

CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY AND AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY: A SURVEY

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Abstract

This work examines the cause for the rise of many new healing and praying ministries around African societies despite the work of the early missionary endeavours. The findings indicate it came as result of the inability of the early missionaries to understand properly the religious atmosphere of the African man. In their quest to change the religious inclination of indigenous people at all cost gave birth to what is today seen as healing and praying ministries. In other words, healing and praying ministries in various African societies is an offshoot of the reactions of the indigenous people against their religious inclination and understanding.

Keywords: African Societies, Indigenous, Christian, Missionary, Spirituality

Introduction

The advent of Christianity in Nigeria brought a new dimension of religion and spirituality to the indigenous people. It was observed that the Christian missionaries failed to carry out an in-depth study into African belief system hence; they have shallow understanding of it and began to propagate the Gospel to the native people. Most of the native people accepted the exotic faith (Christianity) which encouraged them to forsake and abandon their traditional religion and make the foreign religion cum Western culture their most treasured way of life at the expense of indigenous cultures and traditional religions. Nmah (2012) vividly reported thus Christian missionaries' demolished indigenous religions of Africans who they thought have no divine revelation or inspiration. Furthermore, the Africans were compelled to wear Western clothes before they could speak to the White man's God, the one that was not ready to save them, to recognize them except they were decently clad. These poor and primitive Africans must be made to sing the white man's hymns hopelessly and badly translated, and to worship in the white man's unemotional

and individualistic way. At first, the native people paid heed to Christian missionaries and the new found faith in Nigerian soil, after a while, the people observed that this religion could not and do not have answers and solutions to African plethora of problems which are more of spiritual than physical.

In affirmation to the above statement, Nwadiolor (2016) observes that the Christianity brought by the missionaries failed to address issues such as demon possession, witchcraft among others raised by the Africans. Instead of the European Christian missionaries to make efforts to address these problems posed by African cultures and traditional religions, Nwadiolor (2016) decries that the missionaries considered this African worldview as unscientific and unrealistic. Therefore, the early missionary's failure to come up with a religious dimension that will suit African spirituality gave rise to indigenous African prophets and their spiritual movements (Nwaozuru, 2020), such as praying and healing ministries found in nooks and crannies of Nigerian society today.

Concept of Praying and Healing Ministry

Praying and healing ministry is an office of service to God's people and a minister is a person who serves. Although all believers are called to serve God and humanity, yet, some people are ordained for special ministerial offices in Christendom. These persons include the apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelist, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). According to Ukanwa (2017), healing ministry is a religious concept, and it is the service of ministering or evoking healing spiritually on people in the name of Jesus Christ; and not medically as in the ministry of health. Praying and healing ministry is one of the ministries of the Church, and it addresses the issues of sickness, exorcism and other spiritual problems of man. Thus, praying and healing ministry is a spiritually based practice of effecting physical, mental and emotional healing of an individual not neglecting to attend to other problems of man.

There are features of praying and healing ministry. These include; prayer, total faith in the power of Jesus and so forth. Prayer is a veritable tool to invoke divine intervention during difficult time in human history. Christians cannot do without praying and its subsequent fasting. Jesus began to perform healing and other miracles after fasting and praying in the wilderness. The Apostles prayed, the Holy Spirit descended on them and henceforth, they performed many miracles and preached the Gospel with boldness. During difficult times, the early church members gathered and prayed for divine intervention. It is a common saying that Jesus started with prayer and ended with prayer. Thus, prayer is inevitable in Christian faith.

Faith in Christ, is another core feature in the praying and healing ministry. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). For without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6), hence Christians must have faith in order to serve God effectively. Christ demonstrated the need for Christians to have faith in God for miracles to happen. According to Nwaozuru (2020), this is shown in some of the healing stories of Jesus such as healing of Blind Bartimaeus, the Centurion's servant and many more. Faith is required for prayers to be heard and answered by God (James 1:6,8). Warrington (2008) opines that the faith referred to is described as a belief that God will answer the prayer as it has been requested, some thus choosing to claim the answer to the prayer. Here, faith is seen as the key to receiving answered prayers from God. This why in every praying and healing ministry, praying and fasting as well as faith in is action is highly emphasized.

Praying and Healing Ministry in Early Church

The idea of praying and healing ministry cannot be disassociated from early church starting with Jesus earthly ministry. Jesus in his time did not neglect praying and healing ministry, it was the hallmark of Jesus' ministry. Jesus earthly ministry was synonymous with praying and healing ministry; owing to this, He dealt with spiritual and physical needs of people. Jesus commissioned his disciples to carry out the Great Commission along with praying and healing ministry. Just as commissioned by Christ, the apostles and other believers in the early church, joined praying and healing ministry to other evangelistic activities in their time.

The praying and healing ministry in the early Church helped with the spreading of the Gospel within and outside Jerusalem. Apostle Paul while on his various missionary journeys combined praying and healing ministry while converting many non Jews to Christianity. Paul and other believers performed various miracles courtesy of praying and healing ministry, the book of Acts of the Apostles recorded the great achievement of the early Church through praying and healing ministry.

Origin and Development of Praying and Healing Ministry in Nigeria

Tracing the origin and development of praying and healing ministry in Nigeria, this study will examine some charismatic and revival movements of indigenous converts. One among them is Garrick Braide's revival movement. Diara and Nche (2013) narrate that:

Garick Braide's ministry swept through Southern Igbo area from Bakana, one of the villages of the Niger Delta. Garrick Sokari Braide, an Anglican by church denomination, introduced a new and radical form of evangelism in the Niger

Delta area, which involved launching of frontal attacks on idols and charms and observance of strict spiritual discipline. Through his evangelism methods and spiritual practices, the entire Niger Delta and the surrounding Southern Igbo area witnessed a swift religious awakening. These attracted very many people to the Christian faith. Whereas Christianity was introduced to the natives through teaching the creed, the Lord's Prayer, catechism et cetera. (pp. 47-48).

Braide adopted a more radical and practical approach such as waging practical wars against idols with a view to proving to the people that there was no power in them. He did not bother himself with teaching creeds and the rest of Christian catechism, which were extremely difficult in view of high illiteracy rate among his people. Garrick Braide chief method was to organize a crusade against charms, fetishes and idols. His demands were: Destroy fetishes, Confess your sins, Put absolute faith in Jesus Christ and Stop drinking gin. He promoted some pious exercises like daily prayers, fasting and singing hymns of praise to God. He also discovered that he possessed healing power. He had a great impact, brought about a spiritual revival and took the Gospel to the areas not reached by Christianity before. In 1918, Braide died and his followers founded a new church known as Christ Army Church.

Another one is Prayer House Movements: The Prayer House movements sprang up in Nigeria as a somewhat offshoot of the Aladura (Praying People) movements especially in Yoruba land. Most founders of the Prayer House movements were members of the mainline churches who at one time or the other and for one reason or the other had attended the Aladura prayers and had been so influenced. The difference between the two is that members of the Prayer House still fulfill some membership obligations to some mainline (orthodox) churches while those of the Aladura have completely broken away from the orthodox churches and constituted themselves into their own independent churches. The Prayer House groups not only prayed a lot, they also preached from the Bible. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, they would "prophesy, pray for healing and so forth. There was a lot of discipline for spiritual power by way of fasting and very long period of prayer for both the prophets and their congregations. The healers were successful in the act of healing. They sometimes healed even those who were suffering from incurable diseases. It is therefore, not surprising that those who operate praying and healing ministry in Nigeria had themselves been involved in one prayer house or the other.

Evangelical Movements: It started with three young Anglicans namely, Stephen Okafor, Arthur Oraizu and Raphael Okafor who later became a Bishop in the Anglican Church (Diara and Nche, 2013). Before then, they were members of the Ufuma prayer House as

it is commonly called, though its real name is Practical Christian Prayer Band. According to Bolton, (1992), the name Ufuma Prayer House is more commonly used in referring to this Prayer Band because the headquarters is based at Ufuma in Anambra State where the founder, Sophy Okoro, an Anglican from Ovoko-Nsukka, was married. Stephen, Arthur and Raphael eventually had personal encounter with Jesus Christ and left the prayer band and began to preach the gospel of repentance and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Diara and Nche (2013) state that they became the foundation members of a brand of Scripture Union (S.U.) which became a Pentecostal movement rather than an evangelistic agency in the Anglican Church. Consequently many discovered that they possessed spiritual gifts and flocked to them.

At a point, a split occurred in the membership as some members became critical of the turgidity in the mission churches and even haughty in their perception of those they regarded as “carnal brethren” who did not have Holy Ghost baptism. Many of such “Spirit-filled Christians” within the S.U. membership as they called themselves, most of whom were Anglicans, withdrew from the mission churches and founded their own churches while the rest constituted themselves into a strong Pentecostal factor in the Anglican Church and other mission churches (Kalu, 1996).

Early Christian Missionaries and Poor Response to African Spirituality

There are two phases of Christian missionary enterprise in Nigeria. According to Nwadior (2016), the first missionary enterprise to Nigeria was between 14th -15th century in Benin and Warri kingdom by the Portuguese missionaries but the missionary activity was not successful due to reasons such as language barrier, financial difficulty, unfavourable weather condition and so on. But by the nineteenth century, Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) led by Henry Townsend first arrived to Eastern Nigeria in 1842 then extended their missionary work to Abeokuta in 1843 where they established their first mission station. By 1852, C.M.S later established a permanent station in Onitsha. The Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) arrived Igboland in 1885 while RCM set their foot in Yoruba in 1868. The Qua Ibo of Northern Ireland, which first established a mission in Eket and Uyo areas in 1887; the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society, which established its first mission post in Calabar and Owerri provinces in 1892 (Okoro, 2018). By 1889 the Gospel spread to northern Nigeria. With the efforts of these missionary bodies and others, the Gospel spread to other parts of Nigeria.

Mafukata (2017) observes that missionary theology was neither prophetic nor miracle healing oriented. The reason behind this could be according to Warner (1990), that the conservative theologians in nineteenth century maintained that the gift of healing had

ceased with the apostolic age. According to Nwaozuru (2020), it was this period that the missionaries came to West Africa so they did not over emphasize on healing and other miracles; the missionaries understood that Africans were educationally and socially sick thus, they established schools, hospitals and provided other social amenities to better the life of the people.

It is not to say that these social amenities established by the Christian missionaries are not good, but the missionaries failed to understand that African worldview goes beyond the physical to spiritual realm. For example, in African worldview, ill-health is not only associated with physical sickness but other aspects such as spiritual, material and so on. Idemudia (2012) who opines that the common element in the African belief system is simply that physical and mental illness is the result of distortions or disturbance in the harmony between an individual and the cosmos, which may mean his family, society, peers, ancestors or a deity.

Hence, such for the African, is not a hospital issue rather requires the Supreme Being to intervene and cure such disease. For divine healing to take place in such a situation, divination and sacrifices could be done to either appease or attract the Supreme Being, ancestors or other spiritual beings to cure the sick person. This is what the missionaries failed to understand and address properly. Ukpong (2007) analyzing the religious scenario of the period observes that:

There was dissatisfaction among members of the missionary churches in the country. Their religious problems were not met adequately by the liturgical ceremonies of these churches as expectations from the churches were not met. The missionaries of the older churches failed to address the type of questions the African situation raised for them: witchcraft, demon possession, haunting by evil spirits, the cult of ancestors; the use of protective charms, talisman; sorcery and the traditional dancing form of worship at the shrines. The tendency among the missionaries was to dismiss these questions as due to ignorance arising from a pre-scientific mentality This general dissatisfaction opened door for new religious experiences among members of the mainline churches in particular and the general populace at large. (pp. 18-19).

Ukpong (2007) further states that in a church where theology and spirituality do not meet these yearnings, do not take into consideration these dispositions and impulses, and do not articulate them at the level of practicability and functionality, the Christian faith becomes ineffective and could be thrown away. The missionaries were not in support of the revivalist movements centred on miracles and healing activities carried out by African prophets therefore, many of them broke away from the mainline churches and established

their own churches that were miracle and healing oriented. Thus, lack of operating praying and healing ministry together with the gospel by the early missionaries gave rise to praying and healing ministry by many Nigerian Christians.

As Western type of Christianity fails to suit African spirituality which the native people yearned for, indigenous converted Christians began to start up various revival movements among the native believers leading to establishment of praying and healing ministry. For many of them, praying and healing ministry is an authentic sign of God's presence with his people. Thus, there is this conviction that Christ's power and authority which he gave to his followers (Matthew 10:8; Mark 3:15) is still in force. So, African believers are not exempted in this aspect. In this 21st century there has much emphasis and interest in praying and healing activities in most churches in Nigeria.

It could be seen that there are many congregations in various denominations exercising praying and healing ministry both the Pentecostals and mainline churches alike. Ahiabu (2011) observes that the phenomenon of healing has become very common and central to the religious activities of most churches in Nigeria especially Pentecostals with their offshoot of praying and healing ministry as testimonies of various kinds of miraculous healings are reported daily in their various social media platforms, radio and Television stations, national dailies and so on.

Kalu (2008) elucidates that "Africa is a fertile ground for faith healing practices" (p. 263). Faith healing practices are an undisputed reality in Africa; this is because in African worldview, good health is the utmost value and must be protected to avoid damage which could be caused by sickness. It is believed that sickness that defies medical treatment requires a supernatural being to intervene hence, praying and healing ministry could be considered as one of the means God helps Africans in curing sickness beyond medical control and addressing the numerous problems of African man. Hence, this has given rise to the establishment of praying and healing ministry in nooks and crannies of Nigeria.

Impacts of Praying and Healing Ministry in Nigeria

The truth is that life is full of challenges and man must face it. For the African man, to overcome some of these challenges, the Supreme Being must intervene hence, the make recourse to spiritual activities. For many Nigerian Christians, praying and healing ministry must not be relegated to the background as it seems like a soothing balm to many problems encountered in life. Therefore, the praying and healing services, serves as a significant medium for dealing with both spiritual and existential needs of people. In fact, Martin (2014) says that the ministry of prayer and healing is meant to enable the person who is hurt physically, emotionally and spiritually to experience the Lord meeting her/ his

need. Thus, Ahiabu (2011) affirms that the healing ministry has to some extent responded to the African understanding of health and wellbeing. It could be observed that many people who attend the praying and healing ministry may not be physically sick but they consider it necessary and important for them to attend it. There have been reported cases of people recovering from deadly diseases as a result of attending praying and healing ministry in Nigeria. Rotimi (2010) points to the annual and monthly Holy Ghost revival of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) under the leadership of Pastor E. Adebayo is of great value in this regard.

Praying and healing ministry through their constant religious activities and programmes have rejuvenated, revived, built and strengthened the faith of many Christians in Nigeria. As stated earlier, common features of praying and healing ministry are praying and fasting, faith in action among others, these have in doubt given rise to active Christian service among believers in many churches. At different points in time, programmes such as crusades, conventions, revivals, camp retreats has helped to transform the lives of people and to enhance their faith in Christ.

Praying and healing ministry has contributed to the growth of many churches in Nigeria. Just like *hoi polloi* (many people) followed Christ due to his miracles anchored on praying and healing ministry, Ahiabu (2011) views that ministers with healing and other gifts appear to draw more people into the church than those without the gift. When people are healed, they may end up becoming a member of the church where they got their healing. This is the case in most Nigerian churches especially the Pentecostals. Today in Nigeria, many churches like Living Faith Chapel (Winners), Redeemed Christian Church of God, Dunamis Gospel Int'l, Synagogue Church of All Nations, Christ Embassy, Omega Power Ministries and so on are all over the nation simply because of their activeness in praying and healing ministerial aspect of Christianity.

Since African spirituality favours praying and healing ministry, Adetunji (2010) observes that this encourages the desire for miracles to cure diseases and resolve other distressing situations. Today in Nigeria, there is hardly a well-known denomination that is operating praying and healing ministry. It could be observed that some of the people operating praying and healing ministry are capitalizing on this belief element in African thought and culture, to peddle and propagate their fraudulent activities on those who patronize the ministry. Some of them commercialise religious objects like olive oil and so forth. Others buy materials like salt, bottled water, handkerchiefs from the market and sell them at exorbitant rates. This is against Christ's command (Matthew 10:8), even Christ after healing the ten lepers only demanded for appreciation and did not fix prices for the miracles he performed.

Many of the people operating praying and healing ministry, over emphasise on divine and miraculous healing at the same time discourage their members not to access medical services when sick. It is not to say that Christians should not have faith on God and Christ for divine healing and miracle during ill health or difficult times as Ahiabu (2011) properly addressed the issue asserting that while church believes in the extraordinary intervention of God in the healing process, it also believes in progress of modern medicine in curing diseases. Due to the influential teachings of some charismatic people in praying and healing ministry in Nigeria, some of their followers have failed to take medication when sick; this could be detrimental to their health system.

Praying and healing ministry has in doubt led to proliferation of churches in Nigeria. Some people break away from the mainline churches and establish their own praying and healing ministry in the form of indigenous Pentecostal churches. Asuza cited by Nwaozuru (2020) opines that it has reached that magnitude whereby new churches, healing centers and prayer houses are being opened daily, all claiming the power to heal and work miracles. Almost all the so-called prophets in Nigeria claim to have the gift of healing and ability to work miracles and operate praying and healing ministry in full force. While others in a bid to gain popularity opt for *Arrange miracle* this is a situation where some people are paid by charlatans who claimed to have been called by God, to come and give false testimonies about one miracle or the other during church programmes.

Conclusion

The Christianity brought to Nigeria, by the Christian missionaries from Europe did not suit African spirituality embedded in African worldview. This Western type of Christianity, failed to answer questions and properly address problems of African people hence, indigenous converts began to reconstruct the Gospel to suit African spirituality. Hence, the rise of praying and healing ministry in Nigerian societies.

Although praying and healing ministry is associated mainly with some African Independent Churches and Pentecostals, it is also fast spreading in some mainline churches such as Evangelical Fellowship in Anglican Communion, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Rev Fr. Ejike Mbaka's Adoration Ministry of Enugu Nigeria (AMEN) in Enugu, Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Edeh and his Catholic Prayer Ministry of the Holy Spirit (CPM) in Elele Rivers State, Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Obimma's Holy Ghost Adoration Ministry (*Ebube Muo Nso*) in Uke Anambra State, Rev. Fr. Celestine Aniofor's *Pax Chixti* Adoration Ministry in Onitsha at Anambra among others. Healing and praying

ministry will continue and remain an integral aspect of Nigerian Christianity since it suits African spirituality.

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