



Proliferation of Independent African Churches and the Consequences of the Outbreak of Covid-19 on Church Ministers

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Abstract

The proliferation of Independent African Churches has become the reigning thing in Nigeria cum Africa. The split of churches allows each founder to claim divine origin of their ministry. This rapid growth of African Independent Churches is borne out of the freedom of religion and worship. However, Christian religion is sometimes called “Jesus’ business” as it appears to be the easiest way of making money through the “selling of miracles”, collection of tithes, offering, seed sowing; and as the means to the top of the prestigious ladder of belonging to the multimillion religious leaders. Hence, there are churches at every nook and cranny of the city. Billboards of ministers are hoisted all over the city. We have more of the Independent Churches than that of industries and companies. This study used Qualitative Research Method, which is analytical, descriptive and theoretical. It raised critical research questions. What was the faith of African independent ministers as Covid-19 pandemic ended all public worships? This work discovered that despite the presence of independent churches, Nigerian society is eaten up by corruption, despotism, sex abuse, covetousness and manipulation of the populace by swindlers and charlatans “in the name of Jesus.” The study found out that there was over dependence of ministers on church collections; which should not be. It recommended other means of self-subsistence because of the uncertainty of relying on the congregation.

Keywords: Proliferation, Churches, ministers, Covid-19, Religion.

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Introduction

The Pentecostal Movement worldwide originated from the Azusa Street Revival, Los Angeles, California in 1906, and marked also the beginning of North American Pentecostal Movement. It was led by William J. Seymour, an African-American preacher. Vinson Synan describes the experience as “spiritual earthquake of California.” (Synan, 2002, p. 40). This religious movement spread like a wildfire to Nigeria and other parts of the world. Hilary C. Achunike opines that the coming of Pentecostalism into Nigeria can be traced to Naked Faith People of Philadelphia. According to him, they were also the precursors of the Aladura Churches or the African Indigenous Churches including Christ Apostolic Church and the Church of the Lord, that trace their origin back to the Faith Tabernacle. (Achunike, 2009, p. 39). Other versions of Pentecostal Movement outside American Pentecostalism were introduced into Nigeria principally from Britain between 1937 and 1955. However, the first Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria which has the characteristic of the twentieth Century Indigenous Christian Movement was the Crusade led by Garrick Braide. Garrick Braide was a Nigerian Missionary and prophet, largely responsible for the spread of Christianity in the Niger Delta Region of Africa in the early 1900s. He was one of the originators of African Independent Churches and Religious Movements who made innumerable converts from the Niger Delta Pastorate. The Pentecostal Revival associated with the prosperity Gospel according to Hilary C. Achunike was championed by the Late Bishop Benson Idahosa between 1980 and 1990. There is also the Revival Fire Movement that broke out among the Mainline Churches due to internal Schism and the accusation of authorities by the vibrant members as “dead orthodox leaders,” which led some of the members to revolt. (Achunike, 2009, p. 40). This Revival Movement produced some of the prominent Pentecostal leaders like William Folorunsho Kumuyi who broke out from the Apostolic Church and started the Deeper Life Christian Ministry in 1973. He wanted a deeper practical Christian way of life as opposed to what they called “dead orthodoxy and shallow Christianity.” Agha (1999 p.59) maintains that this Evangelical Revival Movement has contributed in no small measure to the rise of modern Protestant Missions in Nigeria.

There are numerous reasons for the rise of Independent African Churches. Accordingly, Ukoha (2013) observes three factors that are said to be responsible for the rise of



African Indigenous Churches. First, it was the responses of Africans to the Christian way of life. Secondly, it was also necessitated by the need for revival in the Old Mission Churches and thirdly, God through the Holy Spirit is at work in the churches.(Ukoha, 2013,p. 139). These Independent African Churches flourished until the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic that shook the world economy, the churches and their ministers.

This study raises critical research questions. Despite these Pentecostal movements that led to the proliferation of churches in Nigeria cum Africa, one is compelled to ask: Has the proliferation of churches solved the problem of corruption, nepotism and all other social ills? Why is it that immorality is on the increase? Why is it that the Church is not able to curb the ills in the society? Has the proliferation of churches made Nigerians better Christians? It is often said that the outbreak of “Covid-19 pandemic changed the face of the world. It stopped public worship and gatherings. It affected private business owners. How did this affect private Church owners?” (Orji, 2022, p. 16).How did ministers of God and their families survive the lockdown of Covid-19 pandemic? What are the lessons to be learnt from the economic meltdown of Covid-19 pandemic?

The aimsand objectives of the study are to trace the roots and reasons for the proliferation of independent African churches in Nigeria, and how the emergence of Covid-19 affected the churches in their effort to sustain the ministers of God and their families? It highlights the fact that the ministers of God should have economic yielding projects. It aims at enlightening church ministers on the need to avoid over dependence on offertory collection. It takes a descriptive theoretical approach and uses qualitative research method which is the collecting and analyzing of non-numerical data to unravel the problem inherent in the study (Orji, 2022, p. 26). It seeks to highlight the fact that those who have Church as their only source of income suffered greatly which led them to use all means to force the ends to meet.

This work has its theoretical frame work. The background study shows that there were many flourishing independent churches in Nigeria. Church programmes were their sole business until outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. With the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic, however, public worship was forbidden. Their means of livelihood was put an end to. This work highlights the



activities of various church ministers during Covid-19 pandemic. It seeks to ascertain the extent of the problems suffered by ministers of God during the Covid-19. And how they coped with the pandemic?

There are those who deny the reality of Covid-19. Such theorists see Covid-19 as government's propaganda and economists' means of exploitation. They deny the vaccine and its efficacy. (Vasilopoulos, Pneumol, 2022, p. 1).It also rejects the theory that sees religion as business and means of making sordid gain. It rejects pastors over dependence on church collections. (Orji, 2022, pp. 70-74).This work, however, follows the theory of World Health Organization that seesCovid-19 as a nightmare, which disrupted both the economic and religious activities of the world. No one should deny Covid-19 pandemic that killed thousands of people all of the world.(World Health Organization, 2023).

The limit and scope of the study. One of the major problems in this study is the fact that the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic appears to be enshrouded "in mystery." There are few literatures in this field of study, which has led to gross misinformation on the true state of the pandemic. The certainty of the vaccine, the political and economic motif of pharmaceutical industry and economists, the role of World Health Organization (WHO) during the pandemic are not part of this study. This work is concerned with the proliferation of independent African churches; and has nothing to do with African Traditional Religion and Culture, Islamic Religion, Buddhism, Taoism or any other world known religion .Another difficulty in the study is the fact that religion is part of human emotions, which do not have scientific methods with which to investigate the motif of the pastors and their quest for independent African churches. Their claims of being called by God are not verifiable, rather, they are private opinions.(Orji, 2022, p. 17).

There are operative concepts that need to be explicated. Proliferation simply means rapid increase in number or amount of something; a large concentration of the number of a particular thing in a given area. It can also mean "to produce,""to reproduce" or "to grow," especially with rapidity, like cells multiplicationin the tissue formation. Proliferation of churches means a sudden increase in the number of churches within a locality, town or in the nation which is as a result of people's response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Ukoha,2013p. 140). In this



Proliferation of churches and the multiplication of religious groups, each founder claims the divine origin of their Church.

Church (*ecclesia*) is an assembly of believers who follow Jesus Christ as their redeemer (Eph 1:7; Heb 9:12; Titus 2:14). According to Ukoha, the Church could be described in two broad categories: The Church as an institution and the Church as the gathered community of God's people (the *Laos* of God). (Ukoha,2013, p. 7). He goes on to give an explanation of the Church as an institution and the Church as the people of God. According to him, the Hebrew words *Edha* and *Qahal* refer to the Church as an institution, an assembly. Also, the Greek word "*Kuriakon*" means "the Lord's House", which was used by ancient authors for the place of worship or a building. The Church as the people of God is a living organism. It is made up of human beings. (Ukoha, 2013, 1).Nwangwu gives the Old Testament source of the concept *Qahal*. In Hebrew Language, the Church called *Qahal* could mean the "people of God" or "the chosen people of God" (Deut 7:6-7); "you alone have I known among the nations of the world" (Ex 19:5). (Nwangwu,1990, p. 8).The Greek words "*Kuriakon*" and "*ecclesia*" are used in referring to the "church" meaning people who are assembled in a place and those who are called out respectively. The Church as the Body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23) has many members and Christ is the Head of His body, the Church (Col 1:15, 18). Similarly, the Church as the Bride of Christ portrays the picture of a bride given out to the bridegroom in marriage. Christ is the bridegroom, while the Church is His bride (Eph 2:22-33).

The word minister has many connotations. It can mean a secular minister such as the minister of health, sports, etc. In its religious sense, however, it comes from the Greek noun *presbyteros* which could mean an elder or ordained religious leader, otherwise known as Sacred or Vocational minister or a priest (Cottrell, 2002, p. 419;Bromiley,(1979, p. 516). The Scripture gives the characteristics of the ordained minister. He "must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, and hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money." (1 Tim 3:2-3). In this context, a sacred minister is one who is authorized to preach the gospel and administer the ordinances of the Church. According to Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary, the word "minister" is a biblical distinctive idea that can mean "to serve" or "service". It came to be used in connection



with ministering to the poor of God (*Anawim Yahweh*) and the *hoi polloi*. In reality, all believers are “ministers”. The apostle Paul (Eph 4:11-12) urges the true pastor to “equip the saints” so that they can minister to one another. The concept of minister is strengthened with the use of the Greek word “*doulos*” (slave). Paul calls himself the slave of Christ (Rom 1:1). According to Nelson’s Bible Dictionary, this was the term for bond slave, one who was offered his freedom but voluntarily surrendered that freedom in order to remain a servant. While addressing the Church Peter (1 Pt 4:10) says that we should render services through our spiritual gifts, which are given by God to the saints in order that they might minister to one another.

Another operative concept is Covid-19 pandemic which is a disease caused by a new strain of Corona Virus. The acronym Covid-19 can be explained as follows: “Co” stands for Corona, “vi” stands for Virus and “D” for Disease. This deadly disease became prominent in 2019. The name “Corona Virus” was derived from the Latin word “corona” meaning “crown”. The expression Corona Virus was coined and brought into public domain in 1968. Corona Virus disease, 2019 (Covid-19) is defined as a novel Corona Virus which causes severe acute respiratory syndrome. Corona Virus 2 (SARS-COV-2, formally called 2019-n COV), was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness found in Wuhan City in China (Cennimo, 2021, p. 1). The Chinese government alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) on December 31, 2019 and on January 30, 2020, the WHO declared Covid-19 outbreak a global health emergency and also on March 11, 2020 the WHO declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. The name Covid-19 was chosen by WHO to avoid stigmatizing the virus origin in terms of population, geography or animal association (Cennimo, 2021, p. 1). The following symptoms may indicate the presence of Covid-19: Fever, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty in breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea, etc. The most common serious manifestation of Covid-19 is pneumonia.

Our methodology is Qualitative Research Method, which deals with the collecting and analyzing of non-numerical data. It is based on the analyses of text books, videos and audios as well as the experiences of those who opened religious houses as their sole business. It is descriptive, theoretical and makes use of secondary source materials and data that represent opinions and feelings that cannot be presented in figures (Orji, 2022, pp. 25-26).



Proliferation of Independent Churches in Nigeria

The root cause of the emergence and the proliferation of churches in Nigeria during 20th century can be traced back to the problem of and the accusation of Mainline Church leaders of “dead orthodoxy;” secondly, the lack of revival fire in the older mission churches and also the influence of prosperity gospel. (Ukoha, 2013, p. 141). The Mainline Churches who were tagged “dead orthodox churches” are Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Baptists. Ayegboyin, & Ishola, state that at the twilight of the 19th Century and the early part of the 20th Century, quite a number of African churches emerged in Nigeria. (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 2013, pp. 12-13). These churches include the Native Baptist Church (1883), the United Native African Church (1891), the African Church (1901), the Christ Army Church (1915) and the United African Methodist Church (1917).

Joseph M. Orji mentions some of the Nigerian Pentecostal Churches and their leaders. They include: Church of God Mission by Archbishop Benson Idahosa; Zoe Ministry by Patrick Anwuzie; Synagogue Church of All Nations by TB Joshua; Bethel Ministry by Gabriel Odayemi; Believers Love World Incorporated also known as Christ Embassy by Chris Oyakhilome; Winners Chapel also known as Living Faith Church Worldwide by David Oyedepo; Redeemed Christian Church of God by Enoch Adeboye; The Lord’s Chosen Charismatic Revival Movement by Lazarus Muoka; Dumanic Church by Paul Enenche. (Orji, 2019, p. 21). These churches to some varying degrees are characterized by their desire for African self-expression, freedom from early missionary control and institutional authorities. Their leaders are also known as prosperity preachers because they see wealth as part of what they are destined by God to be in control of. “For businessmen and women in the house of God, religion is all about what do I gain? Spirituality and poverty appear to be old fashions of religion. Why should a child of God be poor? Christ became poor so that we can be rich (2 Cor 8:9).” (Orji, 2022, p. 144). Other independent African churches otherwise known as Pentecostal Movement or Prosperity Gospel Churches have continued to spring up on daily basis. These Independent African Churches have grown rapidly and some African prophetic leaders have also continued to secede from the Mainline Churches because of what they called the failures of



ministers in the established churches to live up to the Christian principles (Ayegboyin&Ishola,2013, p. 15).

Despite the presence of churches at every nook and cranny of the Nigerian cum African society, the country as well as the continent is eaten up by corruption, nepotism, tribalism and other social vices. A country that churches are located at every street is supposed to be crime free. But in Nigerian cum African, that is not the case. All the evils in the society such as kidnapping, ritual killing, political assassinations, abortion, etc are supposed to be a thing of the past, but they are not. Christians in Nigeria should have been better Christians not only in name but also in character. One may even be tempted to ask, if there are restrictions on the establishment of churches in the country, what and how would have the country survived the present challenges of ills and evils in her society? The Church should rise and fight against corruption and social vices in the country, not just preaching prosperity and economic breakthrough.

The Outbreak of Covid-19 and the Nigeria Independent Churches

The first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in Nigeria by the Federal Ministry of Health on the 27th of February, 2020 at Lagos State University Teaching Hospital. The case was that of an Italian who works in Nigeria but had returned from Milan on 25th of February 2020. It was the virology laboratory of Lagos University Teaching Hospital that confirmed the case. The Government of Federal Republic Nigeria took drastic measures through the ministry of health to ensure that an outbreak in the country does not occur. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) immediately swung into action by activating its National Emergency Centre to respond to the case and implement firm control measures. On 9th March 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun state, a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian. From there the number of cases began to rise geometrically. It is hard to know the exact number but the number of confirmed cases came up to 266,463 as at 13/02/2023, with about 3,155 fatalities. (World Health Organization, 2023).

To prevent the further spread of the Corona Virus in the country, the Federal Government issued a directive on the lockdown of all official and unofficial group gathering of her citizens, and Churches and religious activities were not excluded. Some pastors who tried to violate the directives were arrested and detained. These actions of the Federal Government of Nigeria



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affected all religious bodies. Corporate worship, sacramental and revival activities, rural evangelism, etc. were all suspended. The ban on religious gathering significantly altered the religious routine for most ministers of God. It also affected the financial status of most churches (Orji, 2022, p. 16). Some ministers of God received little or no palliative from the sources they relied on and this affected their financial planning. The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented shock that will take years to recover from its impacts. It is an unbelievable interruption that has shaken the world, her economy, the society and the Church to the fabric. For the first time in the history of our generation, the churches were closed against public worship on Easter Sundays. This did not only affect the worship, the fellowship, the administration and the spiritual life of worshippers but has also adversely affected the Church's economy. Covid-19 not only affected Church finances but also killed many believers.

Our quest is, how did independent ministers and churches cope with daily activities during Covid-19 lockdown? Many ministers adopted different methods cum approaches which replaced public worship. They did this in order to reach out to their members. Some began family ministration. Others started house to house fellowship in all areas covered by their churches. Many pastors celebrated the Church Sacraments, baptism, wedding, child dedication, etc. at private homes. While many churches adopted the use of social media such as, Television, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Zoom to undertake Church activities. Offerings, tithes, bus levies, etc. were collected online and taken to the central Church Council. Some parents became pastors and priests as they conducted Sunday services at home. They played the role of the minister while the children became the congregation. They collected offering and tithes, and took same to their local pastor who lives at the mercy of the congregation. In fact, Covid-19 affected ministers and the setback was great.

The consequences of Covid-19 on ministers were massive. Some of those who tried to hold public Church Service were apprehended by the State Security Services. The lockdown affected ministers differently, which depended on where they resided and their position in the Church. The lockdown affected fulltime pastors differently from the part-time pastors. For example, churches in Lagos were allowed to maintain social distancing and not having a gathering of more than 25 people for the first two weeks of the lockdown. At that period, part-time ministers were



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still able to get income from their employers or personal business, while those who do no other thing order than preaching was seriously disadvantaged. During the Covid-19 lockdown, public meetings were not held, no offerings, no tithes and no thanksgiving. Many ministers due to this situation were not able to feed their families. Church members were crying because of hunger. Some of them were looking up to the Church for palliatives. Paying salaries of Church ministers became a huge challenge to many churches.

The economic crisis caused by Covid-19 was weighing heavily on the Church, the minister and the people of God. People were losing their jobs, businesses were closed down, bail out of financial institutions and inflation continued to rise. The economy of the country was constantly on the front page of the National Dailies and its effect has been felt in the churches. Michael Welles states that the economic situation in the world appears to have affected smaller churches; these churches felt the pain more if ten percent of their members became unemployed. According to him, the economic crisis has allowed churches to become more efficient and opened doors for more creative ministry. Churches are experiencing the impact of the economic crisis and this had led to the drop in tithes and offerings by members.(Welles, 2012, p. 26). Beyond the drop in churches' cash inflow, there has been increasing demand on the church leaders by their congregation for financial support. Some pastors hinged the development on the irregular payment of salary to workers since most of the members are civil servants and they were owed arrears of salary. Before the economic meltdown, however, members would pay little but now, they are not ready to pay anything. They are looking for ways to get something from the Church. They want the pastor to dip his hands into his purse and pay for their transportation and feeding for the whole month. The reason is simple. The Church consists of people who engage in various economic activities and if they are negatively affected by the economic situation in the country, it will affect their ability to meet up with their obligations in terms of tithes and offerings, donations, etc. which are the major sources of income for the Church that does not engage in commercial activities (Orji, 2022, p. 159). Some Church members now stay at home because of the economic meltdown. There is no cash inflow, there is inflation, there is no fuel, no electricity and there is hike in transportation fare.



During the meltdown, companies folded up. Hence, if you have no work, you have no money. It is when you receive money that you will pay tithes, give offering and donation, as well as thanksgiving, etc. The people are just living by faith. If you see anybody in the Church that is still paying tithes and giving offering the way they used to, you should know it is by faith. The effect of economic meltdown has dealt serious blows on the people and it is really tough on them. Therefore, the effects of economic meltdown on the Church cannot be overemphasized. It has impacted negatively on the Church which in one way or the other affected the ministers of the gospel and their families.

Evaluation, Conclusion and Recommendations

The proliferation of Independent African Churches is a fact. Some of the factors that are responsible for the emergency and proliferation of Independent churches in Nigeria include: Some clergymen from Mainline Churches were criticized by the breakaway Pentecostal pastors for appointing well known wealthy men and women into the church's hierarchy; they sought for the need for indigenous leadership, which means the nationalists' feelings, the emergency of charismatic figures that led to mass movements towards what they called "authentic Christianity" and circumstantial factors like worldwide Covid-19 and the economic depression. Others are the desire to indigenize Christianity, passion for a purer form of Christianity and freedom to exercise the gifts of leadership. These objectives were carried out until the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic.

The outbreak of Covid-19 was a hard time for many private Christian denominations in Nigeria. There was no gathering of religious groups and those whose sources of income depended solely on what they get for their ministries had it tougher. They had no other means of income, but their expenditure was constantly on the increase. They needed to sustain themselves and their dependents. Some of the established churches gave out palliatives to their priests and pastors. But the pastors, prophets and priests who could not get palliatives even from the government devised all sorts of means to enable them remain afloat. First, they violated Covid-19 laid down rules by secretly changing house to house fellowship to full time Church Service. Secondly, online services grew astrologically and the creation of group Church platforms giving room for



online offering, seed sowing and payment of tithes became the norm. They did all these to make ends meet. Thirdly, some pastors were not ashamed to beg. Without these means, there would have been the starvation of the pastors and their family members.

Covid-19 rules exposed some facts: First, the conflict between faith or belief and materialism as well as self-subsistence. Secondly, it shows the orientation of many private churches and the consequences of the proliferation of churches. Thirdly, it made known the fact that many pastors and priests have their private ministry as their only source of income. Hence, religion for many is solely their business. (Orji, 2022,pp. 40-42). Fourthly, the proliferation of churches is not the solution to the corruption of Nigerians, despotism, nepotism and all the societal ills. We appear to be going down the drain rather than coming out of the ills of the society.

This study recommends the following: Firstly, religious leaders should know that politicizing religion through the proliferation of independent African churches and religious groups do not solve economic problems. Hence, the proliferation of religion is not the solution to the societal ills. Secondly, ministers of God in general should diversify their means of revenue generation to create more income other than offerings, tithes, donations, thanksgiving, etc. Depending solely on the church members is not the ideal and where the offerings and tithes paid by the members are not enough to cover the church, your family and personal expenses, the minister will be frustrated and may end up becoming a beggar before the members and also losing self-respect. Thirdly, there are business and projects ministers of God could embark on in order to make money and not being solely dependent on the congregation. Projects like writing and publishing of books, Agro farming businesses, rental services, etc. are recommended.

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