Causes and Implications of Youth Migration from the Methodist Church, Nigeria to the New-Generation Churches

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Abstract

The evolution of Methodist Church Nigeria (MCN) is historically traced to the evangelical activism of Wesleyan missionary which in turn played a leading role in planting of Christianity in Nigeria. However, the same church that was once a major force in the chronicles of Christianity in Nigeria appears to be losing her youths to the new generation churches. This migration poses a blink future to the sustainability and relevance of the MCN among other orthodox churches if not urgently addressed. Hence, this paper examined causes and implications of youth migration from the MCN, archdiocese of Ibadan. Historical and descriptive methods were employed. Primary data were gathered through interviews to get first-hand information while secondary data were obtained from text books, journals and articles. Interpretative method was used for data analysis. Finding revealed that inadequate knowledge of church traditions, absence of welfare policy for the youths, inability of the leadership of the church to discover and develop youths' talents, regimented style of worship and lack of youth-oriented programmes, among others are the reasons for migration to the new generation churches. The paper recommended a number of proactive measures to curb the exodus of youths from the MCN including investing more in discovering and nurturing of youth talents and mounting of youth-friendly programmes for the church to remain relevant in 21st century.

Keywords: implications, youth, migration, Methodist Church Nigeria, new generation churches

Introduction

The sustainability of the mission of the Methodist Church Nigeria (MCN) vis-a-viz its future relevance is largely depended on the youths who are regarded as the leaders of tomorrow. It can also be said that the retention of today's Methodist youths will undoubtedly depict tomorrow's relevance of the MCN either in the society or among the comity of churches whether in Nigeria or within the international communities. The truism of the above assertion hinges on the fact that any living organization that left its youth unattended to, may not only loose its heritage and legacy but also may be heading towards total extinction. Judging from the common saying that youths in any organization are considered as the working force with the aim at upholding the tenets, heritage and the values of such an organization in years to come. Hence, it becomes imperative for every succeeding government either secular or church to put in place a youth-oriented programmes and policies that will facilitate their retention. If MCN that played a major role in the planting and the spreading of the Christian mission in Nigeria, with its modern-day imposing structures fails to have a well cut out youth-oriented programmes that will water the retention of her youths, then what becomes of her cherish values and heritage? Though, migration in the history of humanity appears to be a seamless twin that seems not to be inseparable. For example, the Gospel that was brought to Nigeria was made possible because the Wesleyan missionaries migrated. However, exodus undoubtedly becomes a source of concern when the age range of

majority of migrants of any organization consistently fall under the youthful ages like it is presently happening in the MCN. Hence, it must be controlled before it begins to release its venom, especially in any mission-oriented organization. Otherwise, no matter how laudable its antecedents and policy might be, it may go into oblivion in a matter of time and seasons. The study therefore took a critical look at the causes and what the exodus of the youths from the MCN portends for the church with the possibility to proffering solution to at least to reduce the extent of the migration to the barest minimal.

Background of the Methodist Church Nigeria, Archdiocese of Ibadan

Historically speaking, Methodist Church Nigeria played a major role in the planting of succeeding seed of Christianity in Nigeria via the instrumentality of Wesleyan missionary activities with the arrival of Thomas Birch Freeman and Mr and Mrs De Graft in Badagry from Sierra Leone precisely in September 24th, 1842.The evangelical activism of these European missionaries marked the beginning of Christianity in Nigeria. Omotoye affirms that:

> and fallen Agia tree which was located in the central part of the first Christian missionary to be sent to Badagry was Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman, a Wesleyan Methodist who landed in Badagry from Sierra-Leone on 24th September, 1842". He also, posits that Christianity was first preached under the popular town.[1]

It is accounted that the activities of the missionaries were facilitated mainly by an exslave of Yoruba origin named Ferguson, who had earlier returned from Sierra-Leone to the area. James Ferguson one of the traders during Freeman's first year at Cape Coast in March 1841, having settled at Badagry, wrote a letter which was countersigned by Warraru, the Governor of Badagry to Thomas Dove, his old minister in Freetown inviting missionaries to come and preach the gospel there (Badagry).

Familusi describes the circumstances that characterised the arrival of the early Methodist missionaries as follows:

> Eager as they were to get ashore the sun of that evening was too heavy and the day was too far spent to make an attempt. They had to face another night on the schooner. In the morning of 24th September 1842, they came ashore. In the schooner's boat. They went under the thin shade of stately palms to the lagoon which was three quarters of a mile wide. It was calm and silent in the midday and beyond it lay Badagry in full view. A large canoe carried them across and between two and three o' clock in the afternoon of 24th September, 1842 they landed at Badagry.[2]

Though the missionaries came to Nigeria enroute Sierra-Leone, however, Wesleyan Methodist Society based in London facilitated and endorsed the visit. Their intention was to introduce Christianity into the country and also to spread the evangelistic enterprises to the nooks and crannies of the land starting from Badagry.

Ogbondayin corroborates the above by saying:

> Methodist came to Western Nigeria by the Wesleyan Methodist on September 24, 1842

> through the missionary work of Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman and Mr. & Mrs. William De-Graft in Badagry. This group preached the gospel of the resurrected Lord in Nigeria under Agia tree in Badagry on September 24th, 1842. This made Badagry the cradle of Christianity and Methodist as the mover.[3]

Meanwhile, it is on record that while Freeman and his team arrived at Badagry from Sierra-Leone on 24th September, 1842, Rev. Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Anglican came to Badagry on 17th December, 1842 and learnt that the Methodist Pioneer, Birch Freeman, had arrived nearly three months earlier and had built a mission house. Omotoye says further that: Both Thomas Freeman and Henry Townsend celebrated Christmas Eve together in December, 1842 and the event marked the beginning of ecumenism, affection and strong alliance between the Methodist and Anglican Communion till the present day.[4] As the Wesleyan activities in the establishment of Christianity were going on in the Western part of Nigeria as earlier alluded to, so also there was concerted effort to introduce some to other parts of the country. For instance, Methodism was introduced to the eastern part of the country from the tiny island of Fernado Po, now Equatorial Guinea in 1893, Fifty-one years after Birch Freeman's foundation in Badagry before it spread to Abeokuta and other parts of Yoruba land.[5]

Causes of Youth Migration from the Methodist Church Nigeria to the new Generation Churches

Migration has been defined as the movement of people or animals from their original habitat to a destination outside the borders of their origin, purposely to settle and can be voluntary or forced.[6] Transmitting the above general meaning of migration into the parlance of the mission- oriented organization with particular reference to the MCN can therefore mean the exodus of the youths from the MCN to the new generation churches. Whereas, the term 'youth' appears not to have a generally accepted definition, because, those who may be considered as youth in a particular community may not be seen to belong to the same category in some other places. For instance, around the world, the English terms youth, adolescent, teenager, kid, and young person are interchangeably used, often meaning the same thing, but they are occasionally differenciated.[7] Youth can be referred to as the time of life when one is young which involves childhood and the time of life which is neither childhood nor adulthood, but rather somewhere in between.[8] Sosanwo opines that youths are people within the age group between 15 and 30 years. He says further that the Common Wealth Secretariat and the United Nations consider youth as any young person who depends on responsible mature adults for total dependence, support and guidance. This reliance may be in terms of advice, financial training and other forms. The main aim is to lead to adulthood.[9]

Initially, MCN saw any member of the church whose age falls between 18 and 40 years as youth. However, shortly after autonomy in 1962, MCN categorized her members into three major organs, Men's fellowship, Women's fellowship and youth fellowships for the purpose of close monitoring. Aside from the women's fellowship which has the minister's wife at different levels of the church as its president, both Men's and Youth's fellowships Presidents are appointed among the lay members of church. However, the repositioning of the church which informed the evolution of the 2006 MCN constitution and Book of Resolution redefined the age of youth to be a member whose age is be-

tween 18 and 30 years of age. While anyone between 30 and 40 years is seen as a member of Young Men's fellowship.[10] It is surprising to note that despite all measures put in place by the MCN at the different times with the sole aim of youth retention, yet, the migration of the youth to the new generation churches is still subsisting. This section of the work therefore sheds light on the likely factors responsible for this exodus despite all youth-oriented policies and programmes put in place.

The Surge and Style of New Generation Churches

The evolution and proliferation of the New Generation Churches which are broadly categorized as Classical Pentecostalism, Charismatic Renewal or neo-Pentecostalism and Signs and Wonder Movement is considered to be one of the reasons MCN is experiencing mass exodus. Though, John Wesley, the founder of the global Methodism has been popularly referred to as the Father of Pentecostalism. Meanwhile, the domination of Pentecostal and charismatic movements in Nigeria is affecting millions of educated young people. They are very eloquent, and very modern in outlook with their basic religious cosmology rooted in the African worldviews of spirits, evil, and fear of the present and the future which is a rare phenomenon in the operations of the MCN is largely responsible for youth migration to the new generation churches. Moreover, their social goal is congruent with the general aspirations of African traditional quest for long life, money, power, success and fame in a competitive society. They erect their billboards at strategic locations for people to take note of their presence and many a times function in rented or temporary spaces while publicizing their activities with the electronic and print media amidst a very competitive religious landscape which appears to be a rare feature in the MCN. Their pragmatic approach to social and religious issues no doubt influences the lives of millions especially the youths in disruptive social-economic and political contexts, such as presently evident in Nigeria.

Inadequate Teaching of Church Traditions and Doctrines

Another factor responsible for the exodus of youths from the MCN is attributed to the lack of proper teaching of beliefs and doctrines of the church. Methodist Church Nigeria, though got her autonomy from the British Methodism in 1962 still holds in high esteem the ancient practices and doctrines of the global Methodism which is a subsidiary of Protestantism. Unequivocally, doctrines in the Methodist Church Nigeria are the official formalities which provide the basic fundamental dogmas or ideological texts on the church is based. These doctrines include, affirmation of creeds, sacraments, confirmation, order of marriage acts, order of priesthood, church liturgy, observant of sacred times and seasons, church governance in their various styles, among others. While there may not be anything wrong in upholding and practices of all these traditions; it appears most of them have lost their savour in recent times due to poor mishandling by the handlers. According to one of the youths who preferred to remain anonymous, 'How many of the contemporary ministers of different hierarchs who are expected to be the custodian of church traditions know the historical background of each of these doctrines. Of course, there is a common saying that if purpose is not known, then abuse is evitable.[11] Ogunsanwo said, though there are a number of factors responsible for youth migration from the MCN, however, it is assumed that inadequacies of the ministers in handling and teaching the young people of the reasons that necessitated the traditions and ma-

jor doctrines of the church is a major factor one must not underrate. He was so explicit by citing the example of the reason The Apostle' Creed must be recited at every major service and the rationale behind genuflection in this modern day when youths are looking for freer form of worship that will accommodate their religious inclination.[12] Kayode in his own opinion referred to the way and manner prospectives youths are prepared for confirmation today. In his words, unlike the olden day when you were properly coached for you to know the spiritual implication of what you are into and make a personal decision on whether you are spiritually ready or not, the reverse is the case today. Some ministers today hurriedly prepare their prospective confirmation candidates only for few weeks to the confirmation day just to fulfil all righteousness and to create an impression that they are versatile in their sacerdotal duties.[13] Hence, lack of in-depth knowledge of all these major teachings and practices of the church can make youths to migrate to anywhere with just a captivating teaching, though, with no substance to anywhere if care is not taken.

The Problem of Inclusivity

Though, the provision for the placement of youth in the church activities have been previously referred, however, it is obvious that the issue of youth inclusiveness in the MCN for whatever reason is still subsisting. It is observed that the matter of not getting involved in some instances especially when it comes to major decision making is a major challenge that some of the youths cannot handle rather than leaving the church and go to where they fill belong. It is expedient for each living organization to realize that building social capital via participation of the youths is a means through which spiritual needs, social needs and cognitive interest of youth can be easily addressed. If not, there is possibility of drifting away from the mainline church. One of our respondents gave an example of how a business idea was muted by one of the youths in one of the dioceses in the archdiocese of Ibadan never saw the light of the day because it was assumed that the said business plan was coming from youth. He further alleged that perhaps, the idea would have since received the blessing of the church supposing the source is from one of the high- ranking elderly members of the church.[14]

Styles of Sermon Titles

What appears like captivating captions of messages the new generation churches which youth claim to have been successful in providing responses to pressing needs in the society and in the life of churches in contemporary Nigeria is considered to be one of the factors for migration. For example, with no particular reference to any of the new generation churches, messages such as "breakthrough", "end-time winners", "grace and power", "good bye to poverty", "triumphant over all difficulties" and host which are rare messages in the MCN, unequivocally are having great influence on youths. Aside from the fact that these sermons are captivating, they are also taking in series for a number of weeks for easy assimilation of the congregants in their different categories. Whereas, in the MCN, preaching plan with lectionaries for the whole fifty-two weeks are usually prepared yearly, which sometimes does not give room for preaching sermon in series on a given major title.

Livelier Form of Worship

Another major factor that is drifting youth from the MCN is the freer form of worship in the new generation churches which are lively, warm, usually participatory, though often noisy, with clapping and dancing to choruses during praise worship sessions. In most cases the praise worship sessions take a major proportion from the total time allotted to every service. Hence, it is an ample opportunity for the youths to display their emotions. New generation churches have brought worship nearer to the ordinary people, because the people play a spontaneous part in worship through singing, dancing, singing praises, etc. Although, this is the area that has caused much distaste for other Christians. Nevertheless, worship in the new generation churches has restored to the center of the liturgy genuine praise and a deep spirituality.

Absence of a Well cut-out Welfare Policy for the Youths

Interaction with some of the youths in the MCN while carrying out this work revealed that one other factor responsible for the exodus of young people is hinged on the fact that there is dearth clear-cut welfare policy for the youths, the seemingly ones, such as yearly subvention are just on paper which some time never come to fruition. A serving minister confirmed to us of how MCN lost his younger brother to one of the new generation churches on the issue of lack of employment. In his words,

> All of us were born and raised in the MCN; we were committed and dedicated to church activities. However, the problem started when my brother finished his education and waited for many years to be employed. All his pleads to the high-ranking members of the church to salvage the situation for him fell into deaf ears until one of the new generation churches around snatched him by offering him a well- paid employment. Today, he is doing well thanany of us in the family.[15]

Bartepeh corroborates the above by saying,

> While it is undoubted that most of the mainline churches with particular reference to the MCN have really done well in the area of spreading of mission, education, health and others, however, there is no doubt that they are failing in the aspect of the welfare package for their youths which is largely responsible for the frequent migration of the younger ones to the new generation churches.[16]

These expressed views represent the opinions of majority of our correspondents on this subject matter. Of course, in any living organization where the welfare package of youths is treated with some sort of indifference, migration to seek for greener pasture somewhere else is inevitable.

Implications of Youth Migration to the new Generation Church

Having dealt with some of the factors responsible for youth migration from the Methodist Church Nigeria, this section attempts to look at the some of the dangers it portends for the future sustainability of the MCN. This becomes imperative for the church in other to put a measure in place to curb this menace before it eats more to the fabric of the church.

The Challenges of Sustainability

There is no gain saying that Methodist Church Nigeria is one of the mainline churches that is very rich in traditions and culture that must be sustained and preserved as previously noted. However, with the trend of migration of youth, the preservation of these cultures is under serious threat. For instance, supposing the early founders of Methodism had no one to hand over the traditions of the church to while they were exiting either by virtue of the old age which sometimes led to passing unto God's glory, all the rich practices and customs of the church would have probably there wouldn't have been any preservation of such today. Therefore, it behooves of the current leadership of the church to make sure to put a mechanism in place for youth retention in the MCN.

Decline in Population and its Effects

In most cases the numerical strength of any church determines its financial strength. What this suggests is that dwindling in membership can result to financial depreciation of any church, since the major sources of incomes of most of the mainline churches especially MCN are contiguous to the contributions of members. Unfortunately for the MCN, the youths that are considered in any living organization as the work force and the leaders of tomorrow are the set of the people that are leaving the church as previously noted. This therefore, if not quickly check can portent a future financial incapacitation and economic repression to the church, if it has not started already.

Danger of Loss of Expertise, Skilled and Progressive Individuals

It is amazing to note that any church that can boast of the people, especially youths in the above mentioned categories can as well say is a wealthy church not necessarily in terms of naira and kobo but by the value of the quality of its members. For instances, there are many stories of where people of different professions voluntarily offered free services to grow the work of God. These free services include the display of their God given talents in the areas of improving quality of church worship such as drumming, singing in diverse tones, and host of others at no cost in most of the times. Also, some have showcased and developed the church in the area of using their skills and acquired knowledge such as infrastructural development of church building to better the lot of the church in no small measure. Hence, it becomes a source of concern when such group of people are now leaving the church for whatever reason, as we all know that when people leave, they go with their gifts, possessions and other resources they are endow with.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of youth exodus from the mainline churches with the particular reference to the Methodist Church Nigeria may also be referred to the gradual withdrawal or total disengagement from active church life such as participation in worship attendance, sacramental participation, showing lackadaisical involvement in church leadership and other activities of the church due to the enumerated points earlier discussed in the body of this work. Hence, understanding all the factors responsible for the trend and the dangers they portend to the relevancy and future sustainability therefore will help the leadership of the MCN to develop the strategies that promote involvement and long-term youth retention in the church.

Recommendations

Having critically looked at the causes and implications of the youth exodus from the Methodist Church Nigeria, the following are thereby recommended to salvage the situation:

It is high time the Methodist Church Nigeria be more proactive in the area of integrating the youth into leadership roles and in every decision-making. This becomes imperative knowing fully well that when youth feel heard and appreciated, there sense of belonging is arisen and activated;

The work found out that lack of understanding of the practices and traditional of the church are partly responsible for the menace; hence, it becomes sacrosanct for the leadership of the MCN to intensify more efforts in the area of teaching and early indoctrination of the youth into the culture and traditions of the church;

Furthermore, in order to curb the menace of the youth exodus in the MCN, there is urgent need for the youth-oriented programmes. This must be intentional and deliberate and it must be consistence. It will serve as an avenue for them to express their religion inclination and fantasies in the modern-day language; A well develop cut out welfare programme must also be put in place for the MCN to retain her youth, without neglecting the area of digital ministry, among others.

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