after resigning his membership of the Cherubim and Seraphim. CAC was established by Joseph 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 claim to receive direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit in establishing the churches; they all have strong” behalf in the efficacy of prayers”¹⁸ and in emotional and noisy services. They arose from the large towns of Yorubaland, then spreading to other parts of the country, polygamy was not discouraged in these churches and Yoruba pagan practices were frowned at. It must be noted that there was no missionary factor in this movement.

The Period of Charismatic Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches.

This section deals with the period of the charismatic evangelical churches and missions. The revival of the 1930s had effect on African Churches. The increase in the population of Christians in the country up till 1935 modified 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 Ojo describes this period as new trends in Nigerian Christianity by saying that:

The re-grouping of minority Christians in the name of Africanization or indigenization or acculturation in the as a movement of revolt against or revulsion of Idolatrous’ traditional cultural values vis-avis Christianity, was the beginning of sectarianism in Nigeria¹⁹

There emerge different churches in the 1970s upward because strained relationship between the youth and the established churches because of what was regarded as the cold 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. 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 literatures into the country”²⁰. These literatures 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 at 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 at Ibadan”²¹

A prominent feature of these crusades which gave rise to the emergence of separatist evangelical Christian groups, were instances of the 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 by 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, include: The Redeem Christian Church, Deeper Life Bible church, Evangelical Church, of Yahmey, Church of God, Mission Agape Church, End Time Evangelical Ministry, Christian Charismatic Ministries (CCM); Born Again Gospel Church, and many others, Some churches were established for genuine reason of evangelism (e.g. Deeper Life, Redeem Christian Church, Christian Charismatic Ministry (CCM) and Gospel Faith Mission) while some were established for commercial purposes. This scenario led to the birth of proliferation of churches.

The churches that developed as a result of the revivals and crusades were so many to the extend 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 indiscriminate establishment of churches was later abandoned.

The persecution of Christians by the Muslims especially in the North, led to the formation of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). 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); organization of African Indigenous churches OAIC), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) and Tekas. Each group established and expanded their churches. The establishment of Christian Association has led to the birth, growth, spread, and development of churches in Nigeria. Proliferation of churches led to the existence of churches everywhere in Nigerian society especially in Southern Nigeria.

Implication Of Proliferation Of Churches To Church Growth In Nigeria

In this section, we will look at the implications or impact of proliferation of churches in Nigeria. To achieve this objective, we shall point out the positive and negative impacts.

One positive impact of proliferation of churches in Nigeria, is that it makes people to realize that Nigeria is very religious and that many Christian churches abound in the country: Another implication or impact is that the Christian body under one umbrella name called Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) stands as a pressure group in the nation whenever a major policy which affects the Christian group or the generality of the country is made by the government. A typical example was the issue of Nigeria becoming a member of the Organization of Islam countries (OIC) in the 1980s and 1990s. The Christians seriously mounted pressure against this and asserted that Nigeria should remain in her secular status. Thus, Nigeria, become an observer then until when Maccido²², the emir of Sokoto announced that Nigeria had become a full member of OIC. In reacting to the claim or statement of Maccido, Augustine Madu-West and ex-chairman of CAN Kaduna State said “The government should be aware of the danger it is doing to this country, if its secularity is tampered with”²³. To Augustine Madu-West, the consequence of joining OIC full membership means that the economy of any member state and leadership (of OIC) would have to be Muslim oriented and that it was not good for Nigeria as a country because it would tend to impose religion on the constitution of the country which to him was not fair. To Madu-West’s reaction the government then kept mute having realized what it could generate into in the country.

Another way by which CAN serve, as a pressure group is when an action is taken by the government that is detrimental to public interest. An example was during Abacha’s regime in Nigeria when many people were put in detention because of their views and opposition to government policy, the Christian Association of Nigeria’s leadership reacted in their different protest statements. Example of such protest statements were made by Ondo State CAN chairman Bishop Gbonigi at Akure and Bishop Olubunmi Okogie the National CAN Chairman in Lagos.

There are also the negative impacts of proliferation of churches. The doctrinal differences that emanate as a result of split usually confuse the members of the churches. Secondly, some churches are established for commercial purposes with the aim of enriching the founders.

Thus, the proprietors of these religious sects (both foreign mission and indigenous) have become stupendously rich at the expense of the congregation. On the whole,

proliferation of churches, has led to the birth and growth of churches in Nigeria as churches abound here and there. It is to be noted that the Deeper Life Bible Church and Redeemed Christian Church are among the fastest growing churches in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general today.

Conclusion

We have attempted in this work to discuss the history of church growth in Nigeria. Five periods of establishment are discussed notably, the period of introduction of Latin Christianity, the period of Denominationalism and Missionary activities in the 19th century, the period of independent churches, the period of Indigenous churches, and the period of the birth of Charismatic Pentecostal churches.

It is discovered that the dramatic rise of the so-called ‘charismatic’ or Pentecostal movement led to the emergence of new churches and evangelical groups which rapidly grew up to become a powerful new social and religious force. These Pentecostal fellowships later known as Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) increased the number of churches in Nigeria. It is to be noted that the increased missionary activity in the 1960s and 1970s from abroad and increased student interest helped spark revival that gave rise to a Trans denominational ‘charismatic’ movement in the 1970s and 1980s. with a strong base in the Universities and student groups, fueled by an influx of literature and evangelism from the United States gave rise to rapid and powerful new force on the born again scene which was a nucleus to Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. Doctrinal approach of these Pentecostal churches (e.g. Christ’s chapel) include prosperity, the centrality of the holy spirit, speaking in tongues, miracles of healing and monetary reward. The doctrine of prosperity is based on Mark 10:30 in which the spiritual and material fortunes of a believer are dependent on how much he gives, spiritually and materially, to God (or God’s representatives) who will reward him by ‘prospering him’. This is associated with the rise all over Africa of the ‘Faith Movement’ as an outgrowth of American evangelism on the Continent. Indeed many of the pastors of the ‘Pentecostal churches received their religious training in one of the Bible College run by prosperity preachers in USA (Rhema Bible Colleges of Kenneth Hagin Oklahoma, is one of the more popular Bible Colleges

The Growth of the Church has brought development to the nation. The social impact of this growth is seen in the increase of the number of churches all over the Country which establish Nursery and primary schools, Secondary Schools, and Universities that provide job opportunities for many people. Some of such Universities established by mission Church

include Ajayi Crowther University (Anglican), Babcock University (Seventh Day Adventist), Bowen University (Baptist); Joseph Ayo Babalola University (CAC), Methodist University, Ondo, Covenant University, and Catholic University among others. Teaching Hospitals and Mission hospitals are also established by churches. All these provide job opportunities for people.

It is our suggestion that as more churches are established, the ethical and moral teaching of Christian literature be practiced. The growth of the church should not be based on orthodoxy but orthopraxis so as to change African Society for better.

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