

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF CHURCH PROLIFERATION: THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The environmental effects of proliferation of churches continued to be a major concern to all and particularly those in the mainstream of environmental protection. So disturbing has it become that analysts begin to think of the need for a legal framework to tackle the menace. This paper appraised the extent of proliferation of churches with particular reference to The Redeemed Christian Church of God. Churches are noted to be springing up at an alarming and unprecedented rate in all available spaces, shops, warehouses, hotels, to mention but a few. Using both primary and secondary sources of data collection, the paper also listed and discussed some of the problems associated with the proliferation of churches, such as noise pollution, traffic congestion at the Redemption Camp, inhalation of exhaust gases and related air pollutants, improper ventilation and the collapse of weak structures being used. All these were noted to lead to various health hazards like suffocation, stress-induced ailments like hypertension, diabetes, hearing loss, alterations in cardiac functioning and the likes. The paper therefore concluded by recommending some stringent statutory environmental laws that could be enacted to solve the problems. Also, all stakeholders including government and religious bodies were advised to work together to introduce legal and administrative frameworks to manage the effects of this church proliferation.

INTRODUCTION

Our global society today is undergoing significant constant proliferation of churches which have brought not only changing values, but also greater source of solutions to people's problems. This rapid multiplication of churches is borne out of the understanding that in Nigeria, there is freedom of religious worship. Central to the constant proliferation of churches is the question of its environmental effects on the people in the society. The question of how the undesired physiological and institutional effects on individual and environments can be solved. This question has not only been of concern to the officials of Environmental Protection Agency but also to the academia. The major thrust of this paper therefore is to discuss the environmental effects of church proliferation with particular reference to the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Historically, the origin of RCCG could be traced back to 1952 when Rev. Josiah Akindayomi began to express a feeling of dissatisfaction with his mother church – The Cherubim and Seraphim Mount Zion in Lagos. He felt totally persuaded to leave the church because he saw some of the elements like the lighting of candle, burning of incense and ritual washing as a departure from the true word of God. Somewhat dissatisfied with some of the practices, he left C & S in 1952 to start a house fellowship called the "Glory of God Fellowship" with nine members.

Akindayomi led this growing church, which was formally inaugurated in Ebute Metta, Lagos in November 1954 and given the name RCCG. He died in 1981 after which Enoch Adejare Adeboye assumed the leadership position of the church. As a member of the elites, Adeboye introduced many different innovations into the church. One of them was the Holy Ghost service which started in March 1986 at Ebute Meta. However, due to the overwhelming crowd, the place of the service was relocated to the Lagos-Ibadan expressway. The Holy Ghost Prayer Ministry which always comes up in the last Friday of the month is said to be usually jam-packed with throngs of worshippers from different religious tradition and Christian denominations (Olayiwola 2002:3) Today, the total number of parishes of the church in Nigeria is put at twenty-two thousand, six hundred and sixty-nine (22,669)(Annual Convention Reports; 2009).

Dimensions of Church Proliferation in Nigeria

To an observant mind, the pace at which churches are spreading like a wildfire in Nigeria is alarming. In the country, there is freedom of worship, places of worship are full, pilgrimages are over-booked and there is evidence of religious fervour all over the places.

Many people were cashing in on the situation, as they launch new religious organisations and societies. There is evidence that many are just charlatans looking for a means of livelihood. Many are perhaps genuinely religious. But it is obvious that our society has not become upright. It certainly has not become peaceful. There have been and still many hot and cold wars in the name of religion. (Fayomi 1993:37). Churches are noted to be springing up at an alarming and unprecedented rate in all available spaces, shops and uncompleted buildings. Worship come up in warehouses, hotels, abandoned cinema buildings, studios and other public places. It is a common sight to see a minimum of fifty different churches on a street of four kilometres long. This may paint a terrible picture, but such is the present rate of church proliferation in the country. In a statement made by Ogidi, he categorically asserts that, “Nigeria is a country with easily the largest number of churches per capital in the world.”(Ogidi 1997:11). Fayomi also described Nigeria as “a fertile soil for the growth of independent churches.”(Fayomi 1993; 32).

In urban cities and even rural areas, for lack of space and accommodation, six or more different churches could make do with a storey building. Such is the present state of events especially in the South East region. For example, in Ekiti State, as rightly observed by Tokunbo, there are well above One hundred and fifty-seven Pentecostal denominations alone between 1970 and 2004. (Tokunbo 2007: 45). More parishes and new religious movements continue to be springing up each passing day. The spiritual discernment reportedly used by the Pastors and leaders founding churches in Nigeria is, “We prayed about it, and God said go and establish your own church.” Very often, one cannot compete with the self-proclaimed revelations and answers to prayers received by leaders looking to baptize their whims in God-talk. The phrase is usually evoked to silent objections and avoids careful teaching and accountability. And apparently, its use is on the rise, “God told me so” is now perhaps the dangerous four-word-sentence uttered by church leaders.

Several factors have been found to be responsible for this church proliferation. They include economic recession, rapid evangelization, beliefs and practices, unhealthy rivalry, genuine thirst for spiritual nourishment, theological issues, fanaticism, leadership tussle and the likes. (Falayi 1998:42). The phenomenon of church proliferation has its merits and demerits. The merits include, rapid evangelization, development of new leadership, provision of checks and balances to orthodox churches, promotes specialization in ministry and enhances the provision of an atmosphere in which human problems are at times solved.(Adesanya 2004:52). On the other hand, the demerits include, personality clashes, unhealthy competition for convert via homiletical propaganda, lack of unity, monetary crises, heresies, fanaticism and bickering.(Tokunbo 2007:45). Although, church proliferation has certain demerits as noted above, but they are not strong enough for total condemnation of the phenomenon. This is because Jesus was reported in the Bible to have said that, the Gospel should be preached to all nations (Mk. 16:15). Then, Paul in Philippians 1:15-18, supports church proliferation for the expansion of the kingdom of God. This is because religion is not fossil, but a living and dynamic phenomenon. It will surely continue to increase.

Dimensions of Rapid Multiplication

The Redeemed Christian Church of God

The Redeemed Christian Church of God is reported to be the fastest growing church in terms of church planting. (Ojo 2001; 16). The present General Overseer of the church, Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye is credited for most of the reforms going on in the church. Those reforms introduced by him have been one of the key factors that helped the church to grow rapidly. The first of this reform is the model parish established by him. The model parish system was a departure from the classical Redeemed church which is very “conservative” while the model parishes tend to be a bit liberal especially in accommodating different categories of people.(The News Magazine 2002:28). Those in the highest stratum of the society need to be converted to Christ, Governors, commissioners and big executives. Adeboye’s approach was the establishment of the “Christ The Redeemer’s Friend Universal.” This group is made up of those who hold National Certificate in Education, Higher National Diploma, Bachelor of Arts, Masters of Arts/Science, PhDs and Professors. The concept is that the educated Christians elite will not be timid to preach to big shots in the society and then can reason with them on the same frequency.

Another factor which aids the rapid expansion of the church is rapid evangelization. This, the church was able to achieve through a programme called “Go-a-fishing.” Every Easter Monday, Boxing Day and few days to Christmas is usually spent by the members to preach the Good News of God’s kingdom. Most often after this programme, a church will be planted in that area. However, it should be noted that it is not only in these two important days that they preach to win converts; they do so virtually on daily basis.

But, it needs be noted that the motive behind the “Go-a-fishing” is to get more converts. It is also meant to fulfil the vision of the General Overseer that the church must be established at five minutes walk. With this vision, the church continues to increase. (Ojo 2001:38). Also, the annual “Holy Ghost Congress” organised at the popular Redemption Camp along Lagos-Ibadan expressway normally records millions of worshippers. This new innovation also makes the church not only popular, but also the fastest growing church in Nigeria. The proper administration of the church is also a contributing factor to its rapid expansion. With several thousands of Pastors, the Redeemed Christian Church of God is growing faster. The church really knows how to mobilise its Pastors to plant hundreds of churches in one month.

In the light of the foregoing, the table below gives the breakdown of the total number of parishes of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria.

Fig. 1: Table showing the total number of RCCG Parishes in Nigeria

| S/N | REGION | STATE IN EACH REGION | NUMBER OF PARISHES |
|----------------------|--------|--|------------------------|
| 1. | 1 | LAGOS | 2,179 |
| 2. | 2 | LAGOS | 2,986 |
| 3. | 3 | OSUN, ONDO AND EKITI | 2,939 |
| 4. | 4 | KWARA, EDO AND KOGI | 1,288 |
| 5. | 5 | DELTA, RIVERS, AKWA IBOM, CROSS RIVERS AND BAYELSA | 4,206 |
| 6. | 6 | IMO, ENUGU, ANAMBRA, ABIA AND EBONYI | 1,007 |
| 7. | 7 | NORTHERN PROVINCE | 534 |
| 8. | 8 | NORTHERN PROVINCE | 734 |
| 9. | 9 | NORTHERN PROVINCE | 239 |
| 10. | 10 | NORTHERN PROVINCE | 1,358 |
| 11. | 11 | LAGOS AND UNITY PROVINCE | 1,673 |
| 12. | 12 | OGUN AND OYO PROVINCE | 3,532 |
| GRAND TOTAL - | | | 22,669 PARISHES |

**SOURCE: THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD
54th ANNUAL CONVENTION: ANNUAL REPORT 2009.
THE HOPE OF GLORY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

From the table above, one could see that the church has grown rapidly, with a total number of twenty-two thousand, six hundred and sixty-nine (22,669) parishes. It could therefore be said that, the Redeemed Christian Church of God is most likely to be the largest and fastest growing church in Nigeria. However, it is not everything about the church that is being regarded as a success. Unfortunately, most of the parishes at its inception usually made use of hotels, abandoned structures and little available spaces. For example, such development was noticed at Ikere in Ekiti State. The new parish that was established immediately after “Go-a-fishing” moved to an abandoned storey building owned by one Chief Obateru. These structures had been there for a long time, the use which could pose a serious danger for the worshippers peradventure it collapses suddenly.

In the other case, they made use of hotel, abandoned cocoa house and one which was noticed by the researcher made use of a particular building located beside Osun river. This river during rainy season usually overflows its banks and this could pose a serious threat to the life of the worshippers and even people living around. Besides, it is a common sight to see the church pitching its tent at the second or first floor of a residential building. All these are just few examples out of many that one sees both at rural and urban areas. Talking about the redemption camp, the location one could say is good and the motive too is also superb. This is because through the programme, many have been healed, delivered from captivity and souls were won to the kingdom of God. But the major problems which have become prominent are the constant traffic jam usually experienced during their programmes. (Monthly Holy Ghost Service, Convention and December Congress). This is noted to constitute environmental problems. There are five main environmental problems that are associated with the continuous growth of this church and this will be discussed one after the other below:

Environmental Problems Associated with Rapid Multiplication of the Redeemed Christian Church of God

Key finding from the survey carried out reveal Noise Pollution, fragile structural integrity of abandoned building, inhalation of related air pollutants as a result of traffic jam at the Redemption Camp, improper ventilation and unexpected collapse of structure beside river banks as the key environmental hazards associated with constant proliferation of The Redeemed Christian Church of God. These will be discussed succinctly below:

a. Noise Pollution: The first related problem associated with the rapid expansion of RCCG is noise pollution. Noise pollution has been described as “an unwanted excessive harmonious sound that has undesired physiological and institutional effects on individuals. (Fieid 1993:15). People living side by side with the church constantly experienced noise pollution emanating from blaring loud speakers at no respect to time, day or night and more so on any day be it Saturday to Sunday. That of night is even worse because it is quiet and their message can propagate through the environment more clearly. Even students living in such environment will loose concentration while reading at night.

Experts in medical science contend that chronic exposure to noise may cause noise induced hearing loss. It could also lead to stress induced ailments like hypertension, diabetes and psychiatric problems. According to Dr. Ademoye, he said, apart from hearing impairment, the other effect on one’s general health are anxiety, stress reaction and in some extreme situation fright. Noise according to him, disturbs sleep and when sleep is disturbed, it affects mental functioning and judgement. Further he says, the normal noise level in any circumstances should not go beyond 60 decibels, anything beyond it, is a threat to our hearing capacity. (Egwin 2009:59). Mindful of the health hazard associated with noise pollution, the Lagos State Government in June 18, 2009 and October 30, 2009, shut down one parish of RCCG and Mountain of Fire over alleged noise pollution, and for flouting the state environmental law. Also, the officials of the Lagos State Environmental Protection Agency (LASEPA) stormed Holy Life Bible Church, Abule Egba at about 10.00 am to stop a service in progress. The church remained closed until its management was ready to comply with the state environmental law. (Daily Champion 2009:10). Apparently, their public address system was not going down well with the neighbours.

2. Traffic Congestion: It is a condition on networks that occurs as use increases and is characterized by slower speeds longer trip times and increased queuing. Usually, at the Redemption Camp sited at Lagos-Ibadan expressway, traffic demand during the monthly Holy Ghost programmes is always great to the extent that congestion is incurred. In fact, some of the members and non-members narrated their ordeal during the programmes as unpalatable. A member once said, he was in the traffic jam for hours before he could find his way out. For someone to have stayed in the traffic jam for hours, experts contend that it has three major environmental effects namely; (1) Psychological and Physiological effects (2) Economic loss (3) Uncertainty and Unreliability in every services of the vehicles. (Downie 2008). As a non-productive activity, regional economic loss could occur. Delays which may result in late arrival for employment, meeting and education resulting in loss of business, disciplinary action or other personal losses. There is also the inability to forecast travel time accurately, leading to drivers allocating more time to travel, “just in case” and less time in productive activities.

Moreover, exposures to carbon monoxide emissions are linked by experts to worldwide more deaths per year. Symptoms of large exposure to carbon monoxide could lead to asthma, bronchitis, lung and heart diseases and respiratory allergies. It could also contribute to global warming, which lead to depletion of the ozone layer, and thereby causes skin cancers and upsets our immune system. (Stott1990:113). In addition, wears and tears on vehicles could occur as a result of idling in traffic and frequent acceleration, braking leading to more frequent repairs and replacement. However, because of the economic situation in the country, most people tend to manage their vehicles, and the after effect is usually painful. For instance, most road accidents that occur in our highway is as a result of carelessness on the part of the owner or failure to put the vehicles in good shape before travelling. Lastly, blocked traffic may interfere with the passage of emergency vehicles travelling to their destinations where they are urgently needed. In such a situation, it is either the patient being carried to the hospital died on the way or makes it by chance.

c. Fragile Structural Integrity of Abandoned Buildings Being Used: The church in some areas (mostly rural areas) usually makes use of abandoned buildings. Mentioned inter-alia is the two cases of abandoned uncompleted storey buildings used by the church at Ikere-Ekiti. These buildings were in bad shape and the church moved in there immediately after the “Let’s Go-a-fishing” programme held during Easter period. The ceiling of the house is all but gone, grass and other vegetation has begun to grow on the floor, walls so rotten and filled with holes. One can say with absolute certainty that such a building if collapsed can cause head injuries, a punctured lung and other injuries, all putting someone into a coma.

d. Improper Ventilation: Usually, the church makes use of little available space that could have been left alone, in order for the people in the neighbourhood to enjoy proper ventilation. Little available spaces are being contested for because the vision is that the church should be established at five minutes walk.

But this has an adverse effect not only on the worshippers but also on the people living in such areas where proper ventilation is neglected. Air as noted by medical experts, serves “as a nourishment to our bodies just as much as food and drink”.(Emmanuel 2009).Air gives our blood the supply oxygen it must have in order to feed itself so that it may, in turn, feed the tissues, nerves glands and vital glands. Without it, our thinking processes are slowed down without intake and exhalation of fresh air which is the reason mental sluggishness overtakes us in an ill-ventilated room. But unfortunately, most of our churches don’t get the optional amount of fresh air needed. Research shows that fresh air helps keep our moods buoyant and positive. Neglect of proper ventilation is responsible for much of the drowsiness and dullness that destroys the effect of many sermons and at times make the teaching inactive.

e. Unexpected Collapse of Structure Beside River Bank: Actually, this has not occurred and no one is praying for such, but precautions need to be taken. Two parishes of the church were seen by the researcher located by the river banks in both Ado-Ekiti and Ikere-Ekiti respectively. During rainy season, the strength of the river is usually high that it flows out of the river channel, and causes damage to homes, and even to the property of the church. Having analysed the environmental problems associated with constant proliferation of RCCG, attention will now be shifted to the efforts of the church towards environmental sustainability.

THE CHURCH CONTEMPORARY AWARENESS

Certainly, the Redeemed Christian Church of God is beginning to take environmental responsibilities seriously. The General Overseer of the church, Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye announced in October Holy Ghost Service that preparation will be put in place to reduce the traffic in the year congress (Dec. 14th – 20th 2009). New roads, he promised, would be constructed along Ikorodu for the free flow of vehicles from Lagos to Ibadan. This was done and the congress, as promised, did not create traffic congestion. There was free movement of vehicles from Lagos and other parts of the states in Nigeria.

Also, there have been a number of encouragements recently as newly established parishes were given fund to kick off. So, instead of making use of cinema houses, hotels and abandoned structures, funds are being provided for new parishes to buy a land and build their own church.

Thirdly, technologies to mitigate or remove noise are being applied in some big parishes of the church mostly in urban areas. Measures are also been taken through Environmental Protection Agency to manage waste in the Redemption Camp during and after the Holy Ghost services, conventions and congresses.

However, the above notwithstanding, the church, government and other denominations still have a distinctive contribution to make in environmental sustainability. In order to do this, the following are hereby given as additional recommendations for the church, government and the society at large.

Recommendations and Conclusion

- ❖ Do what you can to control your environment, and limit the noise that enters your space.
- ❖ Avoid situations that would expose you to prolonged noise pollution.
- ❖ Installation of double dual-paned windows, weather stripping and even added insulation.
- ❖ Enforcement of noise ordinances at all levels of government, but government should not only make laws but also should enforce them.
- ❖ Individuals, groups, non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) and government should place much emphasis on enlightenment programmes that will sensitize the people on the need to observe measures that engender healthy ear and prevention of aural damage. Individuals should be able to identify sources noises that are deleterious to ear and avoid being close to such sources.
- ❖ Reduce the exposure to carbon-monoxide by reducing travelling or decentralization of Holy Ghost programmes.
- ❖ Road rationing – where regulatory restrictions prevent certain types of vehicles driving under certain circumstances.
- ❖ Provision of more lanes for free flow of vehicles.
- ❖ Traffic jam if managed well can be useful for the environment. This could be done by imposing fees that are high enough to discourage significant numbers of drivers from travelling. Unfortunately, this has been in practice some years back but the then President Olusegun Obasanjo ordered for its demolition. Even apart from that, such money are usually mismanaged by people in charge.

- ❖ People should show commitment to emission reduction, regimes, carbon trading and other strategies as suggested by Fashola. (Fashola 2009:35).
- ❖ Government should have very specific statues on building codes, urban planning and road way development.
- ❖ Demolish abandoned structures, police also to track down the owner, and if they cannot find the owner, then they should go through a demolition process.

In conclusion, people should take the time to breathe freely the revitalizing, invigorating fresh air our wonderful God created for our benefit.

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