6 *Distinguished church leader essay*

Roles of women in African Independent and Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria

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Introduction

African Initiated Christianity came into being in Africa through the initiatives of the concerned Africans who felt that Christianity should better be expressed in the African perception and worldview. This initiative was deployed to wipe out factionalism and bring together African Christians with their African feelings and passions towards generating African thoughts in Christianity. This strategy was necessary to connect the gulf created by the ‘foreign evangelists’ who came to ‘pioneer’ a Christianity that was incompatible with the socio-cultural and sociopolitical worldview of the continent.

Distinction of Pentecostal and African Independent Churches

The Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria were virtually all founded by Nigerians. This as it may, it is difficult to separate the Pentecostal from the African Independent Churches. They can all be considered different branches of African Initiated Christianity. But the Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria can be described as churches modelled around the modern American churches because the founder had been in theological schools in the country or chosen to follow the style in worship, music, sermons etc. In this way, they are able to relate to a class of people in society, e.g. the elites, middle-class, foreign-educated Nigerians who needed spirituality but in a form that they are comfortable with. The founders are usually theologically trained.

On the other hand, the African Independent Churches in West Africa – for example ‘the white garment churches’ – are more indigenous in their approach to Christianity. It brings Christianity to the grass roots in language, music, dance, spirituality and much more with which they are familiar and comfortable with. The founders of these Indigenous Churches are rarely students of theology. They are more often than not of a highly spiritual nature.

The precepts of the two types of churches are similar, as they believe in the Trinity and the word of God. The likely explanation of the existence of both types of churches is that they both reach different strata using different approaches. This however is not the focus of this chapter: the roles women are

playing in these two churches in present-day Nigeria being the object of this discussion. Being in a privileged position as the founder of Divine Salvation Bible Church (an African Independent Church), I believe my position in this discussion will not be undermined.

Women's roles in the early African Independent Church and Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria

African Independent Churches

The African Independent Churches as earlier described as Indigenous Churches, seemed to have had parallel roles for the male and female leaders from the start. Maybe this is because before the advent of Christianity, women had led in spiritual rites and worship in the native and traditional beliefs as priestesses, for which reason in African Independent Churches female leaders became readily acceptable, and became instrumental in the welcoming of the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ in Nigeria. So, one can say the traditional roles of women in the African Independent Churches were not hindered by the doctrine of Paul as such but were acceptable as a norm in the Nigerian society of old. The women could minister, pray with and for men, they taught the Bible and did not have to sit in silence when men were talking. There was no gender inequality to stop them from being the Prophetess Deborah (in the Old Testament) and the Samaritan woman (in the New Testament) of their time.

Pentecostal Churches

The advent of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria would naturally have been expected to address gender inequality (being a more modern and imported approach to Christianity) and be different from the Mission Churches' style, whereby 'women are seen, not heard'. However, contrary to that expectation, women were still marginalised in active participation of any spiritual or religious aspect of ministry in the church. Women were not welcome on the pulpit in a congregation that sits both sexes.

Rather, women were often behind the scenes. They were expected to teach at the children's Sunday school, join the choir, be in the welfare section, do administrative work or just sit at the altar with the 'husband/pastor', nodding and cheering in support of his sermons and much more. A school of thought holds that the Apostle Paul had unequivocally stated 'women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says' (1 Corinthians 14:34). In another scripture, he states 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet' (1 Timothy 2:12). With the obvious fact that most of the Pentecostal Churches were styled around the Apostle's ministry, most have held on to that doctrine that a woman cannot teach, let alone preach in church. Therefore, the traditional role of women according to the scriptures à la Paul the Apostle was the practice in Nigerian

society. It limited the potential of women to minister the word of God with passion like Prophetess Deborah and the Samaritan woman at the well.

Roles of women in modern-day African Independent and Pentecostal Churches

Women in African Independent Churches

Although we have it on record that African Independent Churches had always encouraged women's participation in ministry and have enjoyed equal opportunities with men to serve in leadership roles, the elevated positions of these women in their churches have allowed steady growth, so much so that about 70 per cent of membership is female.

The spiritual care and growth of faith in the ministry of the Lord Jesus is well impacted. Although the African Independent Churches may not have too much of a financial base because their churches are local and not usually found in highbrow and elitist areas unlike their counterpart churches, they are closer to the grass roots and the underprivileged. More often than not they are unable to give financial support but have excellent ministry of welfare and spiritual care for both genders.

African Independent Church women have been able to nurture souls through the spiritual gifts that accompany their ministries vis-à-vis visions, prophecy, trancing and sermons. They usually have an efficient welfare group ministering to the needs of widows, miscreants, homeless, etc. and are playing beneficial roles in the community by providing basic needs like water pumps, schools for the less privileged, health visits, meagre financial support, spiritual support to the elderly and much more. These are some of the ways in which they are able to serve their communities, especially because they are within that neighbourhood. Such areas are usually in the suburbs and these women see the need more regularly than the people, such as charity organisations, who only go there at Christmas or Easter. They are their brothers' keepers.

Pentecostal Churches

Looking back at the roles of women at the advent of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, there seems to be little or no shift from the 'siddon look' (sit and watch) syndrome even in spite of modernisation of churching in Nigeria in the last 30 or so years. There is still the laidback style of not much involvement of females in the Mission Churches; they still play virtually the same roles. In recent times however there seems to be a visible emancipation of Pentecostal women leaders prominently heading fellowships. It is obvious that they have *tactically* taken 'church out of church' by catering for the needs of more faithful women that are gathered in groups now identified as fellowships. Women are coming to the realisation that there is a 'not too hidden scripture' that puts them on the same pedestal as men in ministry: 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor

free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). They now know and accept equal rights to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ, though subtly.

For such reasons listed above, opportunities to gather women and focus on socio-religious matters which the churches were not able to address began to grow, such as Married and Singles Fellowship, Praying Mothers Fellowship, Daughters of Abraham Fellowship, Women of Prayers in Nigeria Fellowship (of which I am the initiator/president), Sisters Fellowship International and many more. An upsurge of fellowships began to be the approach of the modern female Pentecostal leaders to break loose from the shackles of the puppet in a box. Since the advent of women fellowships, the groups have in their own way impacted the lives of women in and outside of the churches. They have taught them scriptures to suit their particular situations and also given the necessary support financially, politically, medically, emotionally, even academically and in many more beneficial ways. They have been able to minister to the needs of the underprivileged and even become relevant in society.

Unfortunately, the Pentecostal women leaders have almost virtually restricted themselves to the middle-class females; most of these fellowships became a gathering of the elitist and the learned. They are more philanthropic towards and are usually only seen at the grass roots as charity organisations. 'They provided bread not the bread of life' (Matthew 4:4). They almost limited their words and works to their fellowship meeting days. Most of the initiators of these female Pentecostal fellowships are not heads of churches. They are usually the wives of the head of their church, so their groups are funded by their mother church. They are still branches of their main church excepting a few women who per chance took over after the demise of their husband/founder, for example Bishop Mrs Margaret Idahosa, Rev. Mrs Roseline Oduyemi, to mention a few. Be that as it may, these fellowships have been a feeder source for the mother churches, so the women have impacted growth through that subtle approach.

Hindrances and recommendations to effective and impactful roles of women in the African Independent and Pentecostal Churches

African Independent Churches

- 1 Due to its African disposition, Christendom has continued to underestimate the abilities of these African Independent Churches, especially the perceived 'white garment churches' to be worthy of association, forgetting that Jesus Christ has said 'He came that we may all be one' (John 17:21).

Recommendation: lines of segregation should be removed in African Christianity. Every church should be seen as working for *Team Jesus*, to achieve a common goal of winning souls and keeping them for the Kingdom of God. All should work together not as strongest or weakest link, not as male or female but as a force to be reckoned with in the communities and society at large.

- 2 African Independent Churches' women leaders face huge financial insecurity to sustain their passion for evangelism, through outreach, crusades, welfare etc., because the membership of such churches due to its locations, language, social status and more are the receivers not the givers.

Recommendations: the government should have in addition to their rural development plans consideration for the growth and sustenance of the local churches by financially supporting them in the provision of good-quality neighbourhood schools, hospitals at affordable prices, etc. NGOs should work closely with these local churches because they are within the community and know what is needed by the people on the ground. Bigger, urban churches should adopt these women-led African Independent Churches without interfering with their theological stands but through them support the social and welfare of the community in which they serve.

- 3 Most women in the African Independent Churches are not educated but could do with educational opportunities in theology.

Recommendation: theological schools should encourage women to come and learn at affordable prices. Confidence should be built and assurance given that they will not be sidelined.

Pentecostal Churches

- 1 Basically, non-recognition of women as equals in the Pentecostal ministry has hidden their God-given ability to win and keep souls.

Recommendation: the Pentecostal Churches should allow women gifted in ministry to exhibit the grace upon their lives. They should be equipped and empowered and set for success in ministry by the church authorities.

- 2 In Pentecostal Churches, their ministries have been undermined and limited to socio-charity organisations. They do not have adequate connection with the real needs of those that are less privileged in society.

Recommendation: women should not remain in the tag of charity alone; they should be allowed equal rights in ministry so they can also expound on other arms of the complete church.

- 3 They have been denied quality leadership roles which would have put them in the advantage role of bearing good fruits and keeping them. The charisma associated with women of God, which is exhibited when they minister passionately, is also hidden.

Recommendation: women have soul-winning abilities; the church should recognise that. This is evident in the growth and impact of the fellowship meetings they have initiated.

A personal testimonial

Born 'Adijat Ajala' as a Muslim to fairly staunch Muslim parents and married as Hadiza Abdulsalami to a Muslim man, I would say before my salvation, my real vivid knowledge of any other Prophet other than Mohammed (S.A.W. – Peace

be upon him) was at the age of nine years, when I watched on television in those days the late great tele-evangelist Billy Graham (*Hour of Decision*). He talked about Jesus with so much energy and tenacity and above all passion. I saw people come to the altar to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. Maybe I was just fascinated, but I stole the 30 minutes every Sunday to watch and listen to him. Many years after, I attended a mission school because of the quality of the education. I remember my father warned me sternly not to get involved in any religious activities and he came to school with me quite a few times to remind the authority that I was a Muslim. I was an all-round student in virtually all activities but Christian-related curricula.

One day about two years out of college, I was barely 18 years old, after I had gone to bed, something unusual was happening among the other members of the family that were 'merry-making' during the New Year festivities. Two of them began to speak in tongues. It was unusual and so it looked funny, I was awakened to join in the fun, but lo and behold, I began to speak in tongues and translated everything that was uttered. As strange as it was, my parents who were present were shocked at the utterances because it spoke of things they never mentioned to us as children and also about their past and present. After that day, there was never another visitation. It could not be explained in Islam, so we pretended it never happened.

About 10 years after this experience, I went to have my baby. My pregnancy progressed and was easy until the day of the delivery. The doctor checked and concluded I needed surgery. That was the beginning of my story. Within an hour of his visit, I became an entirely different person. I saw things no one saw, I heard things no one heard! The family that were with me were confused; they did not understand. They began to make contact with Muslim clerics and others to pray for me.

I began to reveal and repeat what I was seeing and hearing. I saw four strange apparitions and asked them who they were. They told me they had come to help me have my baby in transition. No one else saw or heard them. I was at peace all through, I had no fear or anxiety. This went on for a while. Finally, I asked my husband for a pen, that I had been instructed to write something, which I inscribed on my palm and my fist was clenched and could not be opened by anyone. I was taken to the theatre for the surgery, with all others panicking and hoping with all my show I would come back alive. Alas, at the surgical table my body was dead; 'I' was out of it. I saw the doctors make frantic efforts to revive me and I noticed that the anaesthetist was the only one praying in Jesus' name for a miracle. I said, 'He does not know, that "it" [my body] is dead, and only God can revive it.' They gave up on me and covered 'it' (my lifeless body). I saw my baby taken away. At that moment, the real transition began.

Out-of-body experience, science calls it. For me it was the great encounter. I found myself on an entirely different plane. I could see people burning in a fiery furnace, wailing, crying and gnashing their teeth, no one was guarding the entrance but they could not escape! Second phase, I looked down from above and saw people weeping. The fat and the slim, the rich and the poor, the young

and the old, the pregnant and the barren, everyone was crying. I asked, 'Why is everyone crying?' The answer was that, 'The whole world will weep until they come to the knowledge of God.' At the third phase, I was taken to another sphere where there was void, no crying, no wailing, no hunger, no sickness, I wanted to remain there, but I was told, 'You have to work to be here.' Moving from these three planes, we arrived at a place they told me was the judgment seat! I had never heard of such a thing! And a mighty book was opened, I was curious at its size and I asked what it was about. I was told it was the book of life, where a record is kept of all my deeds. And a loud voice read aloud, 'On this date [mentioned] and this time [mentioned] you said to this person [name mentioned] that you will never forgive him.' It was true! But no one was there with us, it was a reaction, how did it get here? My mind flashed and began to race back to the hellfire I saw earlier; I am doomed! 'True?' the voice firmly asked awaiting my response. I said 'Yes'. I was awaiting further reading, none came, it was time to face the judge! But I was curious, I needed to know so I asked, 'Is there no record of even one good deed I had done?' I got an instant answer, 'Good deeds are not recorded, your purpose in life is *only* to do good. Anything contrary is recorded and will be judged.' And that was it. So many other incidences transpired but I will fast forward to how I was saved from hell.

Where I stood, I felt the presence of something or someone extraordinary, please do not ask if it had a face or not. I could feel the presence, I was trembling and realised there was no escaping judgment, a gentle voice said to me, 'I am the advocate, I can set you free.' It was hard to believe who could save me from here. And I retorted, 'I do not even know you,' he answered, 'I knew you before you knew me.' 'If you *believe* in me, I will speak to Him [judge] and your records will be clean.' At that point in time, I desperately needed the offer of a new lease of life. I said, with every strength in me, 'I believe'. He said, 'Now that you have accepted that I can save you, what will you give in return?' Without much ado, I stuttered 'I will go and witness all over the world, that you are Lord and no one else.' 'I will fulfil my side of the covenant, if you fail your side, I will be back in four days,' he said. And, in a jiffy, I was back where my body was laid; I had been saved! I entered the body and requested, 'Let my right foot move, so they know I live.' And so it was. I could hear the nurse calling my name like from afar. 'Hadiza [my Muslim name, which was the name of the wife of the Prophet Muhammad], are you here, can you hear me?' All I could mumble through it all was 'Jesus is Lord', repeatedly.

Later in the room that night, the surgeon and anaesthetist came to visit me. The first question I was asked was 'Are you a Muslim or a Christian?' I confirmed myself as a Muslim but they told me how I had confessed Jesus as Lord during my surprising revival. At that time, the doctor said 'give me her chart, nurse, time of resuscitation please?' And she answered, '7.19p.m.'. Suddenly my palm opened and that was the exact time I had written in my palm four hours earlier. Everybody at that moment was a witness, even my husband was shocked. I enjoyed his support throughout. In spite of not converting, he believed in the Lord Jesus with that experience.

That is my witness. I have a mandate to proclaim the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to the world. How could this be achieved if I were a Pentecostal woman in ministry? Would I have had the opportunity to win souls and touch lives as much as I have today, if I were under a man's authority and control? No one else experienced what I experienced and so they can never tell it the way I would. It was my testimony, like the Samaritan woman, and it is for me to run with the vision and share with the whole world.

My role as an African Independent Church leader

I did not come into Christianity by personal evangelism, theological studies or exposure. Neither was it by choice. I became a Christian from the above testimony by grace through a personal encounter and the salvation of my soul through the Lord Jesus Christ. For this I am eternally grateful. During the period of my search on how to impact my testimony, the only place where I found acceptance was in an African Independent 'white garment' Church – New Temple Spiritual Church, Banire, Lagos. I was taught about Christianity, I was accepted the way I was and was baptised through the church. I grew in ministry and was ordained as an evangelist and, later, a prophetess.

When it was time to begin the work of an evangelist my testimony birthed the Evangelical Church of Divine Salvation Bible Church (a.k.a. Divine Salvation Bible Church) some 23 years ago at 5 Adewusi Street, Fadeyi, Lagos, Nigeria, which is duly registered and identified by the Nigerian government as an African Initiated Church. The church did not start overnight; it began with sharing this testimony to one, and then two and more in my living room. People urged, 'Teach us about this Jesus.' I shared my knowledge not from the word because I knew next to nothing then, but through the encounter. More people came and were encouraged; they also went about sharing this testimony until we reached the den of thieves and drug addicts. They welcomed us and were anxious to know about Jesus. They refused to let us leave until we promised we would visit them every Sunday. The rest is history because in that same lion's den, the lion of Judah became king. This eventually led to the building of a meeting place, the church. This became another home for all in the community. Today, encouraging both males and females ready to serve and carry out the five arms of the church (apostolic, evangelical, pastoral, prophetic and teaching) and my personal roles and functions as the Leader of Divine Salvation Bible Church has led to impacting individuals, the community and a steady growth and development of the church in the last 23 years.

The sustainable approach to church growth through theology and development: my methods

Credited with the above achievements the following are some, but not all, of the activities that have sustained the growth of the church in the community. In addition to the five arms of the church these regular interaction and support

activities which are essential to the spiritual growth of the individual members have in no small measure impacted the expected expansion both spiritually and physically.

- 1 Sunday worship;
- 2 open-air crusades;
- 3 ordination of other ministers including women;
- 4 welfare and visits;
- 5 performance of marriages, funerals, baptisms and christening ceremonies;
- 6 Bible study and prayer meetings;
- 7 monthly seminars for the youth church;
- 8 prayer ministration for pregnant women;
- 9 care of widows and the elderly;
- 10 free health programmes and check-ups;
- 11 evangelism;
- 12 empowerment of widows and youths;
- 13 community development and much more;
- 14 dancing;
- 15 literacy initiatives; and
- 16 social activities such as Easter picnicking, Christmas carol singing.

Achievements as an African Independent Church woman leader

Ministry: in the church I have been able to dispel the mindset that women are not visionaries. Men and women alike have sat under my ministration and have been positively impacted. Several have been converted through my outreach and crusades, and have become very active members of the church and useful hands in ministry. I have personally through ministry bridged class distinction by making all welcome to church the way they are. Moreover, with my background in Islam, I have been bold enough to preach against and mediate in religious intolerance, not only locally but even on national television. I have resolved communal conflicts that erstwhile elders in the community had been unable to resolve. I have through the bible school of my ministry trained, mentored and ordained more women than men for ministry. Many of them have gone ahead to found their own churches and continue to proclaim the good news of salvation. I have also initiated the Women of Prayers in Nigeria Fellowship, to bring women into the limelight by being vocal in the country and praying for our government, community and family regularly.

Christendom: it is my considered opinion that through my ministry more men of God have come to the realisation that women if given the necessary support can equally move mountains through the word of God. I have received awards too numerous to mention for community service and ministry, the most recent being an invitation to be the Secretary of the Board of Trustees of the Fellowship of Christian Ministers Nigeria, the very first indigenous gathering of

Nigerian ministers. The greatest privilege is my being the very first female office holder in its 106 years of existence. By now our church sits among male church founders in many Christian associations, e.g. Fellowship of Christian Ministers Nigeria, Organization of African Instituted Churches, Bible Society of Nigeria and many more, where I am accorded due respect.

Society: my ministry has been able to impact on the larger society by being contributory to the development of the community vis-à-vis social welfare, provision of potable drinking water, regular health check-ups for all, health education in times of epidemics or breakout of diseases, mentoring and empowering widows and much more. These services are given regardless of background, class or religion. Most of this I have single-handedly financed and occasionally solicited for assistance from well-to-do friends and family. I would have explored the possibility of founding a good-quality primary school and hospital in the neighbourhood, but I have been financially constrained after becoming a widow three years ago and burdened with the further responsibility of single-handedly taking care of my children.

Conclusion

Women when allowed to exhibit their leadership skills have never failed to be crowd-pullers. They have the charisma to attract attention, they are natural teachers. Women have been limited by some men's limited imagination. The native intelligence our mothers used in the African settings of old to raise today's world leaders is being undermined. Women are home builders, so why would they now fail as ministry builders? If women can be allowed on the socio-political scenes all over the world, what is wrong in allowing them to have impactful roles in ministry, especially women who have visions and missions? Women need to be *prepared, equipped, empowered and positioned for success* in ministry. We have a lot to offer. It is time for a paradigm shift. There is space for all in the ministry of salvation. Jesus did not undermine women, He fulfilled ministry through every available vessel, both male and female. Personally, I would want to opine that Paul the Apostle's idea of women keeping quiet was directed at the type of women that were present there (maybe they literally had no value at that gathering). Maybe in different circumstances he would have said, 'Men, be quiet, let us listen to the Prophetess Hannah.'

I would like to close with a quote by Christina Lee, the first Korean-American female pastor in the Episcopal Church, who said, 'If the church followed the example of Jesus in how he treated women, it could heal the world.' I could not agree more.