

WOMEN LEADERSHIP IN PENTECOSTALISM AND SOCIO-RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The involvement of Women in “Ministry” is a controversial topic in Christianity. While some schools of thought hold the Egalitarian view, others are on the Complementarian side; yet, some hold the Patriarchal position on the matter. This paper is an investigation of the role which women have played and are still playing for the growth of Pentecostal spirituality in Nigeria. The paper highlights the roles which women played in the Old Testament, in early Pentecostalism and in the Church today contrasting the factors that led to the subjective status of women in the society and in most orthodox and classical Pentecostal Spirituality. Interviews have also been conducted in some Churches in Jos Metropolis to find out the views of some female Ministers involved in Ministry and the general role played by women. The Paper therefore argue that since some of the Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria have recorded tremendous successes due to the active roles played by some women in Ministry, their effort should be appreciated and encouraged rather than scorned.

Keywords: Women, Gender, Role, Ministry, Pentecostalism

Introduction

“Whatever diminishes, denies or distorts the full humanity of women does not reflect the divine and therefore is not redemptive; by the same token, whatever promotes the full humanity of women is the Holy” (Reuter, 31) Although, the society is at war over the role of women in the church; yet, a careful survey of women’s activities in the past and even today will convince a sincere heart that women did play and will continue to play significant roles in the growth of Christianity, especially in the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches which is the focus of this paper. This paper will be using a three prong approach in addressing its intended scope in this study. This includes an overview of the role of women in the society, the role of women in early Pentecostalism and the contributions of women toward the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Indeed, it is never an exaggeration to say that the spiritual, economic, social and educational contributions made by women of faith have been the brain behind the success of this

movement in the society especially in Nigeria.

What is Pentecostalism?

Omotoye quoting Richard Burgess defines Pentecostalism as the movement that stresses the experience of the Spirit and the practice of Spiritual gifts. (2). He further explains that these churches have some common features which are points of attraction to the people. Making reference to Matthew Ojo, Omotoye observes that since these churches share common phenomena through Literature, Crusades, Camp Meeting, Fire or Holy Ghost or Power Crusades, Open air evangelism etc, there is no need to make any distinction between the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches. Offiong (31-32), further adds the Pentecostal characteristic features to include: a claim by the founders to have been called by God through visions and revelations, evangelistic and missionary zeal, working of miracles, prophecies, faith healing, extemporaneous prayers by the congregation, emphasis on personal conviction, baptism in the Holy

Spirit and lively services expressed in the shouting of “Praise the Lord! Hallelujah, screaming, jumping, dancing and waving of hands in the air while singing gospel choruses accompanied by musical orchestra.

Survey of Role Women Have Played in the Society

Even though the society tends to place women as second-class citizens and their role not given much recognition; yet the tremendous contribution of women towards the growth of our society can never be over-emphasized. Despite the negative posture of man towards women, their contributions still stand the test of time. In the Old Testament for instance, women were treated as mere properties or objects, looked down upon, and disregarded in such a way that they were not permitted to eat together with their male counterparts (Ugwu, 11). The Pharisees could pray thus in the morning: “Praise to God that He has not created me a Gentile! Praise to God He has not created me a woman! Praise to God He has not created me a slave”. (Ibid, 26).

Quoting further to show how the Jews disregarded women, Ugwu, alleges that a law in Rabbinic Judaism states thus, “He who speaks much with a woman draws misfortune to himself, neglects words of the law and finally earns Gehenna, that is, hell” (Ibid, 21).

In spite of all these negative postures, going through the Old Testament account, one would be impressed by the tremendous contribution which women of faith, integrity, intelligence and devotion played for God. Such women like Deborah exercised unusual leadership skill when she was called upon by God to lead the children of Israel as a judge and prophetess delivering them from the hands of their enemies (Azembeh, 3).

A further x-ray of women involvement in the Old Testament shows that Miriam, Moses’ sister (Exo. 15.2), Sarah (Gen.

12.10-12), Rehab (Jos. 2.1-21), Huldah, Ruth, Esther, Naomi, Hannah, Rachael, and Judith all played significant roles which posterity hold in high esteem (Holy Bible, KJV).

The gospels account written during the first century. Greco-Roman world was said to have germinated in a patriarchal society that clearly distinguished between the public male domain and the private and female domain. Growing out of this hostile environment against women, Plato (427-327 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC) have these negative comments against women. Plato maintained that women came about through physical degeneration of human being. As a result, he strongly advocated that only men are created directly by God and are given souls. Aristotle on the other hand viewed women to be defective human beings. According to Aristotle, “Women were infertile males. The female, since she is deficient in natural heat, is unable to cook her menstrual fluid to the point of refinement, in which it would become semen (i.e. seed) (Ugwu, 48).

Despite all these negative tendencies, the advent and attitude of Jesus toward women was quite different. His dealings with women show that He gave them a sense of belonging and acceptance. He associated freely with the Samaritan woman and sympathized with the woman caught in adultery to be stoned to death by the Pharisees. Ugwu, rightly observed that during his passion, death and resurrection, women all stood by Jesus even when the apostles ran away. To this end, it is right to conclude that, God is not partial in choice but called both men and women from every walk of life (Ugwu, 7)

Role of Women in Early Pentecostalism

The Christian life and ministry start and ends in the grace of God (Eph. 2.5,8; 1Cor.12.4-11; Eph. 4.7-12). Christian participation in the life of Christ and service should be understood that we are all given

gifts according to the grace of God. With this understanding, no limiting factor such as race, gender, class or separation should act as an impediment for service unto God. Tite Tienou, quoting A. J. Gordon in this regard calls Joel's prophecy quoted in Acts 2.17-21 "the magna chart of the Christian church." He wrote:

It gives the women a status in the spirit hitherto unknown. And, as in civil legislation, no law can be enacted which conflicts with the constitution, so in scripture we shall expect to find no text which denies to women her divinely appointed rights in the new dispensation... "your sons and daughters shall prophesy" (51). He concludes by saying: Here is a woman's equal warrant with man's for telling out the gospel of the grace of God. (53).

With this understanding and conviction at the back of their minds, women fully exercised their rightful place in early Pentecostal movement. This was based on the fact that Pentecostals believed in the presence and interaction of the Holy Spirit in the assemblies manifested through the gifts such as personal testimony, spontaneous prayer, singing, speaking in tongues, visions, prophesy and miracles (Offiong, 31-32). Since the movement depended on the efforts and participation of all of the members, women took up the opportunity and helped greatly toward the success of the movement. Available records showed that women wrote religious songs, edited Pentecostal papers, taught and ran Bible Schools,

(<http://thepopeofpentecostalwordpress.com>). Further evidence of women's significant contribution to the growth of early Pentecostalism stem from the three oldest Pentecostal groups – Assemblies of God, The Church of God, and the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. The record clearly shows that shortly after the establishment of the Assemblies of God in

1914, the clergy roll indicated that one-third of its ministers were women. Even though, this figure is said to have significantly dropped in 1925, still, two-third of its overseas missionaries were still women (<http://thepopeofpentecostalwordpress.com>). On the other hand, in 1906 when the Church of God was established, one-third of its founders were said to be women. Again, Aimee Semple Marpherson started the International Church of the Foursquare in 1927, single women served one-third of the church branches as pastors while married couples served as co-pastors to another sixteen branches (Liardon, 226-227).

With their conviction and working under the influence of the Holy Spirit, other women during the Azusa street experience shared and participated actively in revivals and preaching the gospel in many parts of the world. Women like Agnes Ozman spoke in tongues at Parham's Bible College and evangelize the Midwest, Mrs. Waldron and Mrs. Hall took the gospel to Zion Illinois, Florence Crawford a convert of the Azusa street became the founding member of the Apostolic Faith Church. Still others, such as Clara Lum, Ophelia Wiley, Ivey Campbell, Louisa Condit, Lucy Leatherman, Julia Hutchins, G. W. and Daisy Batman all served as missionaries to various countries of the world including Africa (<http://thepopeofpentecost-wordpress.com>). Though, time and space won't permit me to mention all the women yet, Mrs. Marcia Woodworth, Etter and Kathryn Kuhlman should not be left out. Due to their monumental contribution to the growth of Pentecostalism, Roberts Liardon described them among others in his book as "God's Generals" (226-227).

Despite these giant strides carried out by these women of faith in the early days of the Pentecostal movement, the tempo could not continue for long due to a number of reasons. First, the restoration's ideology which emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in light of complementarianism especially when Paul's writings in the New Testament

were used as a standard of theology regarding women's roles (Tucker, 25). Pauline epistles such as 1 Corinthians 11:14; and 1 Timothy 2:12 presented a seemingly contradictory teaching on the role of women. Women here are warned not to exercise authority over a man. As a result of this ideology now embraced in the church, gender segregation crept in among the Pentecostals causing them to channel female participation into supportive and traditionally accepted roles instead of the aggressive outlook which they were known for at the early stage of the movement.

Commenting on these problematic Pauline passages, Juliana Senavoe quoting Patricia Grandly says:

...the most effective weapon to keep women from active and equal participation in the church. It has been interpreted to mean everything from "women cannot speak at all in the church" to women cannot teach adult males to women cannot teach their own husbands, it is cited to bar women from the pastorate and deny them access to the pulpit. All evidence that women did preach and teach in the early church is ignored to so apply this passage (79).

Applying the right hermeneutic to these passages is the only answer to the problem at hand. We must understand that the power for the task of ministry is from the Holy Spirit who is given as a gift to every Christian and not based on gender.

Patriarchy/Culture is another factor that contributed to the restriction of women's roles in Pentecostals churches. As a phenomenon widely practiced in many parts of the world, the practice defines the status of women as being unequal to that of men. It gives the power of succession and leadership to the male child. Hence, the endowment of the male child with power and authority which makes him to be preferred to the female child because it is assumed the

former will preserve the family name and lineage (Offiong, 131-132). African society is especially organized along the patriarchal line and in a hierarchal order. The African culture having received the gospel in the above interpretation, see no reason why women should be given active role in the church even if the gift and ability to service is there.

African spirituality is another reason that place restrictions on women's roles in the church (Warmce, 65-69). Women are by these reasons said to be weak, treacherous, cheated, prone to temptation and sin, evil, timid, foolish, slow and docile. With these characteristic features, Africans place restrictive measures on women from holding responsible roles when men are there. This is however unfortunate as many men failed woefully both in secular and spiritual life of the society. James Watkins in his submission identified nine reasons which men used as weapons of restrictions against women participation in Ministry (<http://jameswatkins.com/womenhaines.htm>). These include: male dominant/patriarchal tradition, male dominant/patriarchal society in which the old and new testament was written, the divided stand of the universal church based on the evangelical and the Orthodox views on the position of women in the church, the closed minds between the fundamentalists and evangelical on the issue as they used such controversial passages like (Gen. 1:27-28, Gal. 3:28-29, 1 Cor. 11:14, 33-35; 1 Tit. 2:11-13). Other ideas include women inferiority, lack of support, fear of apostasy, shortage of women models and lack of teaching on the subject by churches.

Women in Pentecostalism in Nigeria

The early missionaries who introduced the orthodox brand of Christianity between 1842 and 1946 came with the sole aim of spreading western education and Christianity among the people. These missionary bodies include the Church Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Methodist church, Scottish Presbyterian Mission and

later the Qua Iboe Mission (Ayandele 4). It is noteworthy that in all these mission churches, leadership was dominated by men even though, women like Mary Slessor did not only preach the gospel but she also encountered a social evil and stopped the killing of twins in the Itu area of the present Akwa Ibom State (Azembeh 3). (Offiong affirmed that despite their contributions to the socio-economic development of the society, patriarchy, administrative laws, cultural laws as well as other factors limit the leadership potentials of the women (133).

This patriarchal notion held by Africans and the mission churches which inhibit the potentials of women however started to give way with the advent of the Pentecostal spirituality in Nigeria. Pentecostalism as a religious idea owns its origin to the event of the day of the Pentecost in (Acts 2.1-4). This scripture reads;

And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; and also on my maid servants I will pour out my spirit in those days (Acts 2.1-4).

The prophecy specifically reveals the mind of God that “He (God) will pour out His Spirit on all flesh.” Following the manifestation of His Spirit, the disciples began to speak in tongues. Bruner observes that Pentecostalism is experiential Christianity that results in the baptism of the believer in the Holy Spirit and evident in speaking in tongue. This implies that both male and female that experience the Holy Spirit baptism becomes one in Christ. There is no more male, female, Jew or Greek with this experience (Gal.3.25-28) (ibid, 57)

Offiong said that the influence of the Pentecostal revivalist movement began to be felt in Nigeria in the early and mid 1970s following the visit of T. L. Osborne and

Ernest Angley (Calabar journal of Religious Studies, Nov. 1999, Vol. 1, N0.1) Gaiya traced their origin in Nigeria as far back as the 19th century when Henry Venn suggested that missionaries should raise indigenous churches that will be self-governing, self-financing, and self-extending (<http://christar.witnesstady.org>). Though, the initial dreams of Venn could not be actualized, yet the leadership crisis in the mission spirituality brought about the revival that swept across the Niger Delta, Ibo land and the Yoruba regions. This development metamorphosed into the charismatic churches in the 1930s that eventually gave birth to the Pentecostal spirituality of 1970s in Nigeria. Deji Ayegboyin and S. Ademola Ishola identify one charismatic feature of this movement to be that of attention which is given to women (29-30). They explained that in spite of the fact that mission churches preach the principle of equality of genders; men usually held the positions of authority such as Archbishops, Reverend Ministers, Pastors, Priests, Choir leaders, etc. However, the African Indigenous Churches have been exceptional in encouraging women to participate in the ministry of the church. Quoting Omoyajowo, Barrett and Opoku, Ayegboyin and Ishola further reveal that women in the charismatic churches are founders of churches, first class prophetesses and deaconesses, Reverend-Mothers, Lady Leaders, Mothers-in-Israel, Superior-mothers, praying-mothers, lady evangelists, women church planters and co-founders of churches.

Azembe, summarized other reasons that lead to the change in the perception of women's role in ministry to include: equality in human personality, legislative laws, new hermeneutic on Pauline passages, the effect of industrial revolution, the UN declaration on women, women's aggressive desire for change, women's successful stride, and participation in politics and the effect of feminism (57-62). These reasons have catapulted women to enviable positions in

Nigeria. Commenting on this, Maryam Babangida once said: "If the role of women as nation builders is in any way to be appreciated then their contributions towards enhancing a nation's ability to gain recognition in her struggle to improve the condition of living for her citizens must be accepted" (14).

Women in Pentecostal churches in Nigeria are therefore an important factor that has brought the movement thus far through their enormous contributions. A mere observation of the population that constitutes the membership of these churches is women. It is no doubt gainsaying that with the advent of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, a new chapter in history has opened creating opportunities for women to be actively involved in the ministry of the Lord. Ayegboyin Deji Isaac and Ishola S. Ademola rightly observed that in the early years of the twentieth century, a ray of hope set in for the participation of women in active ministry in the church (65-140). In the same vein, Gloria Mokungah of the Oasis of Love Bible Church observed that with the advent of Socialism, Globalization, and Technology, attitudes toward women's role in ministry has also changed compared to the 60s, 70s and late 80s when such a topic was considered a taboo. She further explains that though, there are pockets of scepticism here and there, proper orientation will soon overcome the ignorance which needs to be damage for such people to accept the truth (Personal Interview, Jos. 20/03/2012). Collaborating, Fumilayo Akintunde of the Family Restoration Gospel Ministry and Assembly observed that, though, women lost their position during the fall, but after the restoration in Christ, the relationship became cordial again. She further argues that men too were under the curse of the fall but after the liberation, there is absolute freedom in Christ. As a result, all women whom God has called with special gifts should not be restricted but allowed to use them for the advancement of the kingdom (Personal Interview, Jos. 10/04/2012).

Impact of Women Involvement in Pentecostalism

Offiong asses the contribution of Pentecostals this way:

With the advent of urbanization and its attendant problems such as political and economic crisis, anomie, broken marriages and homes, high prices of drugs and other essential commodities, individualism, evil spirits such as demons and witchcraft in the society, Pentecostal churches found a fertile ground of providing solutions to the teeming masses that became helpless in the face of this demise (115-117)

Apart from the fore mentioned, Pentecostals in the Land preach reforms which can change one's life and deliver such from the power of darkness. Apart from this, the Pentecostals also claim to have solution to marriage problems, poverty, ill health, unemployment, and other vices to which they offer pragmatic solutions through healing and prayers. These factors have led many people to the movement thereby causing the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

It is further stressed that the faith healing provided by these Pentecostal is multi-dimensional. It includes physical, social, spiritual, and material well being of the individual and the society. They also claim to heal broken homes, juvenile delinquency, drunkenness, financial problems, ailing business and moral life. Other blessings which they offer to the public are: total deliverance, salvation ministration, anointing for sanctification, deliverance from the powers of darkness, open doors for success, financial and business breakthrough, authority over satanic forces, healing of business, recovery of debt, breaking one's yoke, and possessing one's possessions (Offiong, 115-117).

Samson Fatokun affirmed to the contribution of women to the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria when he revealed that Miss Sophia Odunlami, a School Mistress was among the early adherents that join and spread the message of healing from the Precious Stone or Diamond Society (4). This prophetic healing movement which originated from St. Saviour's Anglican Church at Ijebu-Ode in 1918 was used by Sophia through her prophetic and healing gifts to curb the bubonic plague that ravaged the southern part of Nigeria after World War I (4). Equally, the prophetic gifts of another woman, Abiodun Akinsowon together with Moses Orimolade gave birth to the Cherubim and Seraphim Society in 1916 (Ibid 5). Apart from these, other women that left indelible mark in the record of Pentecostalism in Nigeria are: the Rev. (Dr.) Mrs. Lore Sam Amaga of the Foundation Faith Church (aka Salem International Churches), Pastor (Mrs.) Faith Oyedepo of Winners Chapel, the late Pastor (Mrs.) Bimbo Odukoya of Fountain of Life Bible Church, the Rev. (Dr.) Funke-Nelson Adetuberu of By Faith Ministry International Churches, and Pastor (Mrs.) Deola Ojo of Grace Family Church (ibid 5). The teaching and counselling of these women is highly commendable. For instance, the late Bimbo Odukoya is highly appreciated for her lessons for the singles and courting couples. Through this program many lives were touched and by her teaching ministry, many churches came to invite her to conduct youth ministry for their churches (ibid 5). Though dead, the contribution of this woman to the growth of Pentecostalism can never be forgotten.

Archbishop Margaret Idahosa is another woman of repute in the history of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. The wife of the late Benson Idahosa, Margaret took over the mantle of leadership in the Church of God Mission International when her husband passed away in 1998. Since then, Margaret has made serious contribution to the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria through

her erudite expository teachings and ministration both in Nigeria and abroad. She is also the founder and president of Christian Fellowship International where she ministers to women, youths, and singles (Top 3 Pentecostal female Preachers. <https://ezineArticles.com>).

Thomas Oduro identified Agnes Okoh as another Nigerian lady who made significant contribution to the growth of Pentecostalism in the country. Agnes Okoh, an Igbo lady, though illiterate, claimed she received a call from God in 1943. In 1947 she realized that she had the gift of prophecy and healing. This led her to establish a prayer group in Onitsha where she continued with her evangelistic journey either by public buses, on foot, or by train, preaching. Her message was based on repentance, righteousness, and holiness. Due to her fearless preaching, the ministry was named Odozi Obodo – Town Repairer. Later it was named Christ Holy Church. Agnes is described as a mentor because she fought against female marginalization in Igbo society; Healer, because of her unflinching faith in God caused miracles and healing among the people, her followers never lived on medication; a Prophetess because she was imbued with accurate prophetic utterances and revelation of people with diabolical forces, and a philanthropist. She is remembered for her love for all and benevolence to the needy. She single-handedly constructed a nursery and primary school, a maternity home, roads and streets in the area. Due to her conviction to take the gospel to all the corners of the earth, the church is said to have 850 congregations in Nigeria, Togo, and Ghana. (http://www.dacb.org/stories/Nigeria/Okoh_agnes.html).

Offiong, identified Evangelist Helen Ukpabio, founder of Liberty Gospel Church Calabar as another great female Pentecostal who has contributed immensely to the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Described as a spiritist, occultist, and Satanist, Helen became converted in 1992

when she established her church in order to dispense her powers which she claimed were endowed upon her to discern all spirits including that of marine and witchcraft origin. The church today, according to Offiong, has more than sixty-four branches in Nigeria with the headquarters in Calabar in the South Eastern part of the country. Since her call to the ministry, Evangelist Helen Ukpabio, apart from her deliverance services, has authored books such as *Freedom Pact*, *Unveiling the Ministries of Witchcraft*, *Alive Again*, *Total Yieldedness*, *Single but Powerful*, *Divine Compensation*, *This is your Season of Great Change*, *Take Charge*, *Works of the Flesh*, *A Brand New Day*, and *Seat of Satan Exposed*. She produced several inspirational gospel albums including Christian video films to her credit. These include *Highway to the Grave*, *The Price*, *Kids are Angry*, *The Rapture*, *married to a Witch*, *End of the Wicked*, *Zion's Gates*, *Holy Crime*, *Coven and Grace to Grace*. Her albums: *Jesus na My Best Friend*, *My Liberty*, *I am a Child of God*, *I have been Searching for You*, and *A Little Work with Jesus*. All these are used to reach the lost, oppressed and afflicted, possessed and tormented, ignorant and innocent. Evangelist Ukpabio asserts that her songs are meant to: "Heal the sick, encourage the weak, give deliverance to the possessed, set the captives free, heal battered emotions and serve as a pointer to Christ as King of all kings (WAACLALS Journal. Vol2, No.1).

By the development of film and video culture in Nigeria, Pentecostal churches have transmitted their message to a wider audience. Their messages and the power of God is dramatized as well as the power of witches and wizards exposed. This victory of God over the powers of evil is more concretized through these means.

Charles A. Anyanwu (99), rightly observed that Jesus and Paul acknowledged the worth of women. Also, when the prophecy of Joel 2.28 was fulfilled in Acts 1 and 2, women were with the disciples or apostles in the

upper room when the Holy Spirit came on the 120 waiting to be endowed with the power from on high. The Holy Spirit also empowered women. Again, examples of women who even did better than men in church ministry in history show that when women are empowered, they can be used mightily by God. Thus, He encouraged that the church should understand Christian leadership in terms of servant-hood so that women who are leaders in the church should not be seen as lords over the men. But that God gives every man (male and female) gifts according to his will to edify the body of Christ.

Conclusion

This paper investigates the roles which women have and are playing toward the growth of the Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria. It is discovered that despite the patriarchal posture held by many in the society, the fruits of women's effort in the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is very glaring. Women today have established churches with growth both within and outside the country. Through their articulate teachings, battered souls and homes have been restored. Many schools have been established for the provision of secular and spiritual knowledge. Through their potentials, many prophecies have been declared, the captives liberated, the oppressed and possessed set free, the ignorant directed to the Lord Jesus. Many today are employed through different economic ventures initiated by these movements. Nigeria, with her economic, social, religious, and political woes cannot deny the fact that women involvement in Pentecostalism has not benefited the citizens. The growth in membership and success is a clear test and testimony to the fact that people are benefiting from the spiritual and physical services being rendered by their movements floated by women who claim a call by God to the ministry. Women in Pentecostalism in Nigeria should therefore not be seen as inferior partners to their male counterparts.

Instead, they should be taken as partners in progress having been endowed with the grace and gifts by God to advance his kingdom in this end time.

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