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Influence of Pentecostal movement on Christian missions in Nigeria

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Background: The emergence of Pentecostalism as a Christian phenomenon and its evolution into one of the most significant movements in the world elicits mixed reactions among Christians. Just as the birth of Protestantism took the world by surprise in the 16th century, Pentecostalism also arrived like a tidal wave in the early 20th century and redefined Christianity. It was seen as the Holy Spirit's re-enactment of Acts of the Apostles 2:1–41, where the infilling with the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit triggered Christian Missions that quickly spread throughout the then-world.

Objectives: This study examines the activities of Pentecostal Missions vis-à-vis Orthodox Missions and identifies the influence of Pentecostalism on Christian Missions in Nigeria.

Methods: The article employs contextual theological analysis to evaluate the influence of Pentecostalism on Christian missions in Nigeria by highlighting the Pentecostal Missions' strategies that facilitated its rapid spread and acceptance among the people.

Results: The analysis reveals that Pentecostalism has exerted both negative and positive influences on Christian missions in Nigeria, including an overemphasis on miracles and prosperity, the use of technology in Christian services and quantitative church growth.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Pentecostalism has positively influenced Nigerian Christian missions by bringing revival and vitality to Christianity, contextualising the gospel to respond to cultural worldviews, stimulating mainline churches to revisit mission principles and practices for quantitative effectiveness and opening doors for reverse missions.

Contribution: The article discussed the Pentecostal movement's mission strategies that led to its rapid spread and how these strategies could benefit upcoming ministries.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; Christian Missions; influence; reverse mission; contextual theology; missions.

Introduction

'On the day of Pentecost …' in Acts of the Apostles 2:1–4 became an event that marked the birth of Christian missions after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It was the fulfilment of the promise of the Father for spiritual empowerment that would herald his kingdom on earth (Jl 2:28–29), which Jesus reminded his disciples and charged them to wait and be empowered to be his witnesses. Since then, his followers, through subsequent generations, have been witnessing Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, which, at times, seems lost amid the flurry of ecclesiastical bureaucracy. However, in the early 20th century, the Pentecostal event in Acts 2 was reenacted and has since evolved into one of the most significant Christian movements in the world, Pentecostalism. Just like the descent of the Holy Spirit in times of the early apostles, like a mighty rushing wind, the move of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the 20th century, referred to as the Pentecostal movement, spread globally before the close of that century, and it is still growing in the 21st century. What started as a movement of seekers in a Bible School in Kansas became a global religious phenomenon that reshaped world Christianity. Like the birth of Protestantism, Pentecostalism is another great move of God in his Divine purpose for the Church.

In Nigeria, Pentecostalism came like a tidal wave, a tsunami that redefined Christianity and connected the people to the practicality of the biblical gospel and their cultural and philosophical worldview. It would be unfair not to acknowledge the great work of Orthodox Missions in Nigeria. They laid the foundations of Christian Missions in a sound theological framework and social actions, but with many gaps and missing links like lack of power evangelism, practical demonstration of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and vibrant contextual worship in connecting the

gospel to the existential reality of the people, which Pentecostalism later came to fill, leaving a significant influence on the approach, strategies and practices of Christian Missions in Nigeria. This article explores the history of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, highlights the Missions' strategies that gave Pentecostal Missions an edge over the Orthodox Missions and discusses how Pentecostalism influences Christian Missions in Nigeria.

History of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria

Pentecostalism is a comprehensive term that encompasses many Protestant sects that emphasise the ministry of the Holy Spirit, a Christian movement typified by the first Pentecost and characterised by the reappearance of the charismata of glossolalia, exorcism, healing and miracles (Ayegboyin & Nihinlola 2008:214). The origin of Pentecostalism can be traced back to the Holiness movement, led by Charles Parham in 1901, who encouraged his students to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. One such student was William J Seymour, who led the Azusa Street revival in 1906 in Los Angeles, which became an international movement (Bamigboye 2008:169).

In Nigeria, Pentecostalism has existed since the 1920s and 1930s, with the advent of the Apostolic Faith Tabernacle and the Assemblies of God into the country. Still, it did not significantly affect people until the 1970s (Bamigboye 2008:179). In 1923, Faith Tabernacle made contact with Diamond Society leaders in Lagos. She established their churches, followed by The Apostolic Church from Great Britain in 1931, which arrived at the invitation of indigenous leaders of Faith Tabernacle, whom colonial authorities had persecuted. Likewise, in 1939, the Assemblies of God made an inroad into Eastern Nigeria at the invitation of a Christian group known as the Church of Jesus Christ in Umuahia, Apostolic Faith (1942), African-American Gospel Church (1949), Foursquare Gospel Church (1954/1955) and Pentecostal Holiness Movement (1955). As mentioned above, these churches are known as Classical Pentecostals. Institutionalised foreign Pentecostal organisations instituted them (Ayegboyin & Ukah 2002:9–11). The British and American Pentecostals in Nigeria traced their early Pentecostal movement to the 'Azusa Street birth of global Pentecostalism' (Maxey & Ozodo 2017:84). The move of God cannot be localised; it is always global. It may start locally, but it will eventually reach the international stage. God always has ways of connecting his people to spread a Divine experience.

However, foreign Pentecostal Missionaries did not establish Pentecostal groups; they were indigenous, or homegrown, Pentecostal groups. They are the Ogo Oluwa Society, which later became The Redeemed Christian Church of God, founded by Rev Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi (1952), The Victory Gospel Church, Lagos (1958), The Gospel Pentecostal Assembly (1958), Evangel Faith Mission (1962) and the Gospel Faith Mission, a merger of Apostolic Faith Mission and Gospel Mission (1962). Both the Classical and Indigenous Pentecostals served as precursors to the charismatic movements of the 1970s (Ayegboyin & Ukah 2002:11–12). God is not limited to one way of accomplishing his purpose, and his revelation is not limited to a particular cultural milieu. While working through foreign Pentecostal Missionaries, he also revealed himself to indigenous Nigerians whose understanding, education or worldview may not accommodate the foreign influence, and he enabled them to experience God's reality in their context without working at cross-purposes. Classical and indigenous Pentecostals played a significant role in driving the birth of the Charismatics and Neo-Pentecostals, further advancing the spread of Pentecostalism in the 1970s.

Furthermore, the 1970s witnessed an evangelical awakening through the incursion of Pentecostal ideas into campus fellowships in Nigerian Universities, which gave many Christians more accessibility to Pentecostal influence and materials, and many Christian student bodies were attuned to Pentecostal doctrines, which led to having Bible study and prayer fellowships in mainline churches that resisted the move. In the 1980s, many Bible Study and Prayer meetings metamorphosed into Pentecostal Churches. Examples are Deeper Life Bible Church, Lagos (1982), Living Faith World Outreach (Winner's Chapel), Kaduna (1984), Rhema Chapel International Ministries, Ilorin (1988), Christ Life Church, Ibadan (1989) and Mountain of Fire and Miracles, Yaba (1989) (Ayegboyin & Ukah 2002:13–14). If the mainline or orthodox churches had not resisted those charismatic groups, there is the possibility that the proliferation of Pentecostal churches might not have happened the way it did; the mass exodus of educated youths from the mainline churches into Pentecostal ministries or churches played a significant role in the spread of their ideology and spirituality, which eventually made the mainline churches no longer immune to it.

Pentecostal Missions versus Orthodox Missions

Premack notes that Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and has seen Pentecostal growth over the past century. In its various incarnations, such as Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal, Charismatic, Independent and Renewalist, Pentecostalism is among the fastest-growing religions in the world (Premack 2008:100). Its phenomenal growth was primarily due to its approach to Missions. Their emphasis on spirit possession, exorcism, prophecy and healing in their practice, and their responses and interpretations of African cosmology, greatly influenced their growth, particularly in Nigeria (Premack 2008:100). They were more pragmatic in their gospel proclamation, relating it to the hearers' experience. In contrast, the orthodox Missions' proclamation was more dogmatic and passive. They boldly preached the gospel, connecting it to the existential realities of their audience and to the power of the Holy Spirit to make a difference in their listeners' situations.

Moreover, Bamigboye notes that the mission strategies employed by Pentecostals are as follows: (1) their response to tribal animisms of linking the Holy Spirit's presence and power to the hunger for spiritual power among the people; (2) emphasis on power encounters through demonstration of gifts of the Holy Spirit proving his superiority over gods by destroying their shrines and working of miracles; (3) responding to beliefs of local people in ancestral spirits by proclaiming the kingdom of God and his eternal control over their lives and not dreadful spirits; (4) connecting with the communal nature of the people with fellowship of believers; (5) bringing spiritual ecstasy into their mode of worship; and (6) adapting hierarchical system and philosophical concepts into their ecclesiology (Bamigboye 2008:173–174). Maxey and Ozodo (2017:126) lend their voices to the discourse that the Pentecostals succeeded in Nigeria because they take seriously the reality of the spirit world with its attendant beliefs and God's response to human physical and material needs, which was the missing link in orthodox missions between early missionaries and the people. Pentecostals successfully filled the enormous gap created by the first Christian missionaries of the 19th century in their interaction with Nigerians and their worldview. Pentecostals did not ignore or play down peculiar and particular experiences aligned with Africans' worldview and philosophical beliefs; instead, they engaged them with confidence in the Holy Spirit's ability to manifest his presence and power over the dreaded, malevolent spirits perceived as troubling the people.

Likewise, the message of the Pentecostals attracts people because of their emphasis on personal salvation as a means of connecting to divine experience, wise oratorical sayings, sporadic Bible verse quotations, a spontaneous method of praying and an ecstatic worship atmosphere (Offiong 2010:135–137). Eriksen, Blanes and McCarthy (2019:30) noted that Pentecostalism's success is due to 'its plasticity, its pragmatic unfolding of morality or its lack of theological discipline due to the new covenantal approach it conveys'. Their approach was so flexible, unlike orthodoxy's rigid positions on some Christian concepts and practices, which made them spread like wildfire rather than established orthodox missions. Their flexibility enabled them to connect with the aspirations of diverse audiences and to move with the times, balancing the scriptural and the pneumatic to prepare their members to face any circumstance in life. They could fuse self-improvement techniques from popular psychology with the exorcism of evil spirits that block a person's progress, not despising the poor but always seeking ways to help them move out of poverty. They were also able to engage in transnational outreach and exchange, which enabled them to have missionaries who far outnumbered those of mainstream denominations (Peel 2015:97–98).

Moreover, using mass and digital media as tools for missions and world evangelisation greatly enhanced the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. The writer witnessed this form of strategy; Salvation Ministries, headquartered in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, conducts their services through satellite transmission and has a yearly programme in January tagged '5 Nights of Glory', recently changed to 'Glory Reign', televised around the world with viewing centres that serve as a means for soul winning for the Church. Ogunewu (2018:16–20) also studies the mass media strategy of Deeper Life Christian Life Ministry and its impact on world evangelism, noting that it was highly effective and successfully used to bring people to Christ and to mature their faith in Nigeria and beyond. The embrace of information Technology in Missions largely contributed to their success. In contrast, Orthodox Missions have used traditional methods to reach people until recently, when some mainline churches are also waking up to this trend.

Though orthodox mission may complain about the style of evangelism, rate of church planting and growth, and question its quality and genuineness or just a sheep stealing enterprise or personal business empire, the reality is that Pentecostal missions like Calvary Production (CAPRO), Christian Missionary Foundation, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Winners Chapel and Deeper Life Bible Church are all challenging orthodox evangelical missiology and mission in Nigeria to become more proactive in engaging Spirit-inspired and relevant preaching, aggressive evangelism, improved church growth programmes and intensification of global mission outreach (Nihinlola 2008:140). Pentecostal missions in their early years were more practical than doctrinal, and they were passionate about demonstrating the Spirit's power as superior to that of darkness. This appeal resonated with their audience's philosophical and cultural context.

Pentecostalism and its influence on Christian Missions

Christian Missions could be called Christian service in the world, involving evangelism and social action (Stott 1975:34). Alawode and Ngomo (2018:9) agree with Stott, noting that Christian missions involve proclamation (evangelism) and demonstration (social action) that go hand in hand to win the world for Christ. The Church carries these out to fulfil the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the Church is the primary missionary agency, commissioned to go, proclaim and demonstrate Christ's love for the redemption of the world. This mission is not just to go, but to share the gospel as they go, according to the Matthean account of the Great Commission (Makinde, Odeleye & Afolaranmi 2024:52). The Pentecostals, individually and collectively as a church, took the mandate to preach to the nations as a duty without compromise. They see evangelism as the supreme task binding on all Spirit-filled Christians. Maxey and Ozodo noted that the 'pentecostalisation' of the Nigerian Church is an inescapable reality of the present generation that Orthodox Missions cannot overlook in describing its strength and that due to their passionate commitment to practical Christianity, which has become widespread, 'it is at times difficult to tell within Nigeria who is avowedly Pentecostal and who is not' and as such no one is surprised it was this form of Christianity that Christian migrants to other nations exported from Nigeria to other African countries and beyond

(Maxey & Ozodo 2017:44–45). This assertion establishes the influence that Pentecostalism exerts on Christian Missions in Nigeria.

The Pentecostals' approach to the Christian Mission gives them an edge over the Orthodox. They are involved in action-oriented mission movements through the engagement of paternalism (higher authority takes responsibility and control of those under them), indigenous church principles of self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating; informal leadership training; evangelism and Church planting through personal witnessing; mass media; multimedia; social media; community social responsibility; and targeting of unreached groups (Bamigboye 2008:175–176). They showed so much passion and commitment in bringing many people to experience what they had experienced. Their commitment to evangelism was not about running a programme but about living a personal lifestyle and fulfilling a duty to enhance the move of the Spirit through them. This approach has also helped other churches engaging in missions to be innovative, passionate and practical in their evangelistic efforts.

Also, early Pentecostals all around the world, with Nigeria, not an exception, have a passion for their faith without much thought about doctrines other than singing, praying, preaching, agonising, confessing, seeking the impartation of the gift of the Holy Spirit, sessions of ecstasy, studying, putting scriptures to memory and taking light to dark places (Hunter 2013:4). These characteristics are still evident in many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, which are perceived as livelier and more practical than the dogmatic, seemingly boring liturgy of the Orthodox, which had influenced many Orthodox churches to review their liturgy and make it more helpful and relevant to the people. Also, the attitude towards evangelism and missions in the Nigerian Church has witnessed a radical improvement due to the Pentecostal invasion, which changed the status quo for mainline churches. So many charismatic groups within orthodox churches can express their faith and passion for Missions without being hindered.

Likewise, the Pentecostal approach of addressing the existential realities of the people in Nigeria, particularly poverty, by preaching the prosperity gospel and the need for Christians to be prosperous while on earth, as propounded by Bishop Idahosa and popularised by the likes of Oyedepo, Wale Oke, George Adegboye, Alex Adegboye and Tunde Jooda, who emphasised on Christ becoming poor so that Christians can be economically prosperous (Ayantayo 2010:203), endeared many people to embrace Christ through Pentecostal Missions. Though this aspect is a bit controversial, the truth is that their response to Nigeria's poverty has helped many believe in God for a breakthrough, with testimonies of God miraculously intervening. However, there are so many excesses that mar this approach.

Another area of influence on Christian missions, in which Pentecostals have become distinguished, is Social Responsibility. Davies noted that initially, Pentecostalism did not have a well-defined social programme but has now become a social programme itself, with their dynamic and entrepreneurial approach to life, its connection to people experiencing poverty and commitment to gather them through their innate skill, motivating and releasing them into action, shows that Pentecostals when involved in building a better world, did so with dedication and vigour to produce the desired result (Davies 2020: 215). Though Davies was speaking of the American milieu, this is also true in the Nigerian context; Pentecostals are at the forefront of job creation through the founding of universities and banking institutions, helping members to secure jobs in established secular institutions, empowerment programmes, entrepreneurial skill acquisition, motivation seminars and building of community road projects. These announced philanthropic projects make them appear as Christians engaged in holistic missions. They used all these social investments to attract people to their churches and give them an unforgettable impression of a Christian movement that cares. This approach has also revived other churches' attitudes to members' empowerment and used it as a tool for evangelism and missions.

Another milestone credited to Nigerian Pentecostalism is their success in 'Reverse Mission' (a geographical shift in the direction of missions, where formerly colonised regions are now evangelising their former colonisers) (Burgess 2020:245). Burgess noted that Nigeria has some of the largest Pentecostal churches in the world, with many national and international branches, and that Nigerian Pentecostals have also founded some of the largest churches in Europe. Some are branches of churches that originated in Nigeria, and others are independent churches planted by Nigerian missionaries through transnational networks that seek to cater to migrating members but eventually become mission enterprises to other African migrants, as they have not been able to convert the indigenous European population. However, they are so visible in their ownership of buildings in urban spaces and in their media publicity (Burgess 2020:262–263). Nigerian Pentecostals broke the frontiers of transnational missions and are more vibrant, focused and aggressive in taking the gospel back to those who brought it to Nigeria. This move has also influenced mainline churches, particularly the Nigerian Baptists Convention, to rethink how they can engage International Missions more effectively.

However, Bamigboye notes that some of their approaches negatively affect the Church in Nigeria. Emphasis on faith, healing, deliverance and prosperity pushes the salvation message to the background. Also, the vitality and extravagant lifestyle of some of their leaders, in contrast to their earlier practice of self-denial and spiritual growth, are seen as a diversion from the original purpose of the 1901 birth. Likewise, their stress on power encounters, rather than submitting to the total will of God and abrogating the fundamentals of the Christian faith, marred their mission efforts (Bamigboye 2008:177). Furthermore, Ogunewu (2018:21–22) also warns about the danger of overreliance on

information and digital technology, particularly online services, which could cause churches in Nigeria to experience low turnouts and eventual liquidity, like cinema houses sold out in America because no one was coming to watch movies due to the invention of home videos and satellite television that gives them the same experience in the comfort of their living rooms. The writer agrees with the two authors' observations that Pentecostalism might have influenced Christian Missions positively in unprecedented ways, but some excesses need to be checked and controlled. The mode of evangelism that many among them practice, by poaching from mainline churches, is not advancing Christian Missions in the true sense of the term. Sometimes, their emphasis on miracles leads to syncretic practices and the merchandising of the gospel; digital technology with short, multiple services on Sunday seemingly destroys believers' fellowship and mutual edification among themselves and the general body of Christ, and may reduce the significance of physical gathering.

Conclusion

Pentecostalism has positively influenced Christian Missions in Nigeria, bringing revival, contextualising the gospel to respond to African worldviews, and stimulating Mainline churches to revisit Missions' principles and practices for greater effectiveness. It has even reinvigorated the passion for fulfilling the Great Commission mandate in the Nigerian Church and opened doors for a 'Reverse Mission' to the land of former colonisers.

However, there are still negative influences from Pentecostalism that challenge Christian Missions and spread fast among the Nigerian Church. The challenge of emphasis on a miracle, prosperity, social empowerment to the detriment of sound salvation message, digital tools disconnecting the church members from mutual edification and migration of members from one Church to the other, rather than authentic soul winning, mitigated if both Pentecostal and Orthodox will learn from each other and focus on the essentials of the Great Commission, drop sentiments and rivalry against each other, unite and synergise to advance the gospel cause and concentrate on sound uncompromised biblical principles and practices that fulfil God's Mission on earth.

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Akinyemi O. Alawode: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision and Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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