
Proliferation of Churches and National Development

Rufina G. Ikeazota
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

Proliferation of Churches describes the multiplicity of Christian denominations. It is a feature most notable in Nigerian Christianity. The objective this paper was to examine the problem of proliferation of churches in view of the need for national development. It was observed that proliferation of churches could contribute to advancement of education, healthier politics and positive contributions to other aspects of national development. However, the negative effects of proliferation of Churches have, over the time, outweighed the positive effects. Church leaders were advised to take the lead in bringing together Christians of different denominations to dialogue and better exposure to those Christian virtues that enhance national unity and development.

Introduction

Proliferation of Churches describes the multiplicity of Christian denominations. It is a feature most notable in Nigerian Christianity. With the close of the earliest Catholic Missionary work (1450-1750), described by some scholars as a failure, the environment was set for modern missionary activities. By the end of the 19th century only six foreign missionary establishments were fully functional in Nigeria.

Thomas Birch Freeman (24th September 1842), Methodist Missionary;
Henry Townsend (December 1842), Church Missionary Society
Hope Waddell (April 10, 1846), Church of Scotland Mission (Presbyterian)
Thomas J. Bowen (1850), Baptist Missionary
Father Lutz (5th December 1885), Holy Ghost Fathers
Samuel Bill (1887), Qua Iboe Mission

For about sixty years only six foreign missionary extractions were on record in Nigeria. From the 1960s African initiative in the missionary work became very obvious and aggressive with the Aladura Movement and the Scripture Union as key protagonists. The activities of the Faith Tabernacle (1928), Apostolic Church (1931) and Assemblies of God Church (1932) were very skeletal, compared to the great zeal and missionary aggression of 1970s. Though Bill Roberts had started the activities of the Scripture Union in Nigeria in the 1960s it was after the Civil War that the Evangelical aggression gave rise to

proliferation of Churches. Poverty and illiteracy had forced many people to seek divine intervention beyond the formal and nominal approach of the Mainline Churches. The Civil War had left many people homeless and poor. Majority of the people resorted to prolonged prayer and fasting as well as speaking in tongues beyond the conventional written prayers of the missionaries. Baptism of the Holy Spirit, healing and other forms of miracles became pronounced. Gradually, every prayer warrior became Church founder, as thousands of people needed solution to myriads of life puzzles brought about by the hardship of the Civil war. The return of the southerners to northern Nigeria after the Nigeria Civil War in 1970 influenced the spread of churches (Velon, 2008:11). Meanwhile, various religions and ministries encouraged the formation of students' fellowship groups in universities and these became the breeding ground for leaders. According to Meeking, (2003:90) external influences from Europe and America fed into this pattern, providing theological direction and funds for new strategies. For other parts of Africa, Nigeria precisely, the proliferation wind blew continuously till the fire convention in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1985, acquiring a different shape and character, from the preceding era. Between 1985 and 1995, proliferation movement blossomed into complex varieties (Alaribe, 2006:78). In the enlarged scale and adoption of modern strategies, European/American influence became more pronounced. Even so, the originators continued to be African imitating foreigners eclectically producing foreign theologies but transforming these for immediate contextual purposes.

With the question of national development it became very necessary to define the part that proliferation of Churches has played. It cannot be argued that the honesty and commitment of the early Church founders at the commencement of proliferation of Churches has ebbed very fast. It was a period when sincerity and chastity were celebrated as Christian virtues. With the accompany prosperity preaching it has become very difficult to see the selflessness of Christian missionaries. Interest is mostly on acquisition of wealth and power. It must be noted that development, according to Balogun (2008:175), is the act, process or residual advancement or growth through progressive changes in technological, scientific, political, social, economic and religious advancement leading to the better conditions of living. Changes occur and can be seen or observed in all human endeavours. Where exploitation and economic impoverishment of members by preachers become the order of the day in the formation and proliferation of Churches questions have to be raised regarding the essence of this proliferation of Churches in Nigeria.

Factors of Proliferation of Churches

Proliferation of churches did not emanate on its own accord, some factors contributed to it. Some of these factors are:

1. **Hard Economic Condition:** It has already been noted that the economic hardship of the Civil war was a big precursor to proliferation of Churches. In the 1980s and 90s many religious practitioners converted their trading warehouses to prayer and worship centres. Latourette, (2005:8) asserted that although they worship God, there is economic undertone for closure of centres maybe a way of earning the daily living. This is a feature that became very prevalent in Aba in Abia State. Some Churches have become business ventures where the innocent and ignorant ones are exploited (Lessa, 2008:11).
2. **Persecution:** Emeronye (2011:48) sees persecution as one of the influences of proliferation of churches. When the overzealous members of a Church are not accepted and controlled they end up breaking out into new Churches. Okeke, (2007:9) and Neil, (2008:13) added that quest for salvation, miracles, utilization of spiritual gifts and desire to improve on practices through propheticism also cause proliferation of church.
3. **High Political Ambition in Church System:** Some members of the Church who desire leadership at all cost end up forming their own Churches. This has led the Pentecostal Churches ending up in Episcopal formation. Titles and affluence as well as political aspiration are now the chief motivator for Church formation (Ituma, 2009:10).
4. **Disagreement between Leaders/Members:** Chukwubuikem, (2008:18) asserted that disagreements between church leaders and members now end up into formation of new churches. Newell, (2007:5) argues that this was what happened between Amos Onyike and Reuben Oti all from Olokoro in Umuahia, Abia State. This constraint resulted in a split in their ministry. Amos moved out with some group and Reuben teamed up with some group and they founded their own churches respectively.
5. **Jealousy:** This has also caused proliferation of churches (Hayword, 2009:9). To buttress this fact, Nwodu, (2008:80) said that jealousy operates in two ways; first, a subordinate may become jealous of the success of the leader. This drives the subordinate to establish his own church. Secondly, sometimes a leader might be jealous of his subordinate. A subordinate might attract the leader's jealousy because of the former's growing popularity, owing to his personal charisma or the manifestation of the anointing and gift of God in his life. In such jealousy the leader drives away the subordinate, who in turn is left with the only option to form his own Church (Nwosu, 2009:4).
6. **Protection/Security:** Search for spiritual security has led to proliferation of churches. In view of too many diabolic experiences in Africa many people search for protection in Churches and individuals that claim to have spiritual ability to protect. As such individuals and churches attract more members, other individuals who are able to learn this act of spiritual security establish their centres for the same purposes (Omenka, 2009:2).
7. **Illiteracy:** High level of illiteracy among members leads them to accept any form of teaching without ability to examine the theology of the

preacher. Proliferation of churches has been known to thrive more in Nigeria among the uneducated and illiterates.

8. **Greediness:** According to Walter, (2004:62) some Church leaders, out of greed and selfishness engage in “winner-take-all” attitude. The mindset to force out every assumed rival within a Church leads to frustration on the part of the loser in a competing pastoral interest. In this way, the proliferation of churches continues to increase (Sunkler, 2007:10).

The Challenges to National Development

Some of the Pentecostal Churches insist of the imminent coming of Jesus Christ to the point that members no longer see the need to go to school. Since the coming of the Lord what matters is for one to leave school, move about preaching the coming of the Lord. This in turn creates more illiteracy and the problems associated with illiteracy.

Economic activities have been stalled by those who claim that economy is worldly. What matters is preaching the gospel. Though this group is now reducing in number that was the initial approach during the early period of Pentecostalism and proliferation of Churches.

In commercial cities many unguarded individuals have been deceived to accept that hard work is not necessary for wealth. What matters is prayer and dedication to reading of the Bible. As a result of this, many able bodied individuals who should have been gainfully employed spend time praying in the Church in total abandonment to the development of economy.

Political development and scientific advancement have been abandoned by those who have concluded that these are godless. When those who are supposed to develop the nation see activities related to development as ungodly their quota to the development of the nation is lost. This is very noticeable among many Pentecostal groups who form majority of this form of proliferation.

Faith Based Organisations and National Economic Development

With the recent development among the Pentecostals in Nigeria, economic and political development is beginning to take a different and positive shape. All the early missionaries mentioned above began their missionary work alongside with medical services, schools, skill acquisition and other poverty alleviation programmes. They started the western education, which has changed the development of Nigeria. However, with the proliferation of Churches, mostly Pentecostals, emphasis was shifted to spiritual empowerment on the grounds that the Lord is coming very soon. People were taught to look up to God to resolve economic and other problems. In recent times there is a serious change. The “new churches” are now organizing economic and empowerment programmes, which complement the work of the old missionaries. This is a

good development. Many Pentecostals are now joining in Nigerian politics, thereby changing the negative notion that politics is a dirty game.

The Living Faith Church, aka Winners Chapel, has mobilized Doctors, Lawyers, Engineers, Judges, members of the Diplomatic Corp, Gospel Ministers, top Government Functionaries and professionals from all walks of life to various cities and even outside Nigeria to train the masses and to empower them for self reliance (<http://pulse.ng/entrepreneurship/rccg-church-to-hold-seminar-for-entrepreneurs-id4168368.html>).

The Redeemed Christian Church of God, In a bid to spread the gospel of self-empowerment and entrepreneurship, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, is conducting a free business empowerment seminar themed “*Power to succeed*” (<http://pulse.ng/entrepreneurship/rccg-church-to-hold-seminar-for-entrepreneurs-id4168368.html>).

Faith-based Organisations are now taking the lead in developmental projects in Nigeria and the numerous churches in Nigeria are seriously competing among themselves.

Problems of Proliferation of Churches to National Development

Even though proliferation of churches made enormous contributions on national development, it has also caused some problems on national development. These include:

1. **Violence:** Proliferation of churches may cause violence in the society. When this violence is caused, it diminishes the rate of lives and property security; it diminishes the rate of lives and property security. Those participating in the riots have the high tendency of becoming brutal or aggressive.
2. **Death of labour force and unemployment:** Church conflicts adversely affect the national development in any society. Wherever there are church conflicts, the result is insecurity of lives and properties and it does directly or indirectly affect the economy of the country concerned. Such conflicts often result in the reduction labour personnel. Conflict also causes unemployment. Those who are used to conflict end up becoming touts.
3. **Poverty:** More than one billion of the world’s populations, especially in Africa and Asia are living under abject poverty. When churches give the impression that the world is not important; the only important place is heaven it reduces the mass majority of Nigerians into a population of heaven mindedness disregarding commitment to national development. People’s means of getting their daily bread, shelter and clothing have been challenged as a result of this. Poverty level is still very high in Nigeria in spite of proliferation of Churches.

4. **Division:** Proliferation of churches has caused divisions in families. This happens where different members of the family belong to different denominations. Some of the members of the family go to the extent of calling other members of the family in other denominations infidels. To the, the only true worshippers of God are those who attend their Churches.

Onwuebu, (2004:9) has noted that morality losing its grip on churches with proliferation of Churches. There is a turning inward among people seeking refuge from the pressure of everyday existence in the technological and scientific economy. The effort put in the (church ministry) by the leaders to make churches more appealing and more satisfying to the religious yearning of the people does not seem to be enough. The ongoing experiences in Nigeria call for more attention on spiritual awakening.

Proper approach to proliferation of Churches

It is obvious that without proliferation of churches evangelism would not have been as massive as it is in Nigeria today. While proliferation of Churches has made many of the Mainline Churches to wake up to the call of Church planting and missions it is necessary to remove wrong approach of proliferation of Churches.

- I. **Transparency:** According to Ubaka, (2004:3) and Ubani, (2007:47) some religious leaders have exhibited a penchant for embezzling church funds. They embezzle church's money without fear. This is in flagrant disregard to church accountability and patriotism to the nation. The looted monies are stashed away in foreign banks which in turn affect foreign reserve. Church leaders and member are reminded that stewardship is a biblical virtue and that God demands that from every Christian.
- II. **Healthy Ecumenical Relationship:** Uformba, (2004:90) and Ukaegbu, (2007:14) are of the opinion that it will be very profitable and encouraging for churches to come together from time to time to discuss problems of proliferation of churches and to encourage unity. This will create peace and understanding among church leaders members of different denominations.
- III. **Dialogue:** Church leaders and members should regularly dialogue over issues brooding acrimony and hatred. Ukomadu, (2009:70) observed that dialogue is better accessed early instead of handling cases that have resulted in violence, destruction lives and vandalizing properties due to denominational disagreements.
- IV. **Living Exemplary Life:** Achibon, (2001:6) asserted that leaders of different churches should live exemplary lives. To him lifestyle should be commensurate with preaching. Those who lead the church should live lives worthy of emulation.

Conclusion

The need for national development calls for unity. It also calls for citizens to see the nation as a place that should prepare them for the life to come rather than a place that should be abandoned for the world beyond. While proliferation of Churches has its merits the demerits could be addressed in an approach that reduces tension. The areas of proliferation of Churches that enhance national development should be emphasized regularly so that the impression that proliferation of Churches yields only a negative result will be discarded. The early missionaries left a legacy that should not be abandoned for acquisition of wealth and selfish interests. The Spirit of the Lord in the Christian is good and able enough to lead the sincere Christian in the path of righteousness.

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