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CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPACTS OF GOOD WOMEN FELLOWSHIP (GWF) TO THE GROWTH AND EXPANSION OF ALADURA CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined the contributions and impacts of Good Women Fellowship (GWF) to the growth of Aladura churches in Nigeria. The study became imperative owing to the disadvantage position of women in Christianity not just in Aladura Churches. Often time, women's contributions and influence in church growth are given little or no recognition. Where such is mentioned, it is usually done as a passing comment. It is germane to note that women's roles developed under the shadow of the prevailing male chauvinism in the society. The history of the churches take very little account of the role played by women within church the church. The growth and expansion of African Independent Churches like Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) and the Church of the Lord, (Aladura) popularly called Aladura Churches in Yorubaland is incomplete without the meaningful impacts of women. Women's organization or fellowship within the Aladura Churches has been a place where women in the Church have been allowed to exercise leadership to a greater degree, with limited influence from their male-counterparts. Therefore, the objective of the paper were to examine the contributions and impacts of Good Women Fellowship in Aladura Churches in Nigeria and the extent to which the Fellowship has aided the growth of Aladura movement in Nigeria. The method adopted was historical. This became necessary in order to trace the genesis of women's involvement in church growth more especially in Aladura Churches. The paper discovered that despite the socio-cultural impediment to women's efforts, some women in Aladura Churches are still playing significant contributions in the religious affairs of their respective movement. The paper concluded that the roles of Women's Fellowship and women in general in undeniable in the 21st century. The work recommended that women and their various associations within Aladura movement should be elevated above the traditional view that places them at the background owing to their positive contributions to the growth of the Church.

Keywords: Good Women Fellowship, Contributions, Church Growth, Aladura Churches, Nigeria.

Introduction

Women play important roles in any given society they find themselves, yet little or nothing is written about them as a way of recognizing their efforts. They are often seen to be playing vital roles in both their communities and the church alike. As such, non recognition of their roles in the societies and in church ministry will create a vacuum that may be difficult to fill. By implication, every human being has an obligation to participation fully in the life of the church and women are no exception.

It is a well known fact that women are often relegated to play second fiddle to their male counterparts. Some ordained women have complained about unofficial restrictions many of their men-folks in Christ place on them. Carol Noran (44), for example, described in her work as a female pastor as "creative tension."This is so because of perceived and preconceived notion that women have no business in the ministry. Though there are churches where women are being ordained and involved in leadership, and yet, they are still being marginalized. Despite the preponderance of women in religion, and in the Christian religion in particular, little recognition has been accorded womenfolk. This attitude can be attributed to the fact that "our churches, just like our societies, have patriarchal structures which marginalized the women (Babalola, 17)."

It is interesting to note that the growth and expansion of the "Prayer Churches" *Aladura* is evidence in the positive contributions of her female gender. The genesis and eventual growth of Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), for instance, was speedily facilitated through the trance of a woman. Yet, her effort was almost not recognized because she found herself in a male dominated church and the prevailing environment did not give adequate recognition to women's spiritual potentials. Similarly, in Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), women are excluded in the General Executive Council, the highest ruling of the Church. In the same vein, the ministerial hierarchy in the Church of the Lord (Aladura) and Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) does not have women at the top-most position (Oshitelu, 68). In fact, the position of elder is exclusively reserved for men. Decision making, even on women issues, lies with the men. This buttresses Delores Carpenter's submission that, women are being kept at the background on policy making affecting them (Carpenter, 27).

Suffice it to say that the attempt by women to make themselves relevant in Aladura movement led to an unplanned creation of certain organizations strictly meant for women, where they can exhibit their spiritual gifts. Such associations or fellowships include the Good Women's Fellowship among many others. It is rather unfortunate to say the least that these associations are still not giving the desired freedom to freely exercise their gifts as most of the associations are still under the leadership of their male counterparts. As a result of this, Martin Helwig (82) submitted that;

> Only when women become full participants in all domains
> of life and enter the important areas of decision making
> will humanity be prepared to embark on the next stage
> of its collective development.

The thrust of this paper is to further examine the roles of women as stakeholders in the birth of the Aladura movement in Nigeria as being demonstrated through the positive contributions and meaningful impacts of the Good Women Fellowship, *Egbe Obinrin Rere,* to the growth of the church and the society at large.

Definition of Terms

Fellowship

The first appearance of the word "fellowship" in the Bible is recorded in Leviticus 6:2. It is transliterated from the Hebrew term *tesumeth yad,* which literally means "deposit" and from the Greek word *koinonia,* meaning "communion" (Wikipedia). A fellowship is a group of people that join together for a common purpose or interest. However, from Christian perspective, fellowship is the act of meeting with those who are converted and who possess the same general beliefs. It is the sharing of knowledge and the trials and triumphs of life among those who are called and chosen by God (Wikipedia). The World English Dictionary states that fellowship is the act of people sharing activities, goals, interests, duties, trials, troubles, and alike with one another in a group. Therefore, the definitions of fellowship, either as a noun or as a verb, demonstrate who we are. It allows us to interact with others who share common beliefs and sentiments. It also allows us to recognize our own faults and gives us the opportunity to share in the spiritual growth of others.

Women

According to the English Dictionary, a woman is an adult female being or a female adult that is a grown up, one with experience of the society and not young (Collins, 605). To this extent, the Hebrew word *issah* and the Greek word *gune* can be translated to mean in English a "woman." Likewise, in the view of Adebimpe Adeniyi (5), the word "woman" means an adult female worker or adult female (Stanton, 21-22). It means a female, probably under the authority of a man. If this interpretation is acceptable, then, it implies that women stand as the opposite or second creature to men. The word "women" can be used generally to mean any female human, or specifically, to mean an adult female human as contrasted with girl.

Growth

Growth is the process of increasing in size, the gradual increase in amount, value and importance. It may refer to physical, numerical, spiritual, and financial growth (Stanton, 22). F. Akin John (5) analyzed growth as;

> The sum total of life we live, to grow and grow to live.
> You can grow up, down, put and grow together. Growth
> is the end result of doing something right, when growth
> stops, decay starts. Growth is not optional; it is
> mandatory. All living things grow.

In the opinion of W.R. Shenk (96), growth suggests mobility and change. It indicates a dynamic reality. Growth is both vertically and horizontally measured. In its complete sense, growth covers the height, length, depth and breath. Where there is growth, there is expansion, increase, development, multiplication or production. Therefore, growth connotes mutation transformation, renewal and creativity (Walkin, 293). In a nutshell, growth takes place when something gets bigger or develops. It is an expansion of something, place or environment. It

happens in every facet of living thing. It can be said that something is growing when desired expected results are achieved (295). It is an answer to vision and goal setting.

Church

The meaning of the word **"**church" can best be understood by its etymology and by its past and present usage. W. C. Robinson (123) in Baker's Dictionary of Theology explains that the Latin word *kirche* or *kirk* which is the same as the English word "church" comes from the Greek adjective *kuriakw*, firstly used to designate the house of the Lord. In Greek-English Lexicon (Arndt and Gingrich, 240), the "word" is given as *ekklesia* which means "an assembly, a congregation". It further explains that the word originates from two Greek words—*ek* and *kalow. Ek* means "out" and *kalow* means "to call". When the two words are combined, it literally means "to call out" or "the call outones" (239). However, J. Erickson (1026) submitted that the word church is;

> Sometimes used with respect to an architectural structure, a building. It is frequently used to refer to a particular body of believers. We might, for example, speak of the first Methodist Church. At other times, it is used to refer to denomination, a group set apart by some distinctive, for instance, the Presbyterian Church or Lutheran Church.

As a working definition for this paper, the author considers the "church" as the people that have been called out from darkness unto the glorious light of Jesus Christ, washed in his blood. In other words, the same is the royal priesthood, a holy nation and a peculiar people.

Church Growth

The term "church growth" is a McGravranism because its origin is from Donald McGavran. Church growth means, all that is involved in bringing men and women, who do not have personal encounter with Jesus Christ into fellowship with him and into responsible membership (Lighter, 231). Joe Stacker (9) defined church growth as the divine process of adding to a church those who are saved through Jesus Christ, equipping them for responsible discipline, resulting into witnessing, ministering and establishing a new fellowship of believers. In the view of Peter C. Wagner (137), church growth is a sign of church health. It is a science which helps to maximize the use of energy and other resources for God's greater glory. Whether a church is large or small, it should be a growing church, for healthy large churches and healthy small churches are evangelistically effective (Jegede and Jesuvi, 151).

Aladura Churches

The Aladura Churches are churches founded by Africans, for Africans and in Africa (Adewale, 85). They are often referred to as indigenous because it is not an imported kind of Christianity from Europe or from another continent. It has been able to contextualize Christianity in a way that makes it enticing and applicable to African needs and worldview. As the name implies, they are spiritual churches that emphasize the power and gifts of the Holy Spiri (Adewale, 56). Therefore, to a large extent, they reflect African culture. Such churches in Nigeria include Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Cherubim and Seraphim Church, the Church of the Lord, (Aladura).

Origin of the Aladura Churches

The Aladura Churches known to have different nomenclatures are churches found in every region and country in Africa, not only in Nigeria, but they are more adequately documented in West Africa and Southern Nigeria (Turner, 42). Even though the denominational, ritual, and linguistic diversity of these churches make it difficult to analyze and classify, the common thread uniting all of the Christian churches is that they were all established by Africans initiatives rather than by foreign missionary agendas. Despite the fact that many of these churches have traditional denominational names and relationships, yet they are not defined by these traditions (Houghton, 15). Though, some scholars claim that the Aladura Churches, as they are generally referred to in Western part of Nigeria, are syncretistic in that they combine indigenous African religion with Christian beliefs, but the degrees to which this occurs varies (Jegede, 245). These churches also demonstrate a strong missionary tendency in that most of the spread of Christianity throughout Africa in the 20th century can be attributed to them.

Aladura is the Yoruba word for "Praying People." The Aladura Churches reflect the indigenization of Christianity through its use of African symbols, traditional healing modalities, and worship styles. In most cases, Aladura Churches often led by a prophet (Majola, 2). Though, they tend to maintain strict hierarchy among clergy, laity members are not barred from joining their ranks and heavily involved where necessary. The Aladura movement started in Ijebu Ode, Nigeria in 1918. This movement later metamorphosed to Living Faith Church Worldwide and later to the Christ Apostolic Church. Today, many churches in Western Nigeria can be correctly called *Aladura* (Hayward, 98). The Christ Apostolic Church is not the only Aladura Churches, but their history is suggestive of some of the main themes that emerged in the early years of the Aladura movement.

The first Aladura movement emerged from St. Saviour's Anglican Church, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, in 1918. An Anglican lay preacher Joseph Shadare formed a prayer group with Sophia Odulami, a school teacher, both of whom had experienced dreams and visions, calling them to respond to an influenza epidemic in the region (Alokan, 61-62). The group later became known as "Precious Stone Society", *Egbe Wura Iyebiye.* It was established as a spiritual support for those suffering from influenza, and emphasized prayer and a rejection of orthodox medicine with the understanding that human susceptibility to disease represents a complex set of issues including spiritual vulnerability and others' malevolent influence, that is, witchcraft (Olowo, 20).

Therefore, in 1922, they broke away from the Anglican Church over the issue of medicines and infant baptism (Alokan, 69, 73). They affiliated themselves to a North American fundamentalist Church named Faith Tabernacle, which also favoured faith healing and adult baptism. They later broke away from them owing to issues surrounding doctrinal matters and organization.

It is interesting to note that the Aladura Churches rapidly expanded throughout Yorubaland as a result of revival that took place at Oke Ooye in 1930s. Joseph Ayo Babalola, a Yoruba Anglican and public works employee, had a series of visions that brought him to the "Precious Stone Society." He later became a General-Evangelist in the Christ Apostolic Church. He laid emphasize on the use of holy water in healing rituals. Other Aladura Churches like Cherubim

and Seraphim (1925), the Church of the Lord, (Aladura) (1953), Celestial Church of Christ (1947) sprang up (Fogel, 46).

It is on record that attempts were made to curtail the growth and expansion of the Aladura movement in Nigeria. The British colonial officers arrested Babalola and other Aladura leaders. The Anglican Church in Nigeria also expressed alarm over the growing popularity of the Aladura Churches because many of their members were joining the Aladura movement in large number (Wikipedia). In spite of the oppositions, the Aladura movement has continued to experience rapid growth since independence. Although a wide variety of breakaway churches have been founded owing to issues of polygamy, doctrinal differences and personality clashes, yet they all stress the importance of prayer, fasting and the use of healing waters and oils.

It is pertinent to also note that scholars disagree as to whether the Aladura Churches are Pentecostal. Some observed broad similarities and others pointed to differences in practices. Without doubt, contemporary Pentecostalism and Aladura Churches have overlapping histories (Shenk, 74). For example, the Deeper Life Bible Church has its root in Joseph Babalola's revival movement. Again, numerous founders of Pentecostal Churches have Aladura backgrounds. At the same time, many Pentecostals have demonized the Aladura Churches and as having pagan or occult elements, downplaying the role of Christ, or having other contested features, which considering the many wide spreading branches of the Aladura movement, are not unrealistic claims (Hildebrandt, 139).

Features of Aladura Churches

Emphasis on Prayer

The Aladura Churches as the name indicates are prayer fellowship, and spiritual churches. As such, they rely on the power of prayer to conquer evil. Prayer does not only form the bedrock of their practices. They believe that prayer is the fountain head of all blessings and successes. In most Aladura Churches, and more especially among the Yoruba, the spiritual leaders are affectionately called *Baba Aladura* and *Iya Aladura,* "praying father and praying mother." Most of the Aladura Churches have hours of prayers and intercessory group called "Prayer warrior," *Afadura* Ijagun (Ojo, 28). It is the sole responsibility of this group to pray for those who have problems and to commit special programmes of the Church into the hands of God. They also use what they called "prayer aids" like holy names, the book of Psalms, candles, incense and palm fronds.

Emphasis in the Spiritual

A good number of the Aladura Churches are generally referred to as *Ijo Emi*, that is, "Spiritual Churches" (Omoyajowo, 92). By this, they mean that theirs is a church directed by the Holy Spirit. As such, most of the founders of Aladura Churches are men/women in quest of spiritual contemplation and all of them claim spiritual motivation for the founding of their movements. The Holy Spirit is believed to feature prominently in their worship service as He manifests through visions, interpretation of dreams, ecstatic behavior and prophetic utterances.

Divine Healing

The belief in divine healing can be attributed as one of the major reasons for the rapid growth of the Aladura Churches in the 1918 in Nigeria. The epidemic influenza exposed the

inadequate of orthodox medicine in the treatment of the ailment and paved way for the use of holy waters in healing. Till today, the interest in divine healing is sustained as there are testimonies of healings and miracles from Church members. In a number of cases, those concerned claim that they first went to hospitals, or consulted traditional healers but with little or no success at all.

Freer Form of Worship

One of the fascinating features of the Aladura Churches is their freer and livelier mode of worship. In their worship services, they enjoy a more demonstrative form of worship, with singing, clapping of hands, dancing and stamping of feet in contrast to the liturgy of the Mainline Churches. Most of the songs are rendered in traditional lyrics. They are evocations and are sometimes spontaneous, accompanied with ringing of bells, drumming and the use of other native musical instruments. Worship are conducted in a more relax manner. According to Ayandele (388-9), the individual is "a heart and soul participant in the service and not the passive members who allow only the clergy and the key officials to be dramatis personae."

Position of Women

One of the distinctive features of the Aladura Churches is the elevated position accorded to women. In spite of the fact that the Mainline Churches preach the principle of equality of sexes, men-folk usually hold the principal positions of authority. The Archbishops, Reverend-Ministers, priests are usually men. However, in the Aladura Churches, women are being encouraged to participate in the ministry of the Church. Some of these churches were and are being established or co-founded by women. Positions like Reverend-Mother, Lady Evangelist, Lady Leader, are opened for women in Aladura movement. These are necessary in order to aid their spiritual development.

Contributions of Good Women Fellowship (GWF) in Aladura Movement in Nigeria

The Good Women Fellowship was inaugurated in Aladura Churches as one of the ways of fostering holistic development of women. It is an avenue where every woman in the movement is encouraged to use their spiritual gifts for personal development and for the upliftment and edification of their immediate church. The emergence of Good Women Fellowship in Aladura Churches was not pre-planned. The Fellowship was a child of necessity. It came on board during one of the Annual Conferences of the respective Aladura Churches, though at different times. In Cherubim and Seraphim Church, for instance, the Good Women Fellowship came alive through informal meetings of the wives of the ministers but it was formally registered in November, 2006 (389). In Christ Apostolic Church, the seed that blossomed into the Good Women Fellowship was sown in 1943 (Omoyajowo, 12), when late D.T. Ajayi and her friend Comfort Bolajoko suggested to Joseph Ayo Babalola the need to regularly bring the Church's women together for activities that would improve their Christian living in all spheres, either at home, church, or the society at large. The Fellowship was founded in 1944 (Olusheye, 44). Likewise, other Aladura Churches experienced similar spiritual felt-need. Membership to Good Women Fellowship is opened to adult female members only and that is made possible through Local Assembly, District and National levels.

The immense contribution of Good Women Fellowship towards the growth and expansion of Aladura movement is often seen in its effort at generating funds for various activities of the

Church. However, the fundamental essence of the Fellowship is to build one another up, connecting each other with spiritual encouragement (Adeyemi and James, 154-5). Meeting with others can help in recuperating procedure and give much needed consolation to push ahead. Meeting with other Christian women in worship and discussion shows that they are not the only one in this world. Fellowship of the Good Women in Aladura Churches enables the members to construct those enduring connections so that they are never independent of anyone else in the world. That is the reason God made partnership so imperative. He needed us to meet up so as to create a sense of belongingness and to know we are not alone (Olamide, 1-2).

It is also important to say that the contribution of the Good Women Fellowship is also felt in the area of education. The Fellowship has been promoting by way of sponsoring the education of young girls who are willing to further their education but who lacks financial means. In the same manner, the Good Women Fellowship has equally taken necessary steps since 1960 by being the sole founder, financier while not neglecting the day-to-day maintenance of Babalola Memorial Girls Grammar School, established in Ilesha, Oshun State (Olademo, 56). The health care services are not left behind. The Christ Apostolic Church Good Women Fellowship has taken over, to a reasonable extent, the running and financing of their Maternity Center, located at Ede, in Oshun State (Ojo, 52).

Furthermore, in the area of evangelism, apart from seminars, retreats, and religious conferences held among its members, Good Women Fellowship are not left out. It was through the women ministry that gave birth to a host of them. For instance, the history of Cherubim and Seraphim Church is incomplete without alluding to the seven day trance of the co-founder of the Church, Abiodun Akinsowon. The evangelical campaigns of Abiodun to the major cities and towns of Ilesha, Ile-Ife, Ijebu –Ode, Ibadan and a host of other states further facilitated the speedy expansion of Aladura movement (Omotoye, 73-74). It was through the women ministry in Christ Apostolic Church that Sampson Oladeji Akande was led to Christ. Prophetess O. Julian was instrumental to his conversion (Adewale, 105). The Fellowship is always encouraging its gifted members to wax melodious and thought-provoking choral records that are always in high demands throughout the country.

Impacts of the Good Women Fellowship to the Growth of Aladura Movement

In most Nigerian churches, there are women's groups variously called Women's Association, Women's Fellowship, Mothers' Union, as well as Sisters' Fellowship. These groups are organized within each local congregation to help evangelize, sing as choirs, to teach women vocational skills and a few other things. However, in the Aladura movement, this group is popularly known as "Good Women" or *Egbe Obinrin Rere*. Through the Good Women Fellowship, members are taught how to spiritually impact themselves and the lives of their family members and those around them, how to prayerfully take a stand for their families and appreciate who they are in Christ. The Good Women in Aladura Churches share one another's burden and pain through fasting and prayers. To this extent, the impact of *obinrin rere* is being felt in both spiritual and socio-economic spheres.

Spiritual Impact

Through the activities of the Good Women Fellowship, many women in the Aladura Churches have come to know Jesus Christ as their Saviour and thus join the ever growing Aladura

movement. They put their trust in the biblical teaching they received. According to F.B. Adebowale (107), numerically, women are always in large number when compared to men on any Sunday service. This submission as observed by the writer about women in the church is the true reality. Thus, women in Aladura Churches have responded not only in number but also in zeal and devotion owing to their constant fellowship.

Regarding spiritual matters in the Aladura Churches, the trends are changing concerning women in church ministry. Though, there is still room for improvement especially in allowing women to take charge of their own affairs. At various levels of any Aladura movement, their active participation is very visible. Their positions within the Church are not just limited to Sunday School Services or choir ministration. They are seeing rubbing shoulders with their male counterparts at the highest level. As such, they now function in different capacities like being a founder or co-founder of a church. Notable women in Aladura movement whose spiritual impacts cannot be overlooked include Captain Abiodun Akinsowon (C&S), Sophia Odulami (CAC), Madam Christianah Olatunrinde (Aluko, 72) and a host of others.

The central focus of Good Women Fellowship in Aladura movement is simply to care for one another and to serve one another with love. For this reason, the biblical teaching in Good Women Fellowship centers on Christian homes and happy married life. This has helped to reform many broken homes. Women are learning through this avenue to respect their husbands, co-operate with them and not to suffer in silence but to always share their problems with them (Alokan, 24)**.** According to a member of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, the Fellowship has helped them to build their personal spirituality and encouraged them to work within the Church. Meditation skills, discipline and discipleship are taught in the Good Women Fellowship.

Socio-Economic Impact

The Good Women Fellowship also deems it fit to have on her agenda the education of women. Through the given education, women members know both their rights and duties to their immediate families and the communities at large. Since education is the best legacy an individual can be given, the Good Women Fellowship in its wisdom makes education a core part of the programmes set for the members (Bliss, 49). The educational programmes of the Good Women Fellowship have succeeded in creating positive image of women. They are more aware of their place in the scheme of things as members of the society and learn the value of participating appropriately and ethically in politics (Blumhofer, 92). Through the enlightenment they received, they know it is important to be involved in politics because it is their civic right to vote and be voted for in their quest for national development.

Economically, the Fellowship through elderly women and invited experts teach management of finance to her members. As such, women learn how to handle both home and church income. Women are encouraged to take their husbands as their primary responsibility. This can be done by assisting them financially and providing for their material needs. The economic impact of the Fellowship is not confined to the members' immediate families and homes alone. Rather, the Fellowship equally renders help to indigent students, orphans, widows and other needy groups within the society as a strategy of evangelism (Adewale, 70).

Conclusion

The paper is an attempt to examine the positive contributions and impacts of the Good Women Fellowship in Aladura Churches in Nigeria. Prior to the establishment of the Fellowship, the roles and opportunities given to women in Aladura Churches were limited to Sunday school and choir ministration. The establishment of the Fellowship has really changed the general view of women in church ministry. Women now function in different capacities in the hierarchy of the Church. Some are co-founders, in Nigeria. These achievements can be attributed to the Fellowship. In a nutshell, the paper was able to give better and clear understanding of what has been the place and status of women in Aladura movement before the birth of the Fellowship. Its birth brought women together and it has become an avenue where women are being taught how to annex their spiritual potentials for the glory of God and influence their societies positively. This may not have been possible without the establishment of the Fellowship.

Recommendations

1. The paper recommended that more purposeful and impactful Associations or Fellowship among women should be encouraged.
2. More enabling environment should be created for women through which they can contribute to the development of the church. Therefore, any biblical interpretation on the role of women in the ministry that is subjective and improper should be discarded in preference to correct interpretation as far as women issues are concerned.
3. One of the reasons for the birth of the Good Women Fellowship could be attributed to non-inclusion of women in decision making, even on issues relating to them. Therefore, the paper recommended that the church and the society should put aside male chauvinistic tendencies and embrace the principle of mutuality and understanding since both men and women are equal in all of the ministries of the church.

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