

# WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIAN PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES

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## *Abstract*

The leadership role of women is a controversial theme in contemporary African Christianity. This paper is an overview of the place of women in Nigerian Pentecostal churches. Particular attention is paid to the leading role of selected women in the African Indigenous Pentecostal churches and the Neo-Pentecostal churches, in contrast to the subjective status of women in most Classical Pentecostal churches in the country. The paper highlights the contributory roles of some women leaders in Nigerian Pentecostal churches and also reveals the extent to which women are marginalised in some circles. Reasons for this are suggested, along with possible solutions.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria a new page in history has been turned, creating opportunities for the incorporation of women into active ministry. In spite of this, female

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leadership in the Church remains a very controversial subject in Nigerian Christianity, even in Pentecostal circles. As Akintunde (2005:108) observes, various churches have contradictory rules on the role of women. For instance, while some churches, owing to the patriarchal nature of African society, put women in subordinate positions in matters relating to administration, others, simply owing to modern influences, allow some measure of leadership status for women in church administration. Others still, in spite of their level of development, consider it unscriptural to allow women and men equal access to leadership positions in the church, because of the Pauline injunction that women should remain silent in the churches.

In the light of the above, this paper critically examines the leadership status of women in Nigerian Pentecostal churches. The researcher approached the subject by providing a historical survey of the leadership role of women in the African Indigenous Churches and the Neo-Pentecostal churches, followed by a comparison with the role of women in the Classical Pentecostal churches. Particular emphasis is placed on the Apostolic Church, which is credited with being the first Classical Pentecostal denomination in Nigeria (Barrett 1982:530ff). The paper has been written from a purely historical perspective, making use of oral interview and bibliographical search methods. In sum, the paper highlights the leadership status of women in Nigerian Pentecostalism and suggests areas for improvement.

## 2 WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP ROLES IN NIGERIAN

### PENTECOSTALISM

Christianity was planted in Nigeria as a religion of civilisation by European and American missionaries. The history of Christianity in modern Nigeria dates back to the foreign missionary enterprises of some Protestant and (later) Roman Catholic evangelical movements which, following the eighteenth century evangelical revival in Europe and America, were consumed with zeal and inspired by love to take

the gospel of Christ to the perishing souls in Africa. Thus, the first brand of Christianity planted in Nigeria in modern times had a European and American colouring. Even so, women were still relegated to the background when it came to leadership positions in these mainline churches, possibly as a result of the biblical patriarchal custom which the early missionaries attempted not to depart from. The only exception to this marginalisation known in Nigerian ecclesiastical history was the iron lady, Mary Slessor, of the Church of Scotland Mission.

Marginalisation of women in church leadership in the mainline churches in Nigerian Christianity made Christian women to appear less valuable in the service of God. Consequently they were looked down on as less spiritual than men and of less value. Thus, many women of the mission churches lived and died in silence – not because they did not have the same charisma and qualities of leadership as men, but simply because they were not permitted to express their opinions in matters of church governance. That there were women among them with great potential who could have transformed the church through their natural talents and spiritual gifts but who were denied their right to contribute their quota to the advancement of the kingdom of God is a fact we cannot dispute.

Even with the rise of the African Independent Church Movement (Ayandele 1966:177; Daneel 1970:10), the door to female participation in active ministry remained tightly closed owing to the age-old traditional belief that women were inferior to men. Ironically, this African Independent Church Movement failed to take into consideration the need for women to occupy leadership positions alongside men in the new church system. That is to say, the men who initiated the movement evidently shared the view of the foreign missionaries that African Christian women were too physically and spiritually weak and emotionally immature to take up leadership responsibilities. Possibly, too, they were afraid of possible competition from able women in church administration.

However, with the emergence of the African Indigenous Church Movement (Ayegboyin & Ishola 1997:65-140) in the early years of the twentieth century, a ray of hope appeared for women's participation

in active ministry. This movement, which was also known as the Aladura Church Movement or African Indigenous Pentecostal Movement (Peel 1977), in its bid to recapture the Spirit Baptism, power-oriented and experience-dominating Christianity of the First Century Church, gave women ample scope for the maximum utilisation of their God-given gifts and talents in the advancement of the Gospel. Okure (2003:73) observed, there are an ever-increasing number of women who are founders and co-founders of these churches.

Notable among the women who have exhibited leadership traits in the African Indigenous Pentecostal churches are Sophia Odunlami of the Precious Stone or Diamond Society (translated from the Yoruba *Egbe Okuta – Iyebiye*) – a prophetic healing movement which originated from St Saviour's Anglican Church at Ijebu-Ode in 1918 (Adegboyega 1978:3), and Captain Abiodun Akinsowon who co-founded the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in 1925 together with Prophet Moses Orimolade. Miss Sophia Odunlami with her prophetic and healing gifts played a very significant role in curbing the bubonic plague that nearly ravaged the southern part of Nigeria after World War I. Her healing ministry depended on the power of prayer on stored rain water, which was allegedly revealed to her by God in her series of spiritual experiences. This lady not only emerges as the first healing evangelist of the movement but was significantly the one who earned the prayer group its popularity as a divine-healing movement.

Similarly, the prophetic gifts of Abiodun Akinsowon, together with her qualities of leadership and charisma, made a major contribution to the founding of the Cherubim and Seraphim Society – one of the leading African indigenous Pentecostal churches in Nigeria (Omoyajowo 1982:42ff). It is quite possible that there would not have been anything like the Cherubim and Seraphim Society if Abiodun Akinsowon's charismatic gifts had been suppressed. Moses Orimolade had been an itinerant evangelist since 1916. But he had no church of his own until 1925 when God raised up Abiodun to join him in the work of the ministry. The emergence of the Cherubim and Seraphim Society in Lagos in 1925 was a direct result of Abiodun's charismatic role.

In the same vein, the Neo-Pentecostal churches took their cue from the African Indigenous Pentecostals, who had liberal views on the participation of women in active ministry. A close examination of the Neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria reveals that not only are women playing prominent leadership roles in church administration on an equal footing with men, but Nigerian Pentecostalism has in fact produced great women church founders, planters, general overseers, prophetesses, lady evangelists, pastors, teachers and so on. Besides, some of these women whose husbands are church founders have proved themselves suitable help-mates to their husbands in co-running churches/ministries. Examples of such women abound in Nigerian Neo-Pentecostal churches. To mention but a few: the Rev Dr (Mrs) Sam Amaga of Foundation Faith Church (a.k.a. Salem International Churches), Pastor (Mrs) Faith Oyedepo of Winners Chapel, the late Pastor (Mrs) Bimbo Odukoya of Fountain of Life Bible Church, Lagos, the Revd (Dr) Mrs Funke-Nelson Adetuberu of By Faith Ministry International Churches, and Pastor (Mrs) Deola Ojo of Grace Family Church, Ibadan. One of the most noteworthy achievements is the full leadership status assumed by Bishop (Mrs) Margaret Benson-Idahosa subsequent to the death of her husband in 1998. In fact, these women and others in Neo-Pentecostal circles have indeed proved through their leadership roles that women are not weaker vessels in church administration.

A critical look at the teaching and counselling ministry of Pastor (Mrs) Bimbo Odukoya makes it clear that it would be a great disservice to God and the entire Christian community to say that women of potential should keep silent in the churches. Through her popular television programme for singles and courting couples, this woman has made an immense contribution to the transformation of lives and re-orientation of young people in particular, not only in her church denomination but in the entire nation. In fact, the impact of this woman on the marital life of Nigerian youth has been so enormous that, in spite of her death, Bimbo Odukoya even today remains a household name when young people in Nigeria talk about premarital and marital counselling. Besides her television programme, Bimbo Odukoya's teaching ministry has received so much public recognition and ecclesiastical approval that many different church denominations and campus fellowships have invited her to conduct a youth ministry.

The leadership role played by this woman in the transformation of the lives of youths (males and females alike) in the area of marriage has been found to be so unique that it can be said in all fairness that no man has been able to beat her record. Her death in a plane crash in October 2005 was considered a great loss, not only to her church denomination but to the entire body of Christ in Nigeria. In fact, the whole nation, irrespective of religious differences, mourned her death.

It is also pertinent to note that this woman of great spiritual potential not only made herself a household name through the maximum utilisation of her God given gifts, but also promoted her husband's ministry. The fame of the Fountain of Life Bible Church in Nigerian Pentecostalism today is largely due to the role played by this woman both within and outside the church. It cannot be denied that she is more popular in Nigerian Christianity than her husband.

The Rev Dr (Mrs) Funke-Nelson Adetuberu is another woman of great importance in Pentecostal leadership. Through her Women's College of Ministries this woman, like Pastor (Mrs) Bimbo Odukoya, has transformed many lives, rebuilt many damaged homes, and restored hope to many hopeless women. Besides this, she has succeeded in preparing many women for active ministry in the church. She has also remoulded the lives of many women so that they have become good housewives and loving and caring mothers. As a suitable help-mate to her husband (the Rev (Dr) Nelson Adetuberu) in the ministry, she has proved herself a good pastor and teacher of the word, who could effectively hold the church together in the absence of her husband when he was engaged in outside ministries. In fact, just like the Fountain of Life Bible Church mentioned previously, the By-Faith Ministry International Churches has become famous today, largely as a result of the television teaching programme of the Rev (Dr) Mrs Funke-Nelson Adetuberu's Women's College of Ministries. In other words, this woman has also demonstrated great leadership charisma which has proved her to be both a good ambassador of Christ and a suitable helpmate to her husband in the ministry.

Bishop (Mrs) Bola Odeleke of the popular Christ Apostolic Church (*Agbala Agbara Olorun Kiibaati*), now known as the Power Pentecostal Church, is another woman of great leadership charisma in Nigerian Pentecostal circles. This woman is not merely a female pastor but a church founder with male pastors working under her. Her leadership qualities have been tested and proven by the way she was able to successfully pilot her church through these years in the midst of the crises that followed the death of her husband (an officer in the Nigerian Army). The leadership charisma of Bishop (Mrs) Bola Odeleke as a church founder and Pentecostal leader has been demonstrated by many diverse signs and wonders that accompany her ministry and are in no way inferior to those associated with the men in Nigerian Pentecostalism.

Archbishop (Mrs) Olaniyi is another woman of high potential who has greatly distinguished herself in Pentecostal leadership. Mrs Olaniyi is not just a female pastor like any other but a woman of great spiritual resources. As the worldwide founder and Archbishop of the Agbala Daniel Church, she controls a big Pentecostal church in Nigeria with branches overseas. The high spiritual potential of this woman as a prophetess, pastor, teacher and church administrator has been proved beyond measure by the diverse works of signs and wonders God has performed through her – liberating the oppressed and setting the captives free. Archbishop (Mrs) Olaniyi is also a prophetess of high standing in Nigerian Pentecostalism. As a bold and outspoken prophetess, she has had some success through her prophetic declarations in correcting some social vices in the nation in general and among the leaders of all cadres.

As mentioned previously, in the Neo-Pentecostal churches in general, women are allowed full participation in active ministry. In the Redeemed Christian Church of God, for example, women are given equal status with men. There are ordained female pastors who enjoy almost equal privileges with their male counterparts. Thus, in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, female pastors are not in any way treated as inferior to male pastors. Women are allowed free rein to use their God-given gifts and play leadership roles equal to those played by men. The belief in this church is that “what men can do women can also do”. For instance, women function as assistant

pastors, parish pastors, area pastors, church planters, heads of units, and so on. The wife of the General Overseer, Pastor (Mrs) Folu Adeboye, tops the list of female leaders of the church. Apart from being the head of all women in the church (Good Women Fellowship), she is the Directorate of Missions. She also supervises the activities of the Christ the Redeemer School Movement (CRSM), which includes of the Christ the Redeemer Nursery, Primary and Secondary Schools (CRNPS), the Christ the Redeemer School Movement of Catering (CRSMC), supermarkets, canteens and bookshops. Pastor (Mrs) Odeyemi, Pastors (Mrs) Macualy and Pastor (Mrs) Onasonde are among the many women who occupy distinguished leadership positions in the Redeemed Christian Church of God.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, women in the Classical Pentecostal denominations are not accorded the same leadership privileges as those in the African Indigenous and Neo-Pentecostal churches. These churches (the Classical Pentecostals) planted in Nigeria by foreign Pentecostal denominations from Europe and America between 1930 and 1950 hold almost the same views as the mainline denominations on women's participation in active ministry. As a result, with the exception of the Foursquare Gospel Church, where women are seen in virtually every calling<sup>2</sup>, others like the Apostolic Church, the Apostolic Faith Mission and the Assemblies of God largely deny women the right to participate in leadership. In these churches, women are only allowed to hold the office of deaconess, and even in this they have to be subject to their male counterparts.

In the Apostolic Church, which is the foremost Classical Pentecostal denomination in Nigeria, for instance, women are not allowed full participation in active ministry. The assumption is that women are weaker vessels. A further ground is the admonition by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34 that women should remain silent in the churches. For this reason women are denied ordination of any kind, and are not allowed in any way to lead the congregation in public worship, except in the Women's Movement.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the African Indigenous and Neo-Pentecostal churches, the Apostolic Church does not believe that women could receive any



special ministerial call by God like men. The grounds for this belief are that they have been confined to subjective roles from the beginning on the basis of the Genesis account of the fall. As a result, as gathered from Pastor Samson Akindele,<sup>4</sup> the church believes that women, irrespective of their age, social status or spirituality, have no say in church governance. Besides, unlike their male counter-parts, deaconesses in the Apostolic Church are not allowed to teach in Bible Study, conduct congregational prayer meetings, or serve as leaders of units and groups in the church except for the Women's Movement. This, as pointed out by Pastor Akindele, is simply because the Apostolic Church hardly believes that women could receive any special divine call into the ministry because they are biblically admitted to be weaker vessels. The general belief in the church is that if God wanted to use any woman, He would call her husband into the ministry, thereby enabling her to fulfil her "ministry" by playing a subjective role to her husband who is in active ministry. This attitude, as we gather from our respondents, is unduly restricting some women who are highly gifted but are not married to ministers.

However, to consider the matter critically, Jesus at no time spoke of women as weaker vessels in spiritual matters (Falusi 1976:15). In fact, He had ministering women who played active roles in the sustenance of His ministry. In the words of Amolo (2003:145): "Women constituted a large number of people who supported Jesus' ministry and ministered to Him out of their substances. Now, if Jesus could give such a conspicuous place to women in His ministry, we cannot do less in our generation" Witherington (1995:88ff) expresses the view that from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, He intended women to be witnesses and participants in His mission. The fact that Jesus did not choose any woman as an apostle does not rule out the possibility that there were some women among the group of the seventy disciples.

Reacting to the alleged Pauline injunction on the exclusion of women from active ministry, Amolo (2003:148) identifies cultural factors as the strongest reason for this Pauline injunction. The ancient Jews prayed daily to God: "I thank thee that I am not a woman." In the same vein, Ogba states that a woman in Israel found her identity not as an individual but as a member of a family – first as a daughter,

then as a wife and finally as a mother (Ogba 2006:64). However, Akintunde (2005:109) has argued that an injunction such as that in 1 Timothy 2:12 is not a general rule but a command intended to save a particular situation in a local church. Biblical references point to Paul as recognising women's ministry in the early church rather than as being antifeminist. For instance, Romans 16 contains a long list of women who were co-workers in his ministry. She attributed the antifeminist interpretation of the Bible in Nigeria to lack of sound theological education on the part of some of the church leaders.

Olubayo Obijole (1987:16) states in his contribution that Paul did not oppose the role of women in church administration provided that such women have genuine prophetic gifts. As he further emphasises in 1 Corinthians 11:4ff, Paul confers on prophetically gifted women the right to speak and pray before the assembled community, as long as they do so in an appropriate manner.

Akintunde (2005:99) sees the Bible as a two edged sword on issues relating to women. She observes that while the Bible is used by the antifeminists to support women's alleged inferiority, polygamy, levirate marriage, the silence of women, preference for male children, etc, it is at the same time liberative, as it contains embedded texts on divine love that empower women to find heroines in the Bible who are models in their own struggle to be a liberative force in their context.

The Bible, critically examined, does not wholly support the marginalisation of women in active ministry. Even in the Old Testament there are a number of accounts of heroines who shaped Israel's history. For instance, Deborah the wife of Lappidoth, is portrayed as a great spiritual and political figure who contributed immensely to the development of the nation of Israel during the formative years. As a religious leader, Deborah communicated insight, wisdom and the knowledge of God to her people (Adeoti 2003:87). The question we therefore ask ourselves is: Had Deborah been prevented from fulfilling her God-given leadership role, what would have become of the nation of Israel in its time of tribulation when Barak the captain of Israel's army was not bold enough to face Jabin the King of Canaan?

### 3 DATA ASSESSMENT, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

From our discussion so far, it is abundantly clear that women are allowed to participate freely in church leadership in the majority of the African Indigenous Pentecostal churches as well as the Neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. On the other hand, the majority of the Classical Pentecostal denominations in the country are unduly restricting women of great spiritual potential through their fundamentalist approach and interpretation of the Pauline injunction that women should remain silent in the churches. This marginalisation of women on the basis of a claimed Biblical restriction does a great disservice to women and the entire Christian church. Ecclesiastical history and happenings in Pentecostal circles in Nigeria in general have proved beyond any reasonable doubt that women are not weaker vessels in spiritual matters, neither are they in any way inferior to men in church leadership. The case histories of some of the women examined in this article sufficient evidence to the Classical Pentecostal churches and a host of other churches in Nigeria that women have equal rights with men before God in church leadership. Mrs Aimee Semple Mcpherson, the founder of the Foursquare Gospel Church International, and Florence L Crawford, the founder of the Apostolic Faith Church, are eloquent proof of divine approval for women's playing leadership roles in active ministry. Other heroines of the faith who have their place in ecclesiastical history, like Kathryn Kulma, the woman of outstanding miracles, signs and wonders, and Maria Woolworth-Ether, popularly acclaimed as the "Grandmother of the Pentecostal Movement" (Liardson 1996:45-76), are sufficient proof that what men can do in spiritual matters, women can do as well or even better. In Nigerian ecclesiastical history, renowned women like Captain Abidun Akinsowon, the co-founder of the C & S society along with Moses Orimolade, and Miss Sophia Odunlami, the first recognised healing evangelist in the history of the Precious Stone Society (Adegboyega 1978:3; Ayegboyin & Ishola 1997:67), mentioned in this work, have also demonstrated that women are in no way weaker vessels in active ministry. The leadership status and roles played by contemporary women like Archbishop (Mrs) Olaniyi, Bishop (Mrs) Margaret

Idahosa, Bishop (Mrs) Bola Odeleke, Pastor (Mrs) Bimbo Odukoya, the Rev (Mrs) Funke-Nelson Adetuberu and many others that space does not permit the author to mention in this paper are sufficient evidence that it would be sheer ignorance on the part of any church to continue to confine women to subjective positions in the church on the basis of an alleged biblical injunction that women should remain silent in the churches. In conclusion, therefore, women are special creatures of God and not inferior beings, as some erroneously believe. They should therefore be treated with respect and dignity, and accorded their rightful position in church leadership. Jesus, the Founder of the Church, nowhere legislated in the Scripture that women should be confined to subjective roles in the Church.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Interview with Pastor Taiwo Lemoshe, Pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Ibadan, on 10 March 2000.
  - <sup>2</sup> Interview with the Rev Dr Deji Adeoye, Senior Pastor in the Foursquare Gospel Church, Oko-Oba, Agege, Lagos State, Nigeria, on 22 August 2001.
  - <sup>3</sup> Interview with Pastor Godwin Akinola – Lecturer, The Apostolic Church Theological College, Ilesha – on 16 June, 2003.
  - <sup>4</sup> Interview with Pastor S. Akindele – Lecturer, the Apostolic Church Theological College, Ilesha – on 16 June 2003.