

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS CHANGES IN NIGERIA: FOCUS ON CHURCHES OF CHRIST

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### Abstract

This paper adopted a library research method to investigate how information and communication technology is making subtle changes in some religions in Nigeria. It demonstrated that while social media have enabled religious organizations to reach more people, it has also injected competition for members, physical distance of leaders from their followers, and a manifest personality cult into their organizational structures. In the case of churches of Christ, the paper discovered that social media is influencing the method of edification, relationship formation, and a growing tendency toward theological sects and multiple authoritative voices. The paper recommends making ICT a topical issue in preacher education and workshops for proper utilization.

**Keywords:** ICT, social media, Facebook, churches of Christ, change.

### Introduction

In 2003, history was made when Nigeria joined the league of space nations by launching its first space orbiter, Nigeria Sat-1. Today Nigeria has three space probe—NigeriaSat 2, NigeriaSat X, and NigComSat-1R—orbiting in outer space. These highly designed satellites are meant to serve the country in the areas of agriculture, environmental monitoring, and boundary delineation (Aron). Prior to Nigeria's entrance into the space race, the country, in 2000 introduced the Global System of Mobile communication, aka GSM. Today, GSM phones can be found in the hands of politicians in the heart of Abuja, Nigeria's power base as well as in the hands of fishermen paddling their canoes in the creeks of the Niger Delta.

That these new technologies have changed — for good and bad—our traditional way of communicating, and living, cannot be over-emphasized. Just as news media can disseminate important information—progress of election across the country in real-time across the nation—to the masses

within minutes courtesy of information technology, so also can they broadcast news without regard for traditional norms, especially in announcing the death of a king. The focus of this research, however, is on the effects of information technology on religions in Nigeria. Emphasis will be placed on the changes, both positive and negative, this technology is having on the major religions with attention on churches. By the end, the study will narrow its focus to churches of Christ in Nigeria. But first, definitions of key terms are important at this junction before the work progresses.

Information Technology, according to the Open Society for Idea Exchange “is a technology which uses computers to gather, process, store, protect, and transfer information” (4). While the computer is the central object in information technology, the internet serves as the electronic highway through which information can be disseminated and accessed in an instant. The internet offers a platform by which multiple computer users can be connected in a network.

Nigeria is home to diverse religions. From the esoteric cults whose activities seem clandestine on the one hand to the major religions that enjoy state recognition to some degree. There are also the various indigenous religions that have been with the peoples from time immemorial to the modern ones that aggregate both Eastern mysticism and Western sophistication. Nevertheless, in the context of this work, the phrase “Nigerian religions” will be exclusively used to mean Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religions. This position is informed by the fact that while African Traditional Religion is the indigenous religion of the people, Islam and Christianity have been in the continent a long time and have even become part of the culture of some African tribes (Ejizu).

### **Impact of Information Technology**

That information technology has made impacts across various strata in the world today is stating the obvious. The internet finds its use in education (e-learning), health (telemedicine), entertainment (streaming music and videos), administration (e-governance), and economic (e-banking). Commenting on its influence on Nigeria, Mercy Nwegbu et al noted that information technology (especially through the media of the internet and satellite television) has brought the culture, folklore and heritage of western countries into our doorsteps, reading tables, desktop or laptop with just a press of the computer keyboard or a click of mouse (4-5). Where are Nigeria’s cultural heritages in the world’s cultural arena?

Religions are not exempted from the impact of information technology. Their utilization of these technologies has resulted in changes in some of their features, and this change in African religions is the focus of this study.

### **Religions’ uses of Information Technology**

Information technology-induced changes in religions in Nigeria are as a result of their adoption for particular purposes. One of the

uses of information technology by Nigerian religions is for the purpose of evangelization or proselytization. According to Mercy Nwegbu et al, religious organizations adopted information technology to reach out to more people with their beliefs, teachings, and programmes (5). Newly established religious organizations equally employed it as a means of registering their presence in the larger environment. It enables them to expand their frontiers to places they have physically reached. This trend is not new, of course. Far back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Inoue Nobutaka pointed out that new religious movement (both foreign and indigenous to Japan) have been utilizing so-called “new media” in their proselytization activities.” The advent and utilization of modern information technology in Africa, however, popularizes religious teachings and beliefs.

Walter Ihejirika sees this appropriation of information technologies, especially by Pentecostal, religions, a way of adapting to the global popular culture (81-82). Information technologies, especially those that utilise the medium of the internet, are veritable engines that give speedy popularity to fashion, entertainment, and lifestyle. By appropriating these media, religious organizations attempt to bridge the gap between it and popular culture; the same people who follow celebrities on Twitter will likely come across the tweets or posts or videos of religious organizations. For instance, Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, according to *Pulse*, hit 2,000,000 followers on *Facebook* in 2014. Others are Chris Oyakhilome (14 million), T.B. Joshua (1.37 million).

In addition to religious activities, some religious organizations also use information technology to provide social services. An example is that of “Mater Cyberworld, an internet cafe owned by the Mater Ecclesiae Catholic Diocese, Ahiara Mbaise in Eastern Nigeria.” According to Walter Ihejirika (88-90), the information communication centre

provides several vital services to the rural community. Candidates for examinations such as WAEC, UTME, NECO, etc, use it to process their enrolment and/or admission. Likewise, members of the community utilize its internet-based telephone system (which is cheaper) to make international calls to their kith and kindred. Intangible benefits of such facilities in rural places, would include socio-economic empowerment and prestige to the community.

### **ITC and Changes in Nigerian Religions**

Having examined why some religious groups use information technology, attention will now shift to how ICT is changing religions in Nigeria, the directions these changes are leading to, and the ICT-induced changes in churches of Christ in Nigeria.

#### **How Information Technology causes Changes**

Information technology introduces changes in Nigeria religion in the same way it introduces a change in the larger society: people turn to it for their recreation, as their new market, to socialise with friends, and to find escape from a disillusioned society which is partly being created by technology. There is no gainsaying the fact that information technology-induced changes in Nigerian religions are as a result of religious organizations trying to utilize the technology for their benefit. As Innocent Chiluwa postulated, “Pentecostal churches who believed that the Internet was a fulfilment of prophecy as an instrument for the dissemination of the gospel in the last days began to take the advantage of the new media to propagate their activities” (11). This motive behind Pentecostal churches’ appropriation of information technology—God-sent means for propagation—means that they will continue to be more dependent on it.

#### **The direction of the Change**

Every social change is directional; ethically, it either leads to a positive, progressive goal

or to a negative, retrogressive end. The same axiom holds true in changes in Nigerian religions. Speaking on religious change generally, Robert Duiker, is of the view that the transformation of society into an electronic community through information technology “... threatens the existence of the sort of community that God intends for people to live in.” This virtualization of religion, according to John Foley, is giving people the opportunity to substitute participation in religious activities in real life situation for virtual participation. This practice is generally contrary to religious ideals which hold that God deals with people both as individuals and as a community. It will be an aberration if God’s people abandon coming together as a physical community living in a particular locality for individualized virtual religious experience (Vatican).

Another direction information technology is leading religion is towards unbounded questioning. While it is true that religions do not place any interdict on the utilization of the mind, the claims of some religious systems cannot be subjected to empirical investigation. However, the inroad science has made in virtually every field is also giving rise to a scientific mindedness towards verification of claims. And religion is not spared; people are now questioning age-long religious claims which were/are deemed sacrosanct. This is why Ali Amin Mazrui asked thus: “Will the new technology of information re-open the doors of *ijtihad* wider?” (79-80). So, this trend has the propensity to ignite critical questioning of religious beliefs. Religious people who, hitherto, may not be able to question certain religious claims of their religions may be emboldened to do so through the instrumentality of information technology.

#### **Information Technology-induced Changes in African Religion**

The changes in information technology introduced into African religions are both

manifest and salient. While the manifest changes can be seen in the form of modification in structures and methodology, the salient ones are more of attitude. For instance, the competition among various related religions groups (Pentecostal churches for instance) for members is a reflection of a change in attitude toward membership. Chilwa observed that information technology plays a role in this change in religious attitude, noting that "...there was increase in competition between religious groups on the use of the media, which also resulted in conflicts" (11). This competition is obvious in some religious pages on *Facebook* and the use of unsolicited sponsored pop-ups (Irekamba, et al).

Another subtle change information technology has introduced into religions in Africa borders on communication. In traditional Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions, members have easy access to their leaders for advice and counselling. Similarly, religious leaders always have direct contact with their followers either in person or through proxy: church founders focus on their headquarters while their employed pastors handle branches; in Islam, the faithful frequently meet their local imams; in indigenous religion, shamans and herbalists can either be invited or visited without prior noticed. The adoption of information technology by religious organizations has gradually displaced these informal personal contacts. For instance, both William Kumuyi (Deeper Life) and Chris Oyakhilome (Christ Embassy) use satellite and internet communication system to broadcast their programme to their members across Nigeria on weekly basis instead of using their branch pastors. This new medium of communication has thus created a chasm in the communication channel; the sender (pastor) uses a medium (internet) that gives him the choice of either replying or not replying the receiver (member/public) of his message. In

the traditional face to face communication, the pastor would be able to get feedback from his receiver either verbally or through non-verbal clue; he could deduce his members' reaction to his message either through their silent murmuring or when many of them start dozing. This view is corroborated by Innocent Chilwa whose findings showed that while some of the major Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroun effectively use social media such as *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube* to "promote virtual connectivity and interactions" between members and their pastors, this trend has distanced members from their leaders (13). Most members can "like" a post by their leaders, but rarely have the opportunity to "...discuss personal feelings" with them because their leaders simply use the technology as a one-way means of communication.

Furthermore, information technology is changing religion in Africa into the form of a commercial venture. John Foley noted that:

(One) area for research concerns the suggestion that the wide range of choices regarding consumer products and services available on the Internet may have a spill over effect in regard to religion and encourage a 'consumer' approach to matters of faith. Data suggest that some visitors to religious web sites may be on a sort of shopping spree, picking and choosing elements of customized religious packages to suit their personal tastes.

That native doctors now advertise their services on the internet is an innovation brought about by information technology on indigenous African religion.

Religious adoption of information technology has also saliently changed the posture of religious leadership. Commenting on how some pastors have built their religious organizations around their personality, Walter Ihejirika noted that:

The whole structure of the church and the media programmes revolve around them. This is in line with many revitalisation movements where the leaders are more than simple leaders but prophetic figures representing the movements. The leaders are symbols of identification for the adherents, and thus need to be the major focus of attention (83).

A look at the websites, *Facebook* profiles, etc, of various religious organisations would show the altruism of the above postulation. Indeed, information and communication technologies, especially social media, have influenced religious organizations especially churches in Nigeria.

#### *ICT and Changes in Churches of Christ in Nigeria*

Having appraised the place of ICT in the major religions in Nigeria and the direction it is influencing some churches, there is need to narrow this study to the target group—churches of Christ in Nigeria—which is the thrust of this study. Churches of Christ, in a nutshell, are independent groups of Christians within a geographical area who strives to practice Christianity today as penned down in the New Testament (Akpore, 4) by meeting regularly for education, preaching the gospel, and fellowshiping for mutual benefits. The church of Christ was established in Nigerian in the 1940s through indigenous evangelistic effort spear-headed by Coolidge Asuquo Okon Essien (Akpakpan 120-123) in the present Akwa Ibom-Cross River states of Nigeria. From there it spread to Eastern Nigeria through converts of the pioneer evangelists. The establishment of the church in Western Nigeria is attributed to the coming of American missionary—Leslie Diestelkamp—and local evangelists who went with him to Lagos to start the work there (125-126). Today churches of Christ exist in the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory of the Nigerian nation.

Since the church Jesus established is designed to function as independent congregations, churches of Christ do not have an international, national, or regional headquarters. Due to this condition, conducting research on the ICT experience and influence on churches of Christ in Nigeria is fraught with obvious complications. Hence, this research relied largely on *Facebook* to analyze how churches of Christ in Nigeria are using ICT and its attendant effects in the area of changes in the brotherhood. The following, therefore, are *Facebook* accounts associated to churches of Christ.

*Church of Christ Directory Nigeria* is an app which automatically redirects users, after clicking to, the details and contacts of local congregations in selected states in Nigeria. The app is downloadable from Google Play Store. The *Facebook* group through which the app is publicised has 825 followers as at February 2019. Though not much information about the app is available, its importance cannot be overemphasized. It will help Christians to easily locate congregations nearest to where they may be travelling to. Likewise, when fully embraced by churches, it can serve as a veritable research tool especially in gathering data.

#### *Mobile Bible School*

*Mobile Bible School* is a public group on *Facebook* and *Whatsapp* created by a member of church of Christ named Gbenga Egungbohun in February 15, 2015. It describes itself as a “...net ministry with a vision to remain the spiritual think-tank of distinct mobile Christian education.” The group is a medium for disseminating topical lessons and devotionals for the edification of the public. The group boasts of 1,574 members as at February 2019. This innovation provides on-the-go access to online lessons, compared to going about with printed material. This will be of great benefit to students and youths.



### *Church of Christ Singles-Nigeria*

*Church of Christ Singles-Nigeria* is another *Facebook* group associated with churches of Christ. It is exclusively meant for single members of churches of Christ with a view to networking them for the purpose of finding prospective Christian spouses. This closed group was created in December 31, 2010, by John Osarumwense Ekuase. With over 4,000 members, this group has truly brought a large segment of singles in churches of Christ together.

There are many advantages this group can meet if well embraced. One, it can drastically reduce the numbers of inter-faith marriages in churches of Christ. Our strong commitment to biblical Christianity, especially its teaching on marriage and family, makes the intra-faith marriage of vital importance to us. Two, the common saying of some of our members who marry non-members, especially young men, that “there are no suitable brother or sister in my congregation” cannot be an issue since the barrier of space (and time to locate a suitable spouse) would have been reduced to a large extent.

### *Love Classroom (Building a Godly Home)*

This is a *Facebook* group created in August 19, 2011, by Timothy Iwe, evangelist of the church of Christ. It has 13, 133 members as at February 2019. The group is administered by Love Classroom 101 and nine other persons. The group, with its religious page, is aimed at singles and married persons. According to the group’s page (Love Classroom 101), it has “building a relationship that will before and after marriage reflect the principles of godliness” as its cardinal goal.

As an ICT innovation into churches of Christ, Love Classroom aims to make marriage and family education available 24/7 compared to situations in some congregations where it

comes up once a year. Similarly, it intends to facilitate access to godly advice to persons who may not have such service in their congregations.

Notwithstanding the positive changes introduced to churches of Christ by ICT, there are also some negative trends. The following are some of the negative trends social media has introduced into the church. The *Facebook* group “Church of Christ <Conservative Group>” may have noble ideal, but its appellation may do more of instigating further splintering of the body of Christ than encourage. Those who conceive themselves to hold liberal or moderate views may refrain from joining such group and either join others of similar attitude or create their own. Prior to social media, a member either reads about or hears a preacher to determine his own theological leaning. With Social media, no such effort may be necessary.

Another dimension of the change social media has introduced to the church is what can be termed *destructive criticism*. A *Facebook* group “Errors in the Brotherhood of churches of Christ” has this description on its “About” page:

(T)he churches of Christ today, are not following the Patterns of the Apostles doctrine Acts 2:42. they (sic) somehow still want to bind the old covenant of Israel (before the cross) on Christians today. it (sic) is my hope and prayer that we as Christians get back to that first-century church (ACTS 2) and not the second century "Polly carp" teachings of Roman Catholic church, Restoration movement of Campbell and Stone. these (sic) men (Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone) mislead so many Christians.

Groups like this not only fuel controversy within the brotherhood but also tend toward anti-intellectualism and suspicion of any

effort at the academic discussion of the Christian faith.

uncritical duplication of effort; there are many similar groups created for similar purposes:

Lastly, the advent of information and communication technology has birthed

S/N	Name of Group	Author's friends	Group's Members		Name of Group	Author's friends	Group's Members
1	<u>World Wide Church of Christ Members (WWCCM)</u>	10	155	12	<u>Errors in the Brotherhood of churches of Christ</u>	20	2,562
2	<u>COC SINGLES MATCHMAKING</u>	12	756	13	<u>THE TRUE MEMBERS OF CHURCH</u>	27	5,242
3	<u>SINGLES &amp; MARRIED SUMMIT</u>	13	767	14	<u>BIBLE TEACHERS' CLASS</u>	18	381
4	<u>CHURCH OF CHRIST-NIGERIA, NATIONAL MINISTERS' FORUM</u>	30	508	15	<u>PREACHERS WELFARE, IN AFRICA (NIGERIA)</u>	11	228
5	<u>THE ONLY CHURCH BUILT BY CHRIST</u>	11	514	16	<u>CHRIST TEACHING MISSIONARY W</u>	9	254
6	<u>CONSOLATION VOICES OF CHURCH OF CHRIST WORLDWIDE</u>	4	215	17	<u>Nigeria Youths Church Of Christ Network Summit Talk-NIYOCOCNESUTA</u>	13	422
7	<u>THE PILLAR OF TRUTH&gt;THE CHURCH OF CHRIST</u>	43	6,716	18	<u>SOUND DOCTRINE (THE VOICE OF CHURCH OF CHRIST)</u>	11	2,795
8	<u>CHURCH OF CHRIST BIBLE SCHOLARS</u>	13	710	19	<u>THE CHURCH OF CHRIST</u>	8	130
9	<u>Locate A CHURCH OF CHRIST</u>	7	294	20	<u>POSTS ABOUT HEAVEN</u>	25	265
10	<u>Soldiers of the cross.</u>	17	254	21	<u>Church of Christ</u>	10	200
11	<u>NIGERIA CHRISTIAN PRAYER NETWORK</u>	46	635				

Table. 1. Facebook groups associated with churches of Christ showing the number of members and group members who are mutual friends of this author.

While it can be argued that multiplicity of social media groups associated with churches of Christ will aid in publicizing the church, this is only in appearance. At the deeper level,

these groups can evince contradictory voices, desperate effort to gain attention by unscrupulous persons, the widening centre of authority, etc. For instance, the “Preachers

Welfare in Africa” group may corroborate the existence of “Preachers’ Union” in the church.

In summary, this research has shown the astronomical growth of information and communication technology in Nigeria, its quick adoption by religious organizations in Nigeria. The paper further illustrated how these religious organizations are utilizing ICT to promote their growth and the concomitant negative effects it is having on religions as it is now being used to promote personality cult, impersonal leaders-followers relationship, etc. Among churches of Christ, ICT, especially *Facebook*, is also influencing changes in how certain things are done today: marital relationship and matters are going public, edification is becoming individualized, etc. However, this research demonstrated that it is also weakening the centre of congregational authority and also providing fodder for the emergence of factional theological groups. For a religious group that cherishes independence—with some taking it to the extreme of total autonomy—and the right of the individual to interpret the scriptures for themselves, social media can easily become latitude for extremities. Without the sound knowledge, information and communication technology may become an albatross in churches of Christ in its quests to speak with one voice and maintain the unity of the Spirit. Though this research purported to investigate changes in churches of Christ in Nigeria occasioned by information and communication technologies, the shortage of resources (financial and documentations) limited this researcher to only utilizing information available on *Facebook*. Members and congregations of churches of Christ have a robust presence on other social media platforms such as *Whatsapp*; they are equally employing other ICT tools. And they all leave their marks on the brotherhood. For this reason, this paper recommends the following:

1. That information and communication technology be incorporated into the curricula

of Bible schools and Schools of Preaching. ICT has become too integral to religion for theologians and preachers not to be well-informed about its application in religion. Preachers and teachers need to be educated on how this dynamic relationship plays out.

2. Workshops and lectures on ICT should be a regular feature in churches of Christ. The benefits accruable for proper utilization of social media coupled with the propensity for abuse necessitate that Christians are aware of this amoral human invention that has ethical implications in its use and output.

3. Institutions associated with churches of Christ should encourage quantitative research on ICT experiences among churches of Christ in Nigeria. Other information and communication technologies, especially social media, warrant investigation. Such researches will provide database from which other researches and studies can use as references.

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