

Reverse Missions: The Nigerian Christians' Experience in Re-Evangelizing Europe and North America

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the phenomenon of reverse missions, concentrating on the re-evangelisation of North America and Europe by Nigerian Christians. First, a historical synopsis of Christian missions to Nigeria is considered, emphasizing the early European missionary endeavours in Africa and the subsequent expansion and advancement of Christianity in Nigeria. An analysis of the emergence of missionary movements led by Nigerians reveal a change in the dynamics of missionary work. Examining the reasons behind these reverse missions reveal a focus on socioeconomic, cultural, and spiritual elements. The strategies and tactics used by Nigerian Christians are examined in depth, demonstrating creative and culturally appropriate techniques. The difficulties and obstacles encountered, including cultural disparities, practical problems, and opposition from nearby communities, are also covered in the paper. Despite these challenges, Nigerian Christians' reverse missions have had great success and influence, revitalizing local churches, promoting intercultural understanding, and adding to the worldwide Christian landscape. This study offers an in-depth examination of modern Christian missions' dynamic and reciprocal aspects.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the phenomenon of reverse missions has drawn much attention, as it has changed the face of Christian missions worldwide. From the eighteenth century, the West has been the source of missionary activities to continents such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Nevertheless, this pattern has reversed at the turn of the twenty-first century, with nations previously thought of as mission fields now sending missionaries to North America and Europe. Nigeria is one of the leading countries in this reverse-mission movement due to its burgeoning Christian population. Nigerian Christians are actively involved in re-evangelising areas that are seeing a rise in secularism and a decline in religious adherence. However, despite their apparent dynamism and growing involvement in reverse missions, there is still a lack of thorough scholarly research that critically examines their experiences, challenges, and impacts. This lapse leaves a gap in our knowledge of how Nigerian missionaries traverse North America and Europe's socio-cultural and religious landscapes and how the local communities respond to and view their efforts. To fully understand the relevance of this reverse-mission phenomenon in the modern global

Christian mission activity, a thorough examination of its theological and missiological consequences is necessary.

This study aims to fill a vacuum in the literature by examining the Nigerian Christians' experience of re-evangelising North America and Europe. It seeks to comprehend the reasons behind, tactics used, and results of Nigerian reverse-missions and the difficulties and opportunities Nigerian missionaries face in these areas. By doing this, the paper will shed light on the larger consequences of reverse-missions for Christianity worldwide and provide an understanding of how these missionary endeavours support the resuscitation of the Christian faith in environments characterised by religious plurality and secularism. The paper will also examine how Nigerian missionaries modify their evangelistic strategies to fit in with their areas' spiritual and cultural contexts.

The paper is significant because it can potentially improve missiological practice and scholarship. The study will add to a more thorough understanding of worldwide mission trends by offering insightful perspectives on the dynamics of reverse-missions through an examination of the experiences of Nigerian missionaries. Additionally, lawmakers, church leaders, and mission agencies involved in or supporting reverse mission programmes will find value in the practical insights this paper will provide. It will also show how Nigerian missionary efforts have the power to transform the Christian faith in North America and Europe and how religious communities in the Global South influence the direction of Christianity worldwide. In the end, this paper will highlight how crucial it is to acknowledge and value the contributions made by non-Western missionaries to the Church's ongoing work, encouraging increased cooperation and mutual learning across national and cultural barriers.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS TO NIGERIA

Through a historical lens, this section of the paper reviews Christian missions in Nigeria by considering the early Christian missions from Europe to Africa, the growth and development of Christianity in Nigeria, and the rise of Nigerian-led missionary movements.

Early Christian missions from Europe to Africa

Christian missions to Nigeria started in earnest in the middle of the nineteenth century and were a part of the larger European missionary endeavor in Africa.

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) led the first major attempts, sending its first missionaries to the Yoruba region in 1842. These early missionaries aimed to disseminate Christianity and Western education because a strong evangelical fervor and a feeling of civilizing mission propelled them. They encountered many challenging obstacles, such as severe weather patterns, tropical illnesses, and opposition from the native populace who followed indigenous religions. One of the trailblazing individuals was the former slave Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who rose to become the first African Anglican bishop. As a result of Crowther's translation efforts, Christian doctrines were able to proliferate throughout Yoruba and other indigenous languages. His actions were a crucial turning point in developing Christian missions in Nigeria by symbolizing the meeting point of European missionary zeal and African activity.

Another significant player was the Roman Catholic Church, which established missions in southern Nigeria through the work of French and Irish missionaries. They made contributions by building schools and hospitals, which not only introduced Western education and medical procedures but also served to advance Christianity. These pioneering missionaries faced initial opposition, but their work eventually paid off as Christian communities were established and the number of indigenous clergy increased. Nigeria had become firmly Christianized by the early twentieth century, which helped to create the dynamic Christian environment that exists there now. The legacy of these early missions is evident in Nigeria's robust Christian institutions and the country's role in contemporary global missions.

The Growth and Development of Christianity in Nigeria

The rise and evolution of Christianity in Nigeria from the nineteenth century to the present, is a complex story characterized by notable expansion and change. This dynamic religious environment was made possible by the foothold that early European missionaries created in the mid-1800s. Together with Roman Catholic missionaries, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was instrumental in advancing Christianity through healthcare, education, and translating sacred scriptures into local languages. Their efforts were complemented by other mainline churches that came on board. However, due to the desire for Christianity connected with African cultural contexts, indigenous churches were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The emphasis on spiritual healing, prophecy, and dynamic worship styles of the indigenous churches, such as the Aladura churches attracted adherents and helped believers grow quickly.

After independence, the number and diversity of Christian denominations increased in Nigeria. Pentecostal and charismatic churches first appeared

in the 1970s and 1980s, bringing fresh doctrinal emphases and worship approaches. As a testament to the widespread influence of Nigerian Christianity, these churches have kept growing both domestically and abroad. Nigerian Christianity's growth has also been distinguished by its sociopolitical involvement. Churches have made significant contributions to national development and the resolution of social challenges through their work in advocacy, healthcare, and education. Today, Nigeria is home to some of the largest Christian congregations globally, symbolizing the enduring legacy and dynamic future of Christianity in the region.

The Rise of Nigerian-led Missionary Movements

A notable change in the worldwide mission landscape is the emergence of Nigerian-led missionary movements typified by a reversal of conventional North-to-South missionary flows. As a result of Nigerian churches- especially Pentecostal and charismatic denominations- leading missionary efforts throughout Europe, North America, and other regions of the world, these phenomenon gained speed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. One of the key organizations driving this movement is the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), established in 1952 and has a substantial following across many countries. The RCCG plan for worldwide expansion, which is motivated by establishing churches in every country, is a prime example of the organization and boldness of Nigerian missionary work. Nigerian missionaries provide a unique style of evangelism marked by dynamic worship, a focus on the supernatural, and flexibility in dealing with different situations. These missionaries help communities in the diaspora find spiritual and material support, which helps Nigerian expats feel a feeling of identity and belonging. Furthermore, Nigerian-led missions revitalize Christian faith in regions experiencing secularization and religious decline, particularly in Europe and North America. Examples of such Nigerian-led missions include Kingsway International Christian Centre, African Congregational Evangelical Mission, The Church of Pentecost, Deeper Life Bible Church, Mountain of Fire and Miracles, Christ Embassy and Redeemed Christian Church of God.

The development of international networks that promote cross-cultural interaction and intercommunal assistance among Christian communities is another indication of the influence of Nigerian missionary organizations. Among such networks include Redeemed Christian Church of God Mission Network, Deeper Life Bible Church Global Missions, Christ Apostolic Church Worldwide, African Independent Churches Network, Nigerian Baptist Convention Global Missions and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries. These networks propagate theological ideas and practices that impact outside of Nigeria,

increasing the influence of Nigerian Christianity worldwide. The rise of Nigerian-led missionary movements underscores the dynamic and reciprocal nature of contemporary Christian missions, highlighting the role of the Global South in shaping the future of global Christianity.

The Motivations for Reverse Missions

The divine mandate to revitalize Western Christianity in decline, the socio-cultural difficulties faced by the diaspora, the financial support of church communities, and powerful personal accounts that highlight the transformative power of faith and arouse missionary zeal are the main drivers behind reverse missions among Nigerian Christians. Before delving more into these reasons, it is important to take a broad view of the Nigerian Christian diaspora.

In their reverse missions, Nigerian Christians use various evangelistic techniques and strategies firmly anchored in the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions. The emphasis on individual salvation stories, frequently communicated through impactful narratives of change and supernatural intervention, is fundamental to their evangelism. These stories effectively bridge cultural divides and humanise the gospel message for African and Western audiences.

Overview of the Nigerian Christian Diaspora: Over the past few decades, the Nigerian Christian diaspora has expanded greatly, settling in North America, Europe, and other continents. Socioeconomic issues like the pursuit of better jobs and educational opportunities, political unpredictability at home, and the desire for a higher standard of living are major causes of this dispersion. The Nigerian diaspora is distinguished by its intense religious zeal and close-knit communities, with churches serving as vital hubs for social assistance and cultural preservation. This thriving Christian community overseas is the foundation of reverse missions, in which Nigerians feel compelled to evangelize and revitalize Christianity in their home nations. The motivations for the reverse missions are to be discussed as follows:

Spiritual and Theological Motivations: A strong spiritual and theological foundation underpins Nigerian reverse missions, which many Nigerian

Christians see as a divine mandate to revive the Christian religion in the West, which they see as becoming more and more secular and spiritually apathetic. Pentecostal and charismatic beliefs that highlight the necessity of evangelism and the ability of the Holy Spirit to change people's lives frequently serve to strengthen this sense of mission. Their dedication is further strengthened by their belief in prophetic visions and dreams, as many missionaries share firsthand accounts of God's calling to particular areas.

Socio-Cultural and Economic Factors: Socio-cultural and economic factors also significantly influence reverse missions motivation. Nigerian immigrants frequently encounter difficulties in their new countries, including prejudice, cultural shock, and financial hardship. Constructing churches promotes a sense of community and belonging and offers a spiritual refuge. These churches frequently act as social and financial assistance hubs, providing programmes like counselling, language instruction, and help finding a job. Tithes and offerings from Nigerian Christians provide the financial support these churches need to continue their missionary work and increase their outreach. Furthermore, Nigerian-led churches' success in attracting African and non-African congregants highlights the appeal of their vibrant worship styles and community-oriented approach.

Personal Testimonies and Narratives: Narratives and personal testimonies play a significant role in reverse missions. Several Nigerian missionaries encourage others to get involved in the cause by telling moving stories of personal growth and supernatural intervention. These accounts frequently emphasize liberation from spiritual oppression, healing miracles, and repairing damaged lives, which confirms the perceived effectiveness of their mission and faith. A personal story of faith and resiliency may fuel missionary fervour, as demonstrated by Pastor Agu Irukwu of Jesus House London, a congregation of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). His transition from a legal career to becoming the pastor of one of the biggest African-led churches in the UK is evidence of the life-changing power of one's conviction and divine calling. These testimonials also help close cultural gaps, which allows the gospel message to resonate with various listeners. Nigerian missionaries frequently modify their evangelistic strategies to fit the cultural milieu, effectively conveying their message through drama, music, and storytelling. This cultural adaptability, combined with their fervent spirituality, makes Nigerian-led missions uniquely positioned to address the spiritual needs of multicultural societies.

STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES OF THE NIGERIAN CHRISTIANS' REVERSE MISSIONS

Nigerian Christians use diverse strategies and approaches in their deployment of reverse missions.

Some of those are discussed as follows:

Evangelistic Methods and Practices:

In their reverse missions, Nigerian Christians use various evangelistic techniques and strategies firmly anchored in the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions. The emphasis on individual salvation stories, frequently communicated through impactful narratives of change and supernatural intervention, is fundamental to their evangelism. These stories effectively bridge cultural divides and humanise the gospel message for African and Western audiences. Furthermore, open-air crusades, including lively worship, engaging preaching, and visible displays of faith through healings and deliverance services, are a common tool Nigerian missionaries use. These gatherings frequently draw sizable audiences and present chances for evangelism to spread far. Small group gatherings and house fellowships are essential components of their evangelistic approach. These small-scale events create strong community ties and offer an ideal atmosphere for in-depth Bible study and spiritual development. Nigerian Christians can effectively reach new populations through interpersonal connections and word-of-mouth evangelism.

Establishment of Churches and Religious Communities:

The foundation of Nigerian reverse missions is building churches and religious communities. Two well-known Nigerian-led denominations, Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), have established churches across Europe, North America, and other continents. These churches provide a comfortable cultural setting and spiritual and pragmatic requirements, acting as social and spiritual centres for the diaspora. Also such churches form a platform of communicating the gospel to the people of their host communities. Nigerian churches frequently have an accepting stance, encouraging multicultural congregations and welcoming individuals from various backgrounds. Culturally flexible worship styles that include upbeat music, dance, and enthusiastic praise and worship that appeal to a wide range of people help foster inclusivity. These churches' attractiveness and influence are further enhanced by their emphasis on social services and community engagement, including support for the underprivileged, healthcare efforts, and educational projects.

Use of Media and Technology in Missions:

Technology and media have greatly enhanced the efficiency and reach of Nigerian reverse missions. Nigerian Christians use radio, television, and the internet, among other media outlets, to spread their message far and wide. For instance, millions of people receive daily spiritual support from the RCCG's

"Open Heavens"- devotional, shown worldwide. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram are frequently used for live streaming, testimonies sharing, and online evangelistic efforts. Through these channels, missionaries can reach people who might not normally attend church by connecting with a worldwide audience that transcends geographic boundaries. The creative application of digital technology, including prayer groups and Bible studies on mobile devices, increases participation and strengthens ties between members who are spread out. Examples of these are Pastor Chris Oyakhilome's Christ Embassy that uses platforms like YouTube and Facebook to broadcast events such as the "Global Day of Prayer," which attracts millions of participants worldwide. Also, The Synagogue, Church of All Nations (SCOAN), has a strong online presence, with millions of subscribers on YouTube, where they share live services, testimonies, and healing sessions, reaching a global audience.

Furthermore, churches in Nigeria frequently use high-calibre media products for their outreach initiatives. This involves making inspirational stories of faith and transformation for use in documentaries, music videos, and Christian films. These media creations are effective evangelism tools because they engage the audience's emotions and intellect.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS OF THE NIGERIAN CHRISTIANS' REVERSE MISSIONS

Challenges and barriers exist and they hamper the efforts of the Nigerian Christians' reverse missions. Some of those include:

Cultural and Linguistic Obstacles:

Overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers is one of the most significant issues Nigerian Christians face when engaging in reverse missions. Many Nigerian missionaries find it challenging to fit in with their host nations' subtle cultural differences and social mores. This cultural difference may make communicating effectively and establishing trust in the community challenging. Language difficulties also present a significant obstacle, especially in areas where English is not the primary language. Although many Nigerian missionaries speak English fluently, understanding other languages is necessary to interact with local populations because of the linguistic diversity in Europe and North America.

Legal and Institutional Hurdles:

Another significant obstacle for Nigerian reverse missions is the presence of institutional and legal impediments. Host nations frequently impose tight laws on religious activity, such as prohibitions on assemblies in public, proselytizing, and establishing new religious organizations. A comprehensive grasp of local laws is necessary to navigate these legal systems, and legal aid is frequently required, which

may be expensive and complicated. Furthermore, for missionaries, securing visas and residency permits can be difficult, with many encountering red tape and protracted waiting times. The missionary work is made more difficult by the ambiguity of the surrounding immigration laws and the possibility of restrictive modifications. Furthermore, obtaining registration and accreditation for educational programmes and religious establishments started by Nigerian missionaries can be difficult, as it frequently requires strict adherence to regional laws and norms.

Resistance and Reception from Host Communities:

The host populations' reaction and resistance significantly influence how well Nigerian reverse missions work. Growing suspicion and opposition to foreign religious influences are observed in some areas, especially in nations with strong secular ethos or a predominant religious tradition. This resistance can take many forms, including being shunned by society, being negatively portrayed in the media, or even having laws restricting religious activities. Moreover, preconceived notions and assumptions about Africa and African religious customs frequently impact how Nigerian missionaries are received. These misconceptions may cause local communities to reject and become unsupportive of the mission, which makes it difficult to get traction and expand it. Therefore, Nigerian missionaries must put great effort into dispelling these prejudices, frequently highlighting the benefits of their work to the community and encouraging cross-cultural communication and understanding.

SUCCESSSES AND IMPACTS OF THE NIGERIAN CHRISTIANS' REVERSE MISSIONS

Despite the challenges faced by Nigerian Christians' reverse missions, their efforts have recorded successes, and impacts have been made. Among these include:

Case Studies of Successful Missions:

In Nigerian reverse missions, the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is a prominent success story. Since its founding in Nigeria, RCCG has expanded rapidly, founding thousands of parishes across the globe, notably in North America and Europe. For example, the RCCG has developed over 800 churches in the UK, offering social and spiritual assistance to the Nigerian diaspora while drawing British congregants with its dynamic worship and community outreach initiatives. The Deeper Life Bible Church is another such church that has effectively established branches in significant Western cities and provides comprehensive programmes that meet both practical and spiritual needs.

Contributions to the Revitalization of Christianity in Europe and North America:

Reverse missions from Nigeria have been vital in

reviving Christianity in North America and Europe. These missions' vibrant worship styles, emphasis on personal development, and active community involvement have revitalized nearby Christian towns. Jesus House London, the RCCG's main church, has become a centre for multicultural worship and community outreach, illustrating the influence of missions conducted by Nigerians on the British Christian scene. These missions often collaborate with local churches, organizing joint events and outreach activities that rejuvenate the Christian faith and attract new converts.

Influence on the Religious Practices and Beliefs of Host Communities:

Despite the Western churches' contact with Pentecostal ideas from 1906 during the Azusa revival in Los Angeles, their religious practices and beliefs are greatly influenced by Nigerian reverse missions. With their dynamic music, dancing, and unplanned displays of faith, Nigerian missionaries infuse worship with a flavour that appeals to many Western Christians looking for a more engaging and dynamic style of worship. As a result, these components are now widely accepted and incorporated into conventional Western Christian activities. In addition, the focus on prayer, fasting, and healing in Nigerian churches has given host populations new perspectives on their spirituality and increased dependence on divine intervention.

Future Prospects for Reverse Missions:

Reverse missions from Nigeria have bright prospects. There is a greater chance to broaden and enhance the missionary effect of the Nigerian diaspora as it grows and integrates into Western societies. Nigerian missionaries are well-positioned for future expansion due to their adaptability, capacity to engage various populations, and creative use of media and technology. Moreover, the increasing global interconnectedness facilitated by digital platforms allows Nigerian missions to reach a broader audience, transcending geographical limitations.

CONCLUSION

One notable and influential development in the history of global Christianity is the phenomenon of reverse missions, which Nigerian Christians pioneered. This movement has effectively closed the spiritual and cultural divide between Africa and the West and is typified by Nigerian missionaries' strategic and impassioned efforts. Nigerian Christians have made significant progress towards reviving Christianity in Europe and North America through lively worship, effective evangelical strategies, and the development of strong religious communities. Spiritual, theological, socio-cultural, and economic issues drive Nigerian reverse missions. The strong sense of divine calling, reinforced by personal testimonies and charismatic

practices, drives these missionaries to rekindle the Christian faith in increasingly secular societies.

Furthermore, the tenacity and social connections of the Nigerian diaspora have made it easier to create welcoming and encouraging church environments that serve both the local populace and African immigrants. Nigerian missionaries have shown amazing flexibility and tenacity in the face of enormous obstacles, including linguistic and cultural impediments, institutional and legal constraints, and host community resistance. Their creative use of media and technology has increased their outreach efforts, allowing them to interact with a worldwide audience and overcome geographic boundaries. The countless flourishing churches and reinvigorated Christian communities throughout Europe and North America are testaments to the achievements and effects of Nigerian reverse missions. In addition to offering social and spiritual support, these missions have shaped regional religious customs and beliefs, fostering a revitalized feeling of belonging and faith. The prospects for Nigerian reverse missions are quite bright going forward. There is a greater chance of the Nigerian diaspora's missionary impact growing as they assimilate into Western societies and flourish. Nigerian reverse missions are positioned to play a significant role in influencing the direction of global Christianity, promoting intercultural understanding, and reviving the Christian faith in the West because of their ongoing adaptability, strong sense of mission, and creative approaches.

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