

AN EXAMINATION OF CHURCH PROLIFERATION IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

Looking at Christianity from that early time to the present time, many stages of development had taken place resulting to the planting and establishment of churches. Today's Christians have misunderstood the purpose of the church, instead churches have been formed here and there and not all are with good motives.

This is amazing because Jesus was reported in the Bible to have said that, the Gospel should be preached to all nations (Mark 16:15). Then, Paul in Philippians 1:15-18, supports church planting and proliferation for the expansion of the kingdom of God.¹ This is because religion is not fossil, but a living and dynamic phenomenon. It will surely continue to increase. Although, massive church planting has certain merits as noted above but they are not strong enough for total commendation of the phenomenon. Therefore, this study is out to examine the issues and prospects of church proliferation.

The Concept of Church Proliferation

Church proliferation is a process that results in a new (local) Christian church being established. It should be distinguished from church development, where a new service, new worship center or fresh expression is created that is integrated into an already established congregation. For a local church to be planted, it must eventually have a separate life of its own and be able to function without its parent body, even if it continues to stay in relationship denominationally or through being part of a network.

Christians especially the missionary and clergy men have always believed that the most effective way to reach the world for Christ is by starting new churches. Every people group and community needs a church. According to some scholars, the church is the hope of the world which is why they are committed to building missionary-minded, transformational churches among every people group and community in the world.

The global society today is undergoing significant constant proliferation and planting of churches which have brought not only changing values, but also greater source of solutions to people's problems. This rapid multiplication of churches is borne out of the understanding that, there is freedom of religious

¹ Win Arn, and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples: Every Christian an Effective Witness through an Enabling Church*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998), 736

worship. Central to the constant planting and proliferation of churches is the issues of its environmental and religious effects on the people in the society.

The Problem of Proliferation of Churches at Glance

To an observant mind, the pace at which churches are spreading like a wildfire. In some places, there is freedom of worship, places of worship are full, pilgrimages are over-booked and there is evidence of religious expansion all over the places. In other words, it is obvious for public evaluation today that there are so many churches today. Churches are noted to be springing up at an alarming and unprecedented rate in all available spaces, shops and uncompleted buildings. Worship come up in warehouses, hotels, abandoned cinema buildings, studios and other public places. It is a common sight to see a minimum of fifty different churches on a street of four kilometers long. This may paint a terrible picture, but such is the present spate of church proliferation and planting in the country.

In a statement made by Ogidi using Nigeria as a case study here, he categorically asserts that, "Nigeria is a country with easily the largest number of churches per capita in the world."² Fayomi also described Nigeria as "a fertile soil for the growth of independent churches."³ In urban cities and even rural areas, for lack of space and accommodation, six or more different churches could make do with a single building. Such is the present state of events all over Nigeria. For example, in Ekiti State, as rightly observed by Tokunbo, there are well above One hundred and fifty-seven Pentecostal denominations alone between 1970 and 2004."⁴

Similarly, According to Sesan in a research conducted different churches from different denominations in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course Theology of worship, his research showed "that there are more than one hundred and twenty denominations in Nigeria, although some of these churches have their branch in only one city or a village in Nigeria, yet they were named international"⁵

² R. Ogidi, "Worries over Failure of Religion as Moral Anchor," *The Guardian*, (March, 28, 1997), 11.

³ Ogidan Fayomi, *The pastor's church growth handbook* (Pasadena: Church Growth Press, 1979), 55.

⁴ D. O. Tokunbo, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Perspectives of the Redeemed Christian Church of God' in *Ondo Journal of Religion*, Vol.111, No. 1 and 2. (2002): 3.

More parishes and new religious movements continue to be springing up each passing day. The spiritual discernment reportedly used by the Pastors and leaders planting churches in Nigeria is, “We prayed about it, and God said go and establish your own church.” Very often, one cannot compete with the self-proclaimed revelations and answers to prayers received by leaders looking to baptize their whims in God-talk. The phrase is usually evoked to silent objections and avoids careful teaching and accountability. And apparently, its use is on the rise, “God told me so” is now perhaps the dangerous four-word-sentence uttered by church leaders and planters. Several factors have been found to be responsible for this massive church planting. They include economic recession, rapid evangelization, beliefs and practices, unhealthy rivalry, genuine thirst for spiritual nourishment, theological issues, fanaticism, leadership tussle and the likes.”⁶

Causes of Church Proliferation

The problem associated to the causes of church proliferation is multifaceted. As a matter of facts, if ten people were asked to mention one cause of the causes of proliferation, the ten of them might give different answers. This is to church that the reasons for church proliferation are numerous. According to the research, several reasons contributed to the split and continuous splitting of churches and these reasons are not farfetched. To mention but few are the below reasons:

1. Church Planting as a Means of Livelihood:

The major causes of poverty include lack of employment and inadequate care which invariably result in high level of dependent population. Many people were cashing in on the profits from massive church planting, as they launch new religious organizations and societies. According to Fayomi, “there is evidence that many are just charlatans looking for a means of livelihood. Many are perhaps genuinely religious.”⁷ This clearly shows that many churches in Nigeria

⁵ Sesan Olowo, “A List of Different Ministries in Nigeria” *A Research Report in Theology of Worship Class* (Etsi, Aug-Dec, 2016), 2.

⁶ O. O. Falayi, “*Proliferation of Churches: Causes and Effects on Church Growth, A Case Study of Ikere Local Government Area of Ekiti State,*” (an Unpublished project submitted to the RCCG, Bible College, Lagos, 1998), 42

⁷ M.O Fayomi, *The Christian Response To Our Moral and Social Crisis* (Ado-Ekiti: Hope Paper Mills, 1993), 32.

are found as a result of getting something to meet up daily needs. These churches are not found based on the genuine love for the gospel of Christ. Rather it is only for the benefit of the founders.

These churches can be identified by their much emphasis on tithes and offerings. They centered their message on giving rather than salvation. Onifade referred to the type of people preaching this message as “prosperity preachers”⁸ In fact some founders in these churches didn’t care whether their members have eaten or not their major concern is what they brought for God. Thus, in their sermon, more emphasizes is laid on giving, offerings and tithes. Some are even dubious, shrewd and cunning enough to brainwash their church members with whatever method just to get money.

2. Over-Population

One of the major causes of church proliferation is over-population, some churches when established started with a very small number of people, hence as the church is developing and due to vast growing of the community due to government policies and infrastructural changes. Some churches must divide. For example, a church might divide to an English and Native chapel when the members are no more of the same language, this is prevalent in places where there is a higher institution such as college of Education, Polytechnic, and University, just to meet the immediate need of the people. This act is common within some Evangelical church.

3. Pride and Arrogance

In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul admonish Christians to emulate the humility of Christ despite His being God, was a servant to men and was willing to die, as a result He was given a name above every other name.”⁹ Contrary to this today, some ministers are not willing to serve and they even consider their anointing as being more than that of their master. Some people specifically in denominations where laying of hand and other related acts of deliverance seemed not to be

⁸ John Onifade, *Prosperity Preaching and the Message of the Cross* (Ilupeju: Goodluck Publishing House, 2003), 54.

⁹ Arthur Merrihew. Adams, *Effective Leadership for Today's Church* 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 452.

allowed, some men of God do say that my anointing is bigger than staying or working with a particular church.

Furthermore, there are many people who, when they were rebuked in their former church, founded their own church under the umbrella of something bigger, rather than being disciplined and demonstrating self-maturity in faith. The Bible affirms that God honors the meek but hates the prideful. More so, Jesus washed His disciples' feet and urged them to emulate the same attitude of servant-hood when He said, "He who want to be chief among you let him be their servant." Today's church as wandered far from this, as many desire to be a leader and want others to be subject to them. Some churches today were formed because of their founder's prideful act and unwillingness to serve as servants.

4. Doctrinal Disagreements

Another issue that leads to proliferation of churches is doctrinal disagreements. Some people pulled out of their former churches to establish another just because they are not conformed to the doctrinal belief and practices of the church.

As a matter of fact, the origin of doctrinal disagreement among churches can be traced as far back as the 18th century when Martin Luther wrote his famous ninety-nine theses criticizing the established church. Martin and others led a period in church history known as the *reformation*, when many people left the Roman Catholic Church seeking freedom from its corruption and oppression.

5. Traditional Mode of Worship

A popular writer wrote that "we are living in an age that technology and globalization have been the order of the day, as such if one has to be relevant everyday then he must upgrade with technology and act in the modern trend. He argued further that civilization is another integral part of what make a person current or being detached from current ideas.

This is also applicable to the church. Some churches are still upholding to first-century beliefs and practices, and when a new pastor or youth pastor is employed in such a church there arises the problem of upgrading, and if the church is not ready to conform, they find a means of suiting their own theology that conforms with the current world demand.

6. Corrupt Leadership

Paul D. L. Avis, states that “some people do pull out of their former churches and establish their own ministry because of the bad leadership system”¹⁰. Some church leaders are so corrupt and they are not ready to listen to correction. Some are adamant to these acts and when the one trying to correct them persists, especially, if he is younger than them. They claim “do you know it better than us?”

7. Frustration

Some people were forced to pull out of their indigenous church because of frustration received from co-workers and other church members. In some churches, some pastors are known for their uncompromising truth and hard-work ethic; and others become jealous and envious. Some of this cannot be resolved, and some prefer leaving as to allow for peace.

The Merits of Church Proliferation

The phenomenon of church planting has its merits and demerits. The merits include:

1. Rapid evangelization,

It is undeniable that church proliferation leads to rapid evangelization. Due to church proliferation, it is difficult to find a community without at least one ministry/Mountain or a prayer house today. As such the gospel message is preached at every angle every Sunday.

2. Development of new leadership

Proliferation has led to the development of potential church leaders today there are quite a number of general Overseers and founders in Nigeria who are potentially active in service for God.

¹⁰ Paul D. L. Avis, *Authority, Leadership, and Conflict in the Church* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992)

3. Provision of checks and balances to orthodox churches

Due to proliferation, some orthodox churches have been corrected and where also cautious of their activities. The proffered churches put challenges forward to the orthodox churches and as such autocratic form of government has been reduced greatly from orthodox churches.

The Demerits of Church Proliferation

On the other hand, the demerits include,

1. Personality clashes:

Proliferation in so many cases has led to clashes between churches and personalities. There have been a lot of controversies/disagreements and contention between ministers.

2. Unhealthy competition for converts:

Another demerit of church proliferation is that, there are competitions for converts as each of the churches struggle to get their member. In so many cases some indigenous churches will not allow for evangelism, crusade or revival on their land because of the fear of losing their members to other churches.

3. Homiletical Propaganda:

There have been homiletical disagreements among churches, for example, the Jehovah Witness thought a religious Sect argued that there are more than fifty thousand errors in the Bible.

4. Lack of unity:

Another factor is that proliferation of churches has led to conflict and disunity among churches. This is so because all the denominations are of the opinion that their church is the best and will never accept to be inferior to other churches both in Service, Doctrinal believe, Standard and the likes.

As a matter of fact, this disagreement has even affected the arm formed in other to bring the churches back to unity. It was reported of recent that election of the interdenominational presidential post in a body became problem and almost cause crisis between churches.

5. Monetary crises:

There have been several cases of fraud, embezzlements and the likes by church founders. In fact, some churches are not accountable to their members on how the church money is been used.

6. Heresies:

There have been seeming contradictions to what the bible is teaching and what some denominations are teaching today. There are different doctrinal believes, different approach to the name of God, and they believe that the pastor is impeccable (cannot sin) as such some pastors do oppress the church members, some were asked to eat grass, some are to eat dead rat, ants, snakes etc., just to heal them from various diseases and to set them free from their bondages.

7. Noise Pollution:

One of the major effects of church proliferation is noise pollution. In fact, the rate at which churches cause harm and unpleasant environment for people today is alarming. Unfortunately, so many churches had been closed down by the government in some urban areas because of noise pollution and the effects the church activities are becoming harmful to the people.

Although, some claims that there are underground reasons for the government closing the churches, this could be traced to the Islamization agenda of the country, however the fact still remains that the activities of some churches are becoming outrageously calamitous and the concomitant effect is not farfetched.

Some churches do make noise, at midnight claiming to be doing all night prayers and some people in the environ could not sleep, some have even lost their lives do to restlessness created by the noise of the church.

Conclusion

This researcher concludes by recommending the following as the Solution to the Proliferation of Churches

1. There should be principles guiding the establishment of a church:

There should be laid down principles guiding the establishment of a church. On the one hand, in the early church history, church is not just founded on the ground of I'm called or I'm a convert, but it is done under the authority of apostleship¹¹. In fact, Paul has to see the apostles as to whether the gospel he is preaching is the same thing they are preaching. He don't just went ahead after is calling to be establishing churches but he did it with the knowledge of the authority. That is, he seeks the knowledge of his seniors. This paper holds that this attitude of Paul might also be helping the situation.

On the other hand, the authorities should make sure that such a person is having adequate biblical knowledge from the seminary or college¹². In this regard, heretical teachings and other related form of pulpit abuse will be minimized.

2. There should be consensus among theological seminaries and Bible colleges:

The seminaries and bible colleges where pastors are trained, should review and redefine their curriculums. There should be unity with what Evangelicals are teaching and what Pentecostals are teaching, irrespective of their denominational differences. The disciples of Jesus Christ learned in His feet but were sent to work in different places.¹³ This will bring about: First, a similar doctrinal believe among churches. Second, it will qualify pastor from any denomination to pastor any church available since the seminaries have the same teachings

¹¹ Gilbert G. Bilezikian, *Community 101 : Reclaiming the Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Barrington, Il: Zondervan Pub. House; Willow Creek Resources, 1997), 987.

¹² Daniel Alan Brown, and Brian Larson Craig, *The Other Side of Pastoral Ministry: Using Process Leadership to Transform your Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 75.

¹³ A.B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1998), 440.

3. Church founders should emulate Christ's humility:

One of the popular sayings in Yoruba is that "*Igberaga nin saaju Iparun*" meaning *pride leads to destruction*. Some ministers do not understand this today as they have put on the coat of an 'I don't care' attitude.

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