

ABSTRACT

Nigerian Fastest Growing Churches

and their Intersection

with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty Alleviation

As church growth in the African continent and particularly Nigeria is being celebrated globally, poverty rates keep soaring. Christianity has always had to deal with poverty in Africa. In the early days of the modern missionary activity in Nigeria, Christianity developed a set of poverty alleviation strategies that included programs in public health, education, and agricultural services.

Other phases of Christianity have since emerged, and with them different ways of thinking about and addressing issues of wealth and poverty. This study aims to discover how the fastest growing elements of the Nigerian church are intersecting with the poor, with poverty, and with poverty alleviation today. The discovery will aid in understanding the nature of the churches growing in the country as well as the implications of such growth on the mission of God, the *missio Dei*.

Asbury Theological Seminary
Office of Advance Research Program
E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism

**Nigerian Fastest Growing Churches
and their Intersection
with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty Alleviation**

Written by

Chinyereugo Euphemia Adeliyi

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

has been read and accepted by the Faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary upon the
recommendation of the following committee members.

Dissertation Committee

Dr. Stephen Offutt, Mentor

Dr. W.J. Moon, Reader

External Examiner

Dr. Femi B. Adeleye,

Akrofi-Christaller

Institute of Theology, Mission & Culture

Ghana

April 2023

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Chinyereugo Euphemia Adeliyi

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Dedicated to “the least of these.”

(Matthew 25:40)

Because it is God

who “raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes,
and has them inherit a throne of honor.”

(1Samuel 2:6-8).

May this degree be one of His tools.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Even to your old age and gray hairs

I am he; I am he who will sustain you.

I have made you and I will carry you.

I will sustain you and I will rescue you. Isaiah 46:4

I know that I have been “carried” and I am immensely grateful.

Carried by the Trinity

With a heart full of joy, gratitude, and awe, I acknowledge that I have been “carried” all through this quest and I am grateful to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who have carried me and have sent many others to do so on their behalf.

Carried by Family and Friends

I am grateful to my family - my husband – Dami, and our children – Mubby, 'Dunsin and Hadassah - without whose support this milestone would have remained an illusion. My immense gratitude goes to my mother – Mrs. Philomena Nwogu Chiagorom, for her love, care and support. Thank you also to my siblings for being there when it mattered most. My mother in-law – Mrs. J.O. Adeliyi, was here at the beginning of this journey but has now taken her rest – I am eternally grateful for her unflinching support which has continued through the rest of the family. Fam, words fail me, but suffice it to say that we are grateful for the many ways you have carried us in this season.

Carried by Community

I have been carried by the family Of God.

All through this quest, my Nigerian community kept close touch. You can never imagine what those devotions, those prayers, those prophetic words, those times of worship did in bringing today to pass. I am grateful to you all and do pray that this degree becomes another tool in furthering the cause of our Father.

My Asbury Family!

How do I begin to express my gratitude to this community of the called?

Sheryl, the sister God gave me along this way! Thank you for your labor of love.

Medine and Laura, you literally carried me to the finish line! I am grateful.

Asbury Inn – Best Place to Work!

Dan, I remember coming to tell you how I really wanted to work at the Inn. You and Tamila made that dream come true. You embraced me as family, you gave me the space to enjoy work, serving in the way God created me. You carried me! Thank you, Dan, thank you Tamila.

Thank you, Rebecca, for continuing the tradition of kindness.

Thank you, Hannah, for caring deeply. Amanda, what can I say? And to all the staff of Asbury Inn, thank you for carrying me. This is from a grateful heart.

The Asbury African Community

I am grateful for the love, support, and fellowship.

ARP

Thank you, Patti, for your kindness all through. I can never forget that heater and the blanket you and Maggie provided during my comps. I do not know whether it was the room temperature or the sheer fear of comps. that got me shivering uncontrollably in that room, but you took charge as you have always done.

My immense gratitude to colleagues in the carrell who made this process bearable by sharing knowledge, food, laughter, sorrow, and everything in between. Life was never meant to be lived alone and you so clearly show it in this carrell. Thank you!

My gratitude to every single person who smiled, who prayed, who “did life” in Asbury at this same time. You are the reason Asbury will remain precious in my heart. Thank you.

Church Community

My immense gratitude to Pastor Dale and Mama Rhonda Dragomir and the entire Christian church for your fellowship of seven years. Thank you for your support, we remember. Thank you, Luke and Christina Embree and the entire Plowshares. We are grateful for the life we have shared and continue to share. Thank You Bishop Lynn for being a father indeed.

Thank you for carrying us.

My Deans

These past few weeks have been a whirlwind and without mincing words, I can say that without your support and encouragement, my stay and study would have ended abruptly. You believed in me, and you made me believe in myself. Thank you, Dr. Kima, Thank you, Dr.

Ybarrola!

My Dissertation Committee

I have been carried by my committee!

Thank you, Dr. Moon, for always. I appreciate your kindness and your willingness to read this work at such a short notice yet with the most painstaking attention.

I lack the words to express my gratitude to Dr. Stephen Offutt and his entire family. Thank you for your kindness, thank you for being both professional and humane. I have learned so much from working with you these many years. Thank you, Prof!

Research Facilitators and Participants

I especially want to thank all my research participants and facilitators who contributed in all ways to the success of the study. Thank you for making it fun!

Thank you for carrying us!

Chapter 1

NATURE OF THE STUDY

Introduction

As church growth in the African continent and particularly Nigeria is being celebrated globally, poverty rates keep soaring.¹ Christianity has always had to deal with poverty in Africa. In the early days of the modern missionary activity in Nigeria, Christianity developed a set of poverty alleviation strategies that included programs in public health, education, and agricultural services.² Other phases of Christianity have since emerged, and with them different ways of thinking about and addressing issues of wealth and poverty. This study aims to discover how the fastest growing elements of the Nigerian church are intersecting with the poor, with poverty, and with poverty alleviation today. The discovery will aid in understanding the nature of some of the churches growing in the country as well as the implications of such growth on the mission of God, the *missio Dei*.³

Autobiographical Background to the Study

My highly successful and multi-talented cousin, Richard, recently called to ask about my plans after graduation from Asbury Theological Seminary. I told him that I plan to work towards poverty alleviation through entrepreneurship. He inquired about how I intended to

¹ James O Adeyanju, Emmanuel O Babalola, "The Gospel and the Impact of Poverty on the Practice of Ideal Christianity in Nigeria," *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, 4, Is. 2, (2017): 22, <http://www.ijrhss.org/papers/v4-i2/3.pdf>.

² Abraham Terumbur Mbachirin, "The responses of the church in Nigeria to socio-economic, political, and religious problems in Nigeria: A case study of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)," accessed January 2, 2023, https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/2104/4874/Abraham_Mbachirin_phd.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

³ "Missio Dei" is a Latin theological term that can be translated as "Mission of God," it refers to the work of the church as being part of God's work. So, the church's mission is a subset of a larger whole mission that is it is both part of God's mission to the world and not the entirety of God's work in the world." Also see, "Missio Dei and the Mission of the Church," Eddy Arthur, accessed April 11, 2023, <https://www.wycliffe.net/more-about-what-we-do/papers-and-articles/missio-dei-and-the-mission-of-the-church/>.

pursue such a goal. Since I did not have any action plan, I confessed that I was not sure, but I was praying. In answer, Richard told me to stop praying and to listen to him. He started:

Chinyere! We are going to start a church. I have helped many people set up churches, and within one or two years, the yields will overwhelm you. With your preaching skills and American exposure now, what else do you need? You have been very long in ministry doing missions, the next step for you is a church. Once you start and people begin to hear you, the growth will be phenomenal and from there you can have all the money you need to do all the poverty alleviation and empowerment.

I was surprised at his proposal. Why will Richard ask me to start a church on such a premise? I wondered how eloquence and American exposure could serve as the primary prerequisites for church planting. More so, it was even more difficult to understand how I could engage in church planting for the sake of making money. It all seemed so out of tune. But then I thought it through. Apart from his regular job, my cousin has served as a pastor in a big church as a close assistant to the “man of God.”⁴ so, he knows the inner workings of the Nigerian church system. That must be why he was strongly advising his beloved cousin to open a church in order to be rich enough to alleviate poverty.

Since church growth and poverty are two of the current major issues in Nigeria and Africa as a whole, my conversation with Richard got me thinking about the dynamics of church growth and poverty alleviation in Nigeria. People rise to start their own churches, promising congregants of their ability to lead them into unlimited access to the good life as they give to the work of God. For one program or the other, people gather in churches to sing, dance, and pray for “breakthrough.”⁵ Due to the desperation of poverty in the land, these churches are growing every day.

⁴ As these pastors are respectfully addressed.

⁵ “Breakthrough” is like what Cyril Okorochoa refers to as “Mana” in Cyril C. Okorochoa, "Religious Conversion in Africa: Its Missiological Implications," *Mission Studies* 9, 1 (1992): 168-181, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/157338392X00171>. He writes that “African peoples expect *power* in the form of *mana* to emanate from religious forms. The religiousness of any belief system is measured in terms of its *mana context* and its viability in terms of its *mana effect*. This *Mana* is not political, economic, or even occultic power. It is a “mysterious something” which is utterly desirable and yet somewhat mystifying and elusive.

Each service goes with an offering, congregants are encouraged to “sow seeds” for their “breakthrough,” and this they do in ardent hopes of a major turnaround in their finances. It is possible that some of them experience the expected “breakthrough,” however, what is more apparent is the financial prosperity of the founders of these churches. In fact, statistics indicate that the general poverty level in the country is becoming more desperate.⁶

Poverty is so pervasive and no effective church or ministry in Nigeria can ignore its effects on the citizenry. As a missionary who has worked in some of the poorest parts of the country and who is committed to Christian discipleship, my major concern, however, is that it seems like the worship of God is no more about holiness, rather, people are attending church because they want to prosper financially.

Beneath all the compelling financial empowerment messages, therefore, I desire to understand how in real life, the Fastest Growing Churches in Nigeria are intersecting/articulating and engaging with the poor, and with poverty alleviation and consequently, how effectively engaged they are with the mission of God.

Statement of Research Interest (Problem, Puzzle, Opportunity)

Problem: Relatively, Nigeria is a rich country with a GDP of \$442,980 billion,⁷ the highest in Africa. Nigeria is also Africa’s biggest oil exporter and has the largest natural gas reserves on the continent.⁸ However, over 61% of the populace live in abject poverty.⁹ The documented

⁶ “Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index (2022): United Nations Development Programme.” UNDP. Accessed May 1, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/nigeria/publications/nigeria-multidimensional-poverty-index-2022>.

⁷ “African countries with the Highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2021,” Statista, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1120999/gdp-of-african-countries-by-country/>.

⁸ “The World Bank in Nigeria,” The World Bank, Accessed December 24, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/overview>.

⁹ “Nigerians Living in Poverty Rise to Nearly 61%,” BBC News, Accessed January 1, 2023, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17015873>.

mortality rate for pregnant women is almost 35%,¹⁰ the life expectancy is below 55 years,¹¹ and the major causes of death are totally preventable. Inequality in Nigeria is extreme: a more equitable distribution of wealth could significantly increase human flourishing in the country.¹²

Interestingly, Nigeria is not only home to some of the fastest growing churches in a continent that Jenkins claims will soon be the face of Christianity;¹³ it is also home to some of the wealthiest “prosperity preachers” on the continent.¹⁴ It is common knowledge that the hope of a better life is one of the major reasons for the church growth in Nigeria. As Folarin writes, “Nigerians overwhelmingly see the main emphasis of these churches as deliverance from poverty.¹⁵ In other words, the effectiveness or strength of one’s Christianity is likely to be measured in proportion to accessibility to the good life.

In *Breaking the curse of poverty*,¹⁶ Oyedepo posits poverty as something that can be cured spiritually- a curse, a malady that God directly removes for the poor in response to their “seed sowing.” Bishop Abioye (the second in command to Bishop Oyedepo) emphatically says: “Giving is the principal key to coming out of poverty...”¹⁷ Oyedepo and Abioye are accomplished men of God in Nigeria. Are statements like theirs the controlling factor in

¹⁰ “Maternal Mortality in Nigeria,” This Day, accessed, April 14, 1 2022,

<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/09/08/maternal-mortality-in-nigeria-2/#:~:text=Latest%20statistics%20from%20the%20World,in%204900%20in%20developed%20countries> .

¹¹ “Tackling Low Life Expectancy in Nigeria,” This Day, accessed February 10, 2022,

<https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2016/07/22/tackling-low-life-expectancy-in-nigeria/>

¹² “Wealth of Five Richest Men in Nigeria Could End Extreme Poverty in Country yet 5 million Face Hunger,” Oxfam International, Accessed January 1, 2023,

<https://www.oxfam.org/es/node/10536#:~:text=The%20combined%20wealth%20of%20Nigeria's,gap%20between%20rich%20and%20poor>. This assertion from the reputable Oxfam group may seem to be a hyperbole, considering the systemic nature of poverty in the country, since poverty alleviation is not simply a distribution of money from the wealthy to the poor. However, the import here is the gap between the rich and the poor and how much could be done in poverty alleviation with a more equitable distribution of wealth.

¹³ Philip Jenkins, “*The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*” (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2011), 2.

¹⁴ “Top 15 Richest Pastors in the World and their Net Worth,” Andreas Kamasah, accessed October 21, 2022, <https://www.pulse.com.gh/filla/top-15-richest-pastors-in-the-world-and-their-net-worth/lwj95ky>.

¹⁵ George O. Folarin, “How Valid are the Emerging Responses from Three Selected Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria to Poverty,” *CyberJournal for Pentecostal - Charismatic Research* (2012): 147-157.

¹⁶ The entire message is available via this link: <https://youtu.be/VTWtkcqIrHE>.

¹⁷ www.davidabioye.org – He further says: Giving destroys poverty mentality and instills superiority mentality over materials. Giving puts you in control of things while keeping puts you under control of things. Give to live, give to live abundantly, give to keep giving, give your way out of penury. The greatest message to the poor is, give. The best time to give is when what you have is insufficient. Place it in the hand of the all sufficient God.

Nigeria's Fastest Growing Churches' intersection with the poor or is there more to such statements than meets the eye?

Puzzle: When scholars write about the church that is growing in Nigeria, it is in reference to this category of churches - the FGCs, which as the name implies are literally bursting at their seams with devotees and hence, seeming financial prosperity especially for the “men of God.” For instance, Oyedepo owns four state-of-the-art jets and a fleet of luxury cars like the Rolls Royce phantom.¹⁸ While the masses are adamant in their commitment to these men of God and their belief and hopes that they also will ultimately “make it” (become rich), statistics do not indicate a positive change in their financial state.

Considering the above, it is not out of the question to ponder and wonder how these Fastest Growing Churches are intersecting with the issue of poverty without losing the trust of the poor, even when the promised liberation from the pangs of poverty does not materialize.

Opportunity: There are many suggestions as to how the FGCs are leveraging poverty as an opportunity for church growth in Nigeria. I therefore want to investigate how these churches intersect with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation. My desire is to find out how the FGCs understand poverty, what they understand is their roles and responsibilities in alleviating it, and how they are carrying out those roles and responsibilities. The FGC's manner of intersection with poverty alleviation will also help in identifying the type of churches that are growing in Nigeria, vis-à-vis her expected involvement in the *missio Dei*.

A Brief Historical Background

By the late 19th century, Christianity was already firmly entrenched in southern Nigeria,¹⁹ however, the practice thereof was fraught with many challenges. A major problem

¹⁸ “15 Richest Pastors in Nigeria, their Net worth and Car Collections,” Answers Africa, accessed on January 1, 2023, <https://answersafrica.com/15-richest-pastors-in-nigeria-their-net-worths-and-car-collections.html>.

¹⁹ “The People of Nigeria, Religion,” accessed May 7, 2022, http://www.countriesquest.com/africa/nigeria/the_people_of_nigeria/religion.htm.

was that Nigerians could not identify practically with the brand of Christianity introduced by the missionaries. Many wondered if Christianity was not just “an effective tool of imperialism,”²⁰ to be yielded to, in order to gain the favor of the new authority. Those who did not need that favor vehemently opposed the “strange” ways of the “strange people,” but many of those who did, pretentiously yielded.²¹ This state of the church set off a tradition of nominalism in Nigeria, with only a few adherents understanding and internalizing the gospel message, while many as earlier stated, pretended along or were sincerely inquisitive.²²

Although, most of the missionaries did not enculturate the gospel message, the Bible was translated into some key tribal languages and educated Africans were taught to read it.²³ As Africans began to read the Bible in their languages, indigenous revival ensued, but it was not until God sent two other missionaries into Nigeria, that the explosion of Pentecostalism as we see it today began to happen: Bill Roberts, the Scripture Union (S.U.) travelling secretary,²⁴ and another British missionary, Pa S.G. Elton.²⁵

Picture I: Pa S.G Elton²⁶



²⁰ Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 1-2.

²¹ Benjamin Steward, *Historical Background of Churches in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Interwale Press and Book Stores Ltd., 1981), 17.

²² Steward, *Historical Background of Churches in Nigeria*, 17.

²³ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Co., 2003), 24.

²⁴ Abodunde, *Messenger: Sydney Elton and the Making of Pentecostalism in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Pierce Watershed, 2018). Abodunde chronicles the life and times of Pa S. G. Elton in this inspiring volume.

²⁵ Abodunde, *Messenger*, 90.

²⁶ Boluwatife Oyediran, “S. G. Elton: The Untold Story of a Mandate for the Early Christian Church of Nigeria,” Medium, December 15, 2021, accessed April, 11, 2023, <https://medium.com/crosswatch-review/s-g-elton-the-untold-story-of-a-renegades-mandate-for-the-early-christian-church-of-nigeria-6618342081f9>.

Pa Elton - The Establishment of the Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria²⁷

Olugu a Nigerian writer and one of Pa Elton’s disciples writes:

Pa Elton—as he was fondly addressed—had arrived in Nigeria in 1937 with a clear mandate to raise a new breed of leadership in the Nigerian Church, who, powered by the Holy Spirit, will take the message of God’s kingdom...to the very ends of the earth. He lived in Ilesa (about 30km from Ile-Ife) ... He is undoubtedly the father of the Pentecostal Revival Movement in Nigeria.²⁸

Before then, charismatic Christianity was a rarity that was reserved for the uneducated or people with problems and illnesses that were considered abnormal and were looking for solutions. Nominalism and the secret practice of African Traditional Religion (ATR) was the norm. Pa Elton confronted ATR at its roots and gave clear definitions of what it meant to be a Christian as he disciplined young college undergraduates.²⁹ Elton provided the desperately needed balance between biblical, cultural, and intellectual knowledge. Elton delivered a gospel message that Nigerians could identify with. Before long, “born-again” Christians began to emerge and be highly respected in Nigeria.^{30,31} Because their lives showed this balance; their numbers also began to grow exponentially.

Olugu continues: “In Ile-Ife, he [Elton] found a potent platform to impact and disciple young men and women who continue to be in the forefront of genuine Pentecostal revival and missionary enterprise in Nigeria.”³² There is hardly any significant name in the frontiers of the

²⁷ “Pa Sydney Elton and the Prophetic Destiny of Nigeria,” Sunday Adelaja, Church Times Nigeria, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://churchtimesnigeria.net/pa-elton-sydney-prophetic-nigeria/>.

²⁸ “There Was A Man, S. G. Elton: There Is A Church Uncertain Of Her True Identity And Mandate,” Olugu Orji Mnia | Sahara Reporters, accessed May 7, 2022, <https://saharareporters.com/2014/02/12/there-was-man-s-g-elton-there-church-uncertain-her-true-identity-and-mandate-olugu-olugu>.

²⁹ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 89.

³⁰ “There Was A Man, S. G. Elton: There Is A Church Uncertain Of Her True Identity And Mandate.” Olugu goes further to explain how Pa Elton’s influence continues into all facets of the society till date: “In academia as in the corporate world are men and women who, as direct or indirect beneficiaries of Pa Elton’s ministry, continue to hold the fort; shining the light in a world increasingly under threat of darkness. There are many more in public service who by their exemplary commitment and conduct not only amplify the merits of union with Christ, but also point to the good seed faithfully planted by one British many years back. Current Minister of Agriculture, Akinwumi Adesina operates with an evangelical zeal and unwavering focus that one can now properly place. His path once crossed with Pa Elton’s.”

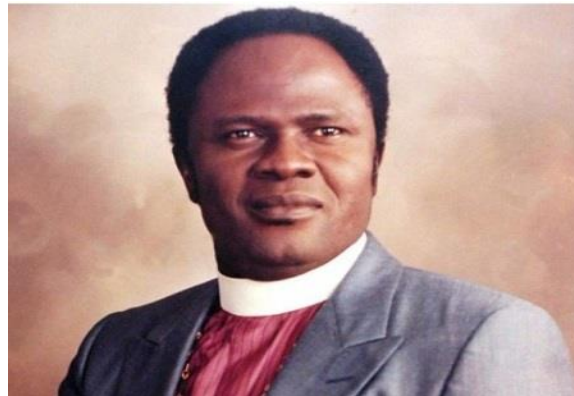
³¹ Abobunde, *Messenger*, 4-6.

³² “There Was A Man, S. G. Elton: There Is A Church Uncertain Of Her True Identity And Mandate.”

“born-again” movement in Nigeria that was not influenced either directly or indirectly by the ministry of Pa Elton.³³ At the top of this list would be the late Archbishop Benson Idahosa who was anointed by Pa Elton.³⁴ Elton later introduced Idahosa to Gordon and Freda Lindsay who sponsored him to attend Christ for the Nations Bible Institute in Dallas, Texas, United States. However, Idahosa left before completing the course because, as Ruthanne Garlock, his biographer said, the young man had ‘fire in his bones’ for soul winning.³⁵ Idahosa came back to the Church of God Mission, which he had earlier founded, and continued his ministry without completing his theological training.³⁶

The Birth of a New Message

Picture II: Benson Idahosa³⁷



³³ “S. G. Elton: The Untold Story of a Mandate for the Early Christian Church of Nigeria.” Here, Oyediran writes: Through the 70s, and until his death in 1987, Elton mentored several young men who eventually turned out to be the leading figures of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements of Christianity in Nigeria. Some of those men who were influenced by his ministry—some meeting and hearing him once or a couple of times—were Archbishop Benson Idahosa, Pastor Enoch Adeboye (who visited him at Ilesha every fifty days while he was a lecturer of Mathematics at the University of Ilorin), Brother Gbile Akanni (another frequent visitor at his place), Bishop David Oyedepo, Bishop Francis Wale Oke, Pastor Williams Folorunsho Kumuyi, Dr. Chris Oyakhilome, Bishop Dr Paul Nwachukwu, Pastor Tunde Adesida, Pastor Olubi Johnson, Engr Steve Olumuyiwa, Rev Dr. Mike Oye, Apostle Geoffrey Numbere, and several others, many of whom are scattered in several sectors of professional businesses.

³⁴ Ruthanne Garlock, *Fire in his Bones: The Story of Benson Idahosa* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1981), 95-104.

³⁵ Ruthanne Garlock, *Fire in his Bones*, 95-104.

³⁶ Ruthanne Garlock, *Fire in his Bones*, 95-104. See also: Pa Elton and His wife interviewed by Archbishop Benson Idahosa, LinusBaka TV. “Pa Elton and His Wife Interviewed by Archbishop Benson Idahosa,” October 4, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Y_iG545_Gc.

³⁷ Archbishop Benson Andrew Idahosa [Miracles, life, Career, family, Death], accessed 05/07/2023, <https://explain.com.ng/topic/archbishop-benson-andrew-idahosa-miracles-life-career-family-death/>.

The born-again movement in Nigeria had managed to maintain theological unity under the leadership of Pa Elton despite the fragmented nature of the church and the country. Since Pa Elton did not plant churches, he spent his time discipling young people across all the denominations; therefore, there was a sense of cohesion within the movement.

When Benson Idahosa came back from the United States, he introduced a new message of prosperity, which Ogbu Kalu describes, “sounded like music in the ears of those who had just come out of the civil war.”³⁸ Israel Olofinjana echoed Kalu by saying, “Through his personal experience of poverty, the effects of the Civil War riots on Nigeria, the global recession that deflated the Nigerian economy and the influence of American evangelists, Idahosa started to articulate the Prosperity Gospel making him a pioneer in Nigeria and other African countries.”³⁹ Benson Idahosa has, therefore, been described by some scholars such as Israel Olofinjana as the father of Nigerian Prosperity Preaching in Africa.”⁴⁰

Idahosa began to influence thousands of young preachers from all over Africa who imbibed and went on to reproduce his ideals; and with a Bible college that had American financial support, that was very easy. Many of today’s African Pentecostal ministers can trace their roots directly or indirectly back to Idahosa.⁴¹ Chief among them is Bishop David Oyedepo.⁴²

In 1973 Idahosa claimed he received this message from God:

The world and its people are complaining daily of poverty and want. I have given you the mouth of miracles and blessings to my people. I have asked the cashiers of heaven to be on duty as long as you have a need for my own honor and glory. I shall supply all your needs according to

³⁸ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 91.

³⁹ “Benson Andrew Idahosa (1938-1998): Father of Nigerian Pentecostalism,” Israel Olofinjana, accessed May 8, 2014, <https://israelolofinjana.wordpress.com/2012/03/12/benson-andrew-idahosa-1938-1998-father-of-nigerian-pentecostalism/>.

⁴⁰ “Benson Andrew Idahosa (1938-1998): Father of Nigerian Pentecostalism.”

⁴¹ J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, “Your Miracle is on the Way,” *Oral Roberts and Mediated Pentecostalism in Africa, Spiritus*, vol. 3 no. 1, 2018): 14. In this Article, Asamoah-Gyadu lists some of those influenced by Archbishop Idahosa to include: Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams, the pioneering founder of a charismatic church in Ghana; Bishop James Saah, also of Action Chapel International; Bishop Charles Agyinasare, founder and leader of Perez Chapel International; and Christina Doe Tetteh, founder, and leader of Solid Rock Chapel International.

⁴² “S. G. Elton: The Untold Story of a Mandate for the Early Christian Church of Nigeria.” See also, “Benson Andrew Idahosa (1938-1998): Father of Nigerian Pentecostalism.”

my riches in glory (Philippians 4:19). Begin to bless your people with all blessing; ask them to ask me anything they need, and I shall provide it for them. If only they will honor me with their wealth, I shall make them to be prosperous in all areas of their lives. I shall bless your partners and co-workers. Wake up, go to the Church in the morning, and tell them poverty died last night. What you bless on earth is blessed in heaven. Bless my people, says the Lord, who came to give the good life of abundance.⁴³

The above statement became the theme and color of Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

With the prevalent political and socio-economic issues at that time, only a few people would refuse to go to church. So, people trooped into churches, not necessarily because they had a change of heart or were seeking God, but because they wanted to say, “goodbye to poverty.” There were some genuine conversions, and many authentic miracles too, but the end of it all became the quest for a better self, as opposed to Pa Elton’s rigorous focus on discipleship.

Churches grew sporadically but the quality of Christianity in the nation dropped drastically.^{44 45} In reference to Nigeria, Biwul states it aptly:

The irony however, is that despite her large and colourful presence in the religious arena, the quality of her Christian spirituality is low. It is quite a paradox that “Nigeria, one of the most religious countries in the world, is also voted one of the most corrupt, crises-prone nations on earth.” ***The quality of her spirituality does not match the quantity of her Christianity.*** The influence and impact of Christian presence in her society is minimal vis-à-vis the plethora and paraphernalia of her religiosity.⁴⁶

In addition, because the Elton group did not plant churches, the Idahosa company, with their theological school and churches became the face of Christianity in the country.⁴⁷ The

⁴³ “Benson Andrew Idahosa (1938-1998): Father of Nigerian Pentecostalism.”

⁴⁴ Femi Bitrus Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel: A pilgrim's Reflections on Contemporary Trends in Christianity*, (Hippo Books, Zondervan, 2011), 33-39.

⁴⁵ In his book about Nigeria, Daniel Jordan Smith articulates the tension and the dulling of conscience that congregants in some of these churches face. He says, “The large numbers of middle-class and elite Nigerians who belong to these prosperity churches are able to justify their wealth and success in religious language, even though many have clearly acquired their wealth through various mechanisms of corruption.” See Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption - Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁴⁶ Joel Kamsen Tihitshak Biwul, “Preaching Biblically in the Prosperity Gospel Context,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 2013: 121-135.

⁴⁷ As evidenced by the fastest growing Nigerian churches and their link to Idahosa.

Idahosa company affected not just the Pentecostal stream of Christianity but also other streams, including those of the *Aladura*,^{48 49} roots and even the mainline churches. Some of the churches impacted by the teachings of the late Idahosa are among the fastest growing in Nigerian today.⁵⁰

Explaining the term ‘Fastest Growing Churches’ (FGC)

I adopted the term, “Fastest Growing Churches” on the grounds of sensitivity. My interest is to investigate the dynamics of church growth and poverty alleviation without bias. Whereas one could easily call these FGCs prosperity churches, that might not be a label they are comfortable with. They however are proud to identify as “fastest growing churches.”⁵¹ Moreso, a simple Google search of the fastest growing churches in Nigeria would reveal that the two churches used for the study fall into the group.⁵²

The use of the term “Fastest Growing Churches” does not mean that these churches have the most members. The mainline churches like the Anglican and Catholic denominations are more populated. They are called “fastest growing” because of the rate of growth and expansion of their denomination from their inception till date. For this research, I was interested in where the crowd was headed each Sunday, and it was to these two denominations, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, and the Living Faith Church.⁵³

⁴⁸ J.D.Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*. London: Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1968, 80-81.

⁴⁹ S. I.Fabarebo, "Study of the Prayers of Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 12, no. 2018, 1 .

⁵⁰ Jegede Oyebo Paul, *Evangelism and the Rise of Pentecostalism in Nigeria*. Federal University of Kashere, Gombe State, 7, accessed April 15, <https://foa.nou.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EVANGELISM-AND-THE-RISE-OF-PENTECOSTALISM-IN-NIGERIA.pdf>

⁵¹ Philipp Öhlmann, Marie-Luise Frost, Wilhelm Gräb, “Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development,10, <https://www.rcsd.hu-berlin.de/de/publikationen/pdf-dateien/oehlmann-frost-graeb-2021-potentials-african.pdf/view>.

⁵² Roots and Goals: Nigeria's Redeemed Christian Church of God,” Bregtje Van der Haak, Richard Vijgen, Pulitzer Center, accessed January 6, 2023, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/roots-and-goals-nigerias-redeemed-christian-church-god>

⁵³ “List of Churches in Nigeria,” Wikipedia Contributors, accessed May 3, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_churches_in_Nigeria.

Introducing the Redeemed Christian Church of God

The Redeemed Christian Church of God was founded by Pa Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi (1909- 1980) in 1952. His parents who hailed from Ondo state, Nigeria were Ogun (the iron god) worshippers. They did not send him to school but apprenticed him to a local blacksmith from where he qualified as a professional blacksmith. Like his contemporaries, he struggled to make ends meet, and would intermittently augment his profession with farming which was the mainstay of the local economy.⁵⁴

However, it was clear from an early age that Akindayomi was a different child. It was said that he constantly experienced miraculous healing, even from ailments that defied traditional medicine. Akindayomi got baptized in the Anglican church at the age of 18, but he later joined the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) church in his search for spiritual fulfillment.

The C&S church is considered a syncretic church.⁵⁵ People go to such churches to find solutions to their problems, especially when such problems are perceived as spiritual. In fact, there is a saying in the southeast of Nigeria, *manu ejila ekpela Cherubim na anya oma*. This translates to: “People do not attend C&S under normal conditions. They must have extenuating circumstances that drive them to the church.” However, Akindayomi would say of the church,

At that time, the Cherubim and Seraphim church was very good since they stood on the truth to the extent that they did not add to or subtract anything from the word of God. The Cherubim and Seraphim Society did not take any medications. If somebody was ill, he or she would be prayed for, and the Lord would hear, and the person would be healed.⁵⁶

Akindayomi, out of belief in the C&S devoted himself wholly to the church, it was there that he later heard the call of God into ministry in 1940. At about this time, he married Esther, and their marriage was solemnized in the C&S church. In preparation for the ministry, Josiah

⁵⁴ Olufunke Adeboye, “Origin and Expansion of the Redeemed Christian Church of God,” in M. Faseke, *Enoch Adejare Adeboye @ 70: The Story Behind the Glory*, 53-85, (Lagos: CIBN Press, 2020), 53-58.

⁵⁵ Fabarebo, S.I. “African Body Adorned in Christian Garb: A Study of the Prayers of Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria.” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 12, no. 1 (2018): 57, accessed April 15, 2023. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A559893744/AONE?u=anon~203d0299&sid=googleScholar&xid=44f62602>.

⁵⁶ E. A. Adeboye, *This is my Story: A Posthumous Autobiography of Reverend Josiah O. Akindayomi Founder of the Redeemed Christian Church of God with Contributions from his Children*, (Ikeja: Nigeria, Optimum, 2010), 4.

relinquished his job to give himself to regular praying and fasting and so he could not provide for his family. Esther did everything she could to keep the family going, but they were poor. The biographer would say that “This personal conviction of poverty as a form of consecration was later reflected in the early days of the RCCG.”⁵⁷

In 1951, Josiah left the C&S church because of the growing tension with the church authorities. Together with others, they had formed the Ogo-Oluwa (Glory of God) society which was an independent prayer group. It was this group that later metamorphosed into the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

According to Akindayomi, this is how the Redeemed Christian Church of God got its name. “In 1956, I went to Osogbo, and while I was praying the Lord revealed to me that the name of the church was to be “Redeemed Christian Church of God” ... From that day, we have been bearing the name God Himself gave this church.”⁵⁸

Picture III: Josiah Akindayomi⁵⁹



Pa Josiah Akindayomi

Picture IV: Esther and Josiah Akindayomi⁶⁰



⁵⁷ Adeboye, “Origin and Expansion of the Redeemed Christian Church of God.”

⁵⁸ Adeboye, *This is my Story*, 45.

⁵⁹ Akindayomi, Josiah Olufemi, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://dacb.org/stories/nigeria/akindayomi-josiah/>.

⁶⁰ Sesan Olasupo, The Story Of Redeemed Christian Church, Late Founder Pa Josiah Akindayomi's & Pastor Adeboye, accessed, December 9, 2022, accessed <http://www.amazingstoriesaroundtheworld.com/2014/12/the-story-of-redeemed-christian-church.html>.

Olufunke Adeboye, a Nigerian scholar has categorized the growth of the Redeemed Christian church of God into four stages.⁶¹ These stages are explained below.

1. The Foundation Years, 1952 – 1980

At those beginnings, the doctrines of the RCCG combined both the *Aladura*⁶² and the Pentecostal features. Akindayomi died in 1980, by which time the RCCG had about forty branches, mostly in southwestern Nigeria. The church was yet to spread into the eastern and northern parts of the country.

The church was plagued with two problems in this first phase of its development. One was the poverty of its members which made the church poorly funded. The second problem was the frequent breakaway of members to form other groups and churches as was common amongst Pentecostals.⁶³

2. The Consolidation Years, 1981 – 1989:

Adeboye took over after the death of Akindayomi and began to consolidate the foundations laid by the latter. This was a significant time in the life of the RCCG as Adeboye, an intellectual don from one of the Nigerian universities intentionally situated the church within the prevailing Pentecostal milieu in Nigeria.

3. The Explosion Years, 1989-2009:

Adeboye's intentionality and visionary leadership began to pay off during this period as he began to clearly define the goal and the mission of the church. The church grew in leaps and bounds and spread to other parts of Nigeria.

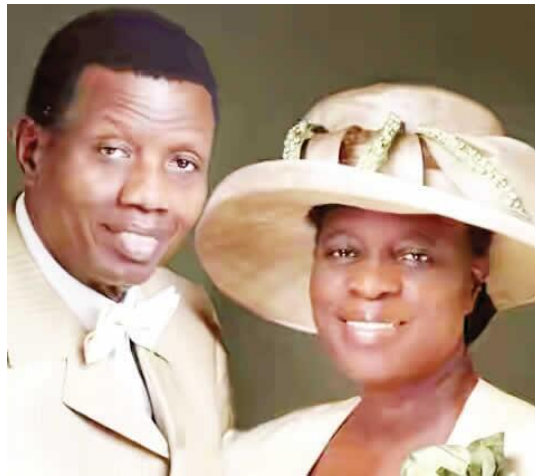
⁶¹ Adeboye, *Origin and Expansion of the Redeemed Christian Church of God*, 53-85.

⁶² Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, 80-81.
Adeboye, *This is my Story*, 45.

4. Pursuing Global Relevance: Direct Engagement with International Issues, 2009 till Date

From 2009 till date, Adeboye and the RCCG have been engaging freely with the global world with growing relevance. RCCG is presently in 197 countries and territories, with over nine million members, and fifty thousand parishes worldwide.⁶⁴

Picture V: Enoch and Foluke Adejare Adeboye⁶⁵



Enoch Adejare Adeboye was born on 2 March 1942 to a humble family in Ifewara, near Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. He began his secondary education at Ilesha Grammar School Ilesha Osun State in 1956. His education was almost curtailed by lack of funds as Adeboye recalls, “for the first seventeen years of my life, I never had to wear shoes.” However, as God would have it, he survived against all odds and managed to graduate from the University, at the age of 25.⁶⁶

Adeboye started his college degree program at the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN) in Nsukka, before the start of the Nigeria’s civil war. His academic progress was

⁶⁴ RCCG, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://www.rccg.org/>.

⁶⁵ “Pastor Adeboye reveals how Mathematics has kept his marriage for 47 years,” Ameh Comrade Godwin, Daily Post, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://dailypost.ng/2015/02/22/pastor-adeboye-reveals-mathematics-kept-marriage-47-years/?amp=1>.

⁶⁶ Meet 7 Popular Nigerian Pastors Who Have Private Jets (Photos), Goddy Elliot, Opera News, <https://ng.opera.news/ng/en/religion/0b86af7a9135b9a9139d8274796ace6a>.

truncated by the war and he eventually completed his degree at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics in 1967. That same year, he married Foluke Adenike. They have four children: Adeolu Adeboye, Bolu Adubi (née Adeboye), Dare Adeboye and 'Leke Adeboye. In 1969, Adeboye obtained a Master's degree in Hydrodynamics from the University of Lagos and a Ph.D. in Applied Mathematics from the same university in 1975⁶⁷

Adeboye encountered the RCCG while seeking a solution to the problems he and his wife had regarding childbirth. Foluke had had recurrent caesarian sections. Doctors had diagnosed that due to the formation of her pelvic bones, it would be impossible to deliver a baby naturally. She already had two children through caesarian section and had been advised against having more. They wanted more children and were therefore looking for a higher intervention. His uncle invited him to the RCCG, and he became enamored by the grace of God upon the founder and his lieutenants despite their lack of formal education.⁶⁸

Adeboye surrendered to Christ on the 29th of July 1973, and began serving as an interpreter for the church before he was ordained a pastor by Pa. Josiah Akindayomi in 1975. He became the General Overseer of the church in 1981 and has since taken the church from its regional presence to the ends of the earth. Adeboye has been recognized and honored nationally and globally as an icon and a role model.⁶⁹

Adeboye is blessed with several grandchildren from his four children. Pastor Adeboye's family recently suffered the loss of his son Pastor 'Dare Adeboye on 4 May 2021, who died at the age of 42.⁷⁰ 'Dare was the first child born without a caesarian section. His

⁶⁷ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enoch_Adeboye#/media/File:Eaa1.jpg n.d.).

⁶⁸ How Adeboye became RCCG's General Overseer, Premium Times, accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/442851-how-adeboye-became-rccgs-general-overseer.html?tztc=1>.

⁶⁹ Adeboye, "Origin and Expansion of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, 53-58.

⁷⁰ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enoch_Adeboye#/media/File:Eaa1.jpg n.d.)

birth was thus significant, and so his death was extraordinarily painful. Adeboye celebrated his 80th birthday in 2022.⁷¹

Picture VI: Bishop David and Mrs. Faith Oyedepo⁷²



Introducing Bishop David Oyedepo and The Living Faith Church

Bishop David Oyedepo is the president and founder of the Living Faith church worldwide aka Winners' Chapel, the owner of the Faith Tabernacle Church at Ota, Ogun State, and the leading prosperity preacher in Nigeria and possibly Africa. Bishop David Oyedepo was born on September 27th, 1954, in Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria. He is a native of Omu-Aran, Irepodun Local Govt. Area of Kwara State, of Nigeria. David Oyedepo was raised in a hybrid religious family.

Bishop Oyedepo's father was a Muslim healer, and the mother, Dorcas by name, was a member of the Holy Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S).⁷³ David Oyedepo says he was raised by his grandmother in Osogbo and claims to have learned the virtues of the Christian life through early morning prayers which they both attended. He also says he

⁷¹ Pastor Adeboye's Miracle" Son, Dare, Dies at 42, Ripples Nigeria, accessed, May 3, 2023, <https://www.ripplesnigeria.com/pastor-adeboyes-miracle-son-dare-dies-at-42/#:~:text=Ripples%20Nigeria%20gathered%20that%20Dare,was%20based%20with%20his%20family.>

⁷² David Oyedepo, Wikipedia contributors, accessed May 5, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Oyedepo.

⁷³ "Bishop Oyedepo Biography: How Old is the Pastor and When did He Start His Ministry?" Chucks Obiora, Buzz Nigeria, accessed April 15, 2023. <https://buzznigeria.com/bishop-david-oyedepo/>

learned the importance of tithing from her.⁷⁴ Even though he hardly mentions it, it is obvious that Oyedepo grew up in poverty.

Oyedepo claims God encountered him in a vision in 1981 saying: “Now the hour has come to liberate the world from all oppressions of the devil, through the preaching of the Word of faith; and I am sending you to undertake this task.”⁷⁵ He later recounts that God spoke to him again, and specifically commanded him to “go and make my people rich.”⁷⁶ The church started in 1983, now has over oversees over 21,000 churches across Nigeria and several thousand across six major continents of the world.⁷⁷

In August 1982, Oyedepo married Florence Abiola Akano (now known as Faith Oyedepo). They have four children together (David Jr, Isaac, Love and Joyce). David Oyedepo Jr and Isaac Oyedepo were ordained as Pastors in May 2007 by Kenneth Copeland. David Oyedepo Jr formerly pastored the London Branch of the Church with his wife Kemi, but is now the resident pastor of Faith Tabernacle in Ota, while Isaac Oyedepo pastors Winners' Chapel International Mitchellville, Maryland, in the United States of America with his wife Ayomitide. His first daughter Love is married to Stephen Ogah, who also pastors in Winners' Chapel. Joyce Priscilla is the last child and second daughter; she married Abimbola Abodunrin in 2020.⁷⁸

The Oyedepos own four private jets and manage the largest church auditorium in the world with a sitting capacity of over 50,000, holding four services every Sunday at their headquarters.⁷⁹ The ministry also has diversified to owning several primary and secondary

⁷⁴ “Biography of Bishop David Oyedepo,” Christian Diet, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://christiandiet.com.ng/bishop-david-oyedepo-biography-ministry-lessons-from-his-life>.

⁷⁵ Preaching The Word of Faith | Bishop David Oyedepo

⁷⁶ David Oyedepo, *Born to Win: Breaking Financial Hardship*, (Dominion Publishing House, 1995), 40.

⁷⁷ Bishop David O Oyedepo, Founder & President, Living Faith Church Worldwide, Living Faith Worldwide International, accessed May 3, 2023, <https://faithtabernacle.org.ng/about>.

⁷⁸ “Biography of Bishop David Oyedepo.”

⁷⁹ Oyedepo, “Founder & President.”

schools as well as two universities. Oyedepo's current net worth is estimated to be about a hundred and fifty million dollars.⁸⁰

Today, the Winners' chapel is involved in the construction of the historic 100,000-seater stadium-like sanctuary, named the ARK, whose foundation was laid on March 25, 2021. The project is expected to be completed before the end of 2024.⁸¹

Layout and Organization of the Chapters

I have approached the study in seven parts. The first part is this introduction, where I recall how the quest for this study began in a conversation with my cousin. This was followed by my statement of research interest. For clarity, I have added a brief historical background of the Nigerian church to show the previous changes in Christian expressions that have led to where we currently are. I highlighted the crucial contribution of Pa Elton to the establishment of the Pentecostal movement in Nigeria. I also explained the term "Fastest Growing Church" (FGC) and the reason for adopting the term. I then introduced the churches of my focus – The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and the Living Faith Church and their leaders Pastor Adeboye and Bishop David Oyedepo.

The second chapter is the literature review. In this chapter, I draw from standard Christian development literature to articulate the expected intersection between church growth and poverty and have from there elicited possible expectations for the growing Nigerian church. The literature chosen, seek to explain the cause and cure of global poverty, with special reference to Africa and Nigeria in particular. In addition, I have also interacted with works that specifically enunciate the poverty alleviation efforts of the two representative churches.

⁸⁰ Hendy, Iheoma, *Bishop Oyedepo net worth, sources and the luxury house he lives in*. July 16. <https://buzznigeria.com/david-oyedepo-worlds-richest-pastor/>.

⁸¹ Oyedepo, "Founder & President."

The Methodology of the study is articulated in the third chapter. Here, I discussed how the data for the study was collected with utmost care and reflexivity. I also commented on some of the challenges I encountered during the data collection processes.

Chapter Four is focused on the lived experiences of the poor. I discuss points of intersection of the FGCs and the poor, specifically focusing on how the FGCs relate with the poor and vice versa. This is to highlight the dynamics and the effects of the disposition and behavioral attitudes between the FGCs and the poor in their everyday interaction. I argue that while the FGCs self-report all the wonderful things they do to help the poor, the picture from the perspective of the poor is nuanced with the majority of those surveyed saying that in terms of relationship, the FGCs do not provide an atmosphere where the dignity of the poor is respected and where their aspirations as human beings can be fulfilled.

The poor yet remain in these churches because they identify with or benefit from certain aspects of the FGC's organization. There are, however, a few adherents who not only identify with all aspects of the FGCs, but also believe that the FGCs are doing their best for the poor.

Chapter Five discusses the views that the members of the FGCs hold regarding the causes and subsequently the cure for poverty in the Nigerian context. It also includes the responses of the wider Christian community and the rest of society to these claims. I argue in this chapter that the FGCs understanding of the causes and cures of poverty and their general articulation of poverty as a human condition is convoluted and might not only be seen to constitute a problem to biblical poverty alleviation, but they could also be said to contribute to poverty in Nigeria.

Chapter Six is an organizational analysis of the poverty alleviation structures and efforts of the FGCs. The analysis starts from their mission statements and explores the place of poverty alleviation in the agenda of the FGCs. The conclusion is that though there are some

efforts to the effect, poverty alleviation is not the priority of Nigeria's Fastest Growing Churches.

The study ends with the Missiological Implications in Chapter Seven. Here, I draw together the conclusions from the study and lay out the implications for the global church and for the Nigerian society.

I conclude by arguing that the FGCs' intersection with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation has not had a positive impact on the spread of the gospel and on the goal of the *missio Dei* in general, which is the transformation of humans into the image of Jesus. Contrariwise, the expected visible impacts of church growth are lacking in society, while poverty and crime grow alongside the church.

The FGCs present poverty alleviation as a Christian responsibility and as something they want to do, but my empirical analysis shows that poverty alleviation is not central to the life of the FGCs. I offer a way forward from these realities that is based on the words of Jesus and from the life of John Wesley, a man who shares a similar background with the studied FGC leaders.

I concluded the chapter by reflecting on the nature of the churches growing in Nigeria and why others may need to take a second look before making conclusions on the celebrated growth.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction:

I go into this study with the understanding that although “Christianity” and “poverty” are well-known terms, what these terms entail may differ from one context to another. It may therefore be crucial to clarify what these terms imply in the contexts where they are used. As a result, I have chosen literature that seek to explain the causes, consequences, and cures of poverty with special reference to Africa and specifically to Nigeria. I have also drawn from standard Christian development literature to articulate the expected intersection between church growth and poverty and have from there elicited conclusions for the Nigerian clime where the church is said to be growing.

FGC is not a generic term; it seeks to describe our country’s church growth phenomenon. Even though the church is said to be growing in Nigeria, it is not every type of church that is growing. Asides from being indigenous and independent (many times presided over by a single founder), the common thread that runs through these churches is their inclination towards prosperity preaching. Bishop Oyedepo is the president/founder of one of the foremost of this category. I have therefore used his writings to explain some of the general perceptions the FGCs have of the poor, poverty, and poverty alleviation.

I have put these views in conversation with a few prominent scholars, some of whom have empathetically interpreted them as relevantly contextual while others have insistently pushed back and even condemned them as not Christian.

The poverty alleviation ideals of these FGCs are a recent development, different from how it was at the onset of Christianity in Nigeria. A Nigerian author explains how white missionaries who brought Christianity to the country intersected with poverty at the onset. Yet another Nigerian scholar elaborates on the possibilities of an indigenously innovative poverty alleviation strategy.

While most of the authors theorize, generalize, and project, my interest is in engagement with the present: I find it a misnomer for the church and poverty to be growing together. None of these authors clearly articulate the correlation between our church growth and the ever-present issue of poverty. They have told us of what it was, what it should be, what it could be, but hardly how it presently is. Investigating how these relatively new Fastest Growing Churches intersect with the poor, with poverty, and with poverty alleviation will enable me to make conclusions on the present that has relevance for now and the future.

The Nature of African Poverty

The African Poor by John Iliffe⁸² is an attempt to understand and quantify the history of poverty in Africa by comparing it with the already understood indices of poverty in other continents, especially medieval Europe. By those measurements, Iliffe argues that there has always been poverty in Africa. However, since it is a land-rich economy, the extremely poor were those who were incapacitated for labor and bereft of support, and so could not fend for themselves. Only recently did Africa transition to a land-scarce economy leading to the emergence of a new poverty, where able-bodied people are excluded from access to productive resources as it is further complicated today by poor governance.

Iliffe identifies two levels of poverty in Africa: the poor - those who constantly struggle to make ends meet, which he says will include most of the people, and the destitute - those who have failed in that struggle for survival. He also distinguishes between two types of poverty, structural and conjunctural poverty. He defines structural poverty as “the long-term poverty of individuals due to their personal or social circumstances.”⁸³ He further explains that the characteristics of structural poverty in Africa differs from societies like Europe and Asia where land is scarce.⁸⁴

⁸² John Iliffe, *The African Poor: A history*. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University, 1987), 4.

⁸³ Iliffe, *The African Poor*, 4.

⁸⁴ Iliffe, *The African Poor*, 4.

Iiffe defines conjunctural poverty as “a temporary poverty which befalls ordinarily self-sufficient people as a result of crisis.”⁸⁵ Iiffe argues that conjunctural poverty has exhibited greater change than structural poverty in Africa. He writes that in precolonial Africa, as in Europe until the seventeenth century, the chief cause of conjunctural poverty was climatic and political insecurity which mostly resulted in mass fatalities from food shortages and exclusion from the scarce resources. Conjunctural poverty remains but the cause keeps changing.⁸⁶

While Iiffe establishes the endemic nature of poverty in Africa, In *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, Paul Collier does not only give a diagnosis for the causes of poverty, he also gives definite prescription for poverty alleviation. Collier identifies four main reasons why countries are poor. These are the result of conflict, lack of natural resources, being a landlocked country, and bad governance.⁸⁷ His prescription indicates that these bottom billion countries cannot really help themselves. Collier argues that poverty alleviation for these countries will be at the mercy of the strongest industrialized countries, who must enact a plan to help with international policies and standards if there will be any headway.⁸⁸

Apart from not being a land-locked country, Nigeria is implicated in all the other three causes of poverty mentioned by Collier. Collier posits that there is the need for a unity of purpose, a shared vision, a change in the collective thinking, that poverty alleviation will not just result from aid from developed countries but from the wider electorates whose views shape what is possible.⁸⁹ Collier’s conclusion, therefore, is that the solution to Africa’s poverty lies at the mercy of the West and the re-imagination of the electorate. He says:

⁸⁵ Iiffe, *The African Poor*, 4.

⁸⁶ Iiffe, *The African Poor*, 6.

⁸⁷ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion - Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

⁸⁸ Collier, *The Bottom Billion*, 183- 190.

⁸⁹ Collier, *The Bottom Billion*, 190-2.

“Without an informed electorate, politicians will continue to use the bottom billion merely for photo opportunities, rather than promoting real transformation.”⁹⁰

While Collier does not directly address the church in his book, his diagnosis can help shape an effective intersection between the church and poverty alleviation in Nigeria. For instance, with their teeming numbers, these fast-growing churches can create the electoral awareness needed to put in good governance that helps in pulling people out of poverty.

Poverty and the Christian Mission

In his book *Walking with the Poor-Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Bryant Myers, who is distinguished for his discourses on Christianity and development is a lot more direct about the involvement of churches in poverty alleviation. By integrating the best principles and practice of the international development community, the thinking and experience of Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and a theological framework for transformational development, Myers elucidates a holistic way in which Christian mission can contribute to dismantling poverty and social evil. Myers is convinced that poverty will be alleviated if Christians come out from their self-imposed exile and begin to holistically and unapologetically contribute the vast material that the Christian faith tradition has to offer.⁹¹

While not being specific on any geographical location, Myers traces the root of poverty to broken relationships. He describes four ways in which our relationships are broken: the relationship with God, the relationship with self, the relationship with others, and the relationship with the rest of creation.⁹² He explicitly states that sin is at the heart of these broken relationships and therefore grounds poverty as fundamentally spiritual.⁹³ Myers proffers holistic mission as the means of restoring these relationships and ultimately *shalom* - peace, completeness and

⁹⁰ Collier, *The Bottom Billion*, xii.

⁹¹ Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. (Mary Knoll NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 45.

⁹² Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 144.

⁹³ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 142.

welfare as God intended at creation.⁹⁴ If “poverty is a result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life...”⁹⁵ then poverty alleviation must be the result of functional relationships which promote mutuality and creativity. For Myers therefore, the church is the best environment to nurture such relationships that support meaningful poverty alleviation.⁹⁶

Several significant people in history will agree with Myers. John Wesley for example, would say “wherever true Christianity spreads, it must cause diligence and frugality, which, in the natural course of things, must beget riches!”⁹⁷ In a similar tone, Max Weber, a German sociologist in his classic publication *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* had observed that there is a peculiar lifestyle exhibited by Protestants, especially the Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth century that was concomitant with what he identified as the spirit of capitalism. Weber argues that their understanding of the Bible, their hope and the long view of eternity plunged them into an ethic of hard work, perseverance, and frugality, which ultimately generated great wealth.⁹⁸

And some other scholars agree that wherever the Protestant Ethic held, it would encourage capitalism, generate wealth, and eventually lead to development. For instance, Woodberry argues in his article “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy” that Conversionary Protestantism played a most critical role in the emergence of modernity wherever it was practiced.⁹⁹ David Martin in *Pentecostalism -The World their Parish*, makes a direct allusion when he writes that “there is a discernible consonance between Pentecostalism and the simultaneous (indeed, related) advance of global liberal capitalism and “the expressive revolution.”¹⁰⁰ In the same vein, Peter Berger asserts that the overall picture of Pentecostalism

⁹⁴ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 143.

⁹⁵ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 143.

⁹⁶ Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 96-98.

⁹⁷ *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.: Sermons*. Google Books, 441.

⁹⁸ Max Weber, Stephen Kalberg, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹⁹ Robert D. Woodberry, "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy." *American Political Science Review*, (2012): 254.

¹⁰⁰ David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World their Parish*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002): 16.

in Latin America as well as in Africa fits neatly with Weber's description of the Protestant Ethic and its effects.¹⁰¹

Most recently, some scholars have also established the positive impact of protestant evangelism on economic outcomes for poor Filipino households.¹⁰² In addition, the developmental divide in Nigeria itself is a clear testimony that the places where Christian missionaries settled are by far more developed than where they did not.¹⁰³ Along with Myers, these findings establish a significantly favorable linear connection between Christianity and its intersection with poverty alleviation over the years, directly implying that church growth would mean less poverty.

Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom* testifies that there is tremendous church growth in the African continent with Nigeria leading the way. If Jenkin's assertion is valid, and it should be, because Jenkins statistically shows that the center of gravity of Christianity has shifted from the West to Africa and the East.¹⁰⁴ To him, Christianity is more vibrant in these areas now than in the West. This shift, Jenkins credits to Pentecostalism, by which Christians in Africa and the East are having similar experiences as the Christians in the first centuries had.¹⁰⁵

Jenkins even predicts that African Christianity will soon influence every sphere of the Western variety. He posits that because Christianity is growing faster in Africa than any other place in the world today, Africa and indeed Nigeria will soon be the face of Christianity.¹⁰⁶ If Jenkins is correct, can we expect the same characteristic intersection with poverty alleviation that Christianity is known for to occur in Africa and especially in Nigeria?

¹⁰¹ Peter Berger, "Max Weber is Alive and Well and Living in Guatemala: The Protestant Ethic," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 3.

¹⁰² Bryan Gharad, James Choi, & Dean Karlan, "Randomizing Religion: The Impact of Protestant Evangelism on Economic Outcomes." Working Paper, 2018, <http://faculty.som.yale.edu/jameschoi/ICM.pdf>

¹⁰³ B.C.D. Diarra, "European and American Christian Missions and Nigeria's National Development (1840-1960)," *Journal of Educational and Social Research MCSEER Publishing, Rome-Italy, vol. 3 no. 10, December 2013*, 98-89.

¹⁰⁴ Jenkins, "*The Next Christendom*, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Jenkins, "*The Next Christendom*, xii.

¹⁰⁶ Jenkins, "*The Next Christendom*, 100.

The next logical step will be to explore how the Fastest Growing Churches are articulating and engaging poverty alleviation.

The Nigerian Fastest Growing Churches and Poverty

In his numerous books, David Oyedepo, of Winners' Chapel, the representative figure for the FGC in Nigeria articulates their engagement with poverty alleviation. In *Born to Win* and *Breaking Financial Hardship* he explains that financial prosperity is the birth right of anyone who is born of God. People who do not get into that abundance are locked out by ignorance of the covenant of sowing and reaping.

Bishop Oyedepo's theology can be summarized thus: The good God can only give good things which is why He created a good world which was marred by sin (poverty) when man disobeyed. Out of His goodness, He sent Jesus to pay the price for sin (poverty) and deliver humankind from the curse of the law and from poverty.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, all those who receive Jesus also receive the power to break free from poverty. But those who do not, God will humiliate until they bow, because even when the unbelievers have wealth, it is not the kingdom type.¹⁰⁸ However, Christians must by faith enter the covenant of sowing and reaping to draw their blessings from God.¹⁰⁹

While that theology seems to agree with Myers in positing that poverty is rooted in sin, there are a few discrepancies that might create major parallels. While Myers is engrossed in articulating a wholistic integration of the church, Oyedepo's focus is on the individual Christian and what he can do to prosper, independent of any other person or even the state of the economy. Oyedepo believes that "The word works more than magic."¹¹⁰ And if any

¹⁰⁷ Oyedepo, *Born to Win*. Here, Oyedepo says, "God is not benefiting from your poverty, and it is not giving Him glory. You don't resemble God by being poor. He built mansions up there. It sure takes somebody that has money to do that. The streets of heaven are paved with gold. That takes money too. If you are in His image, you have access to His riches."

¹⁰⁸ Oyedepo, *Breaking Financial Hardship*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ Oyedepo, *Breaking Financial Hardship*, 15.

¹¹⁰ Oyedepo, *Born to Win*, 1.

Christian anywhere will appropriate it accordingly, prosperity will be theirs. He believes that God's interest is to humble the world through hunger and poverty and conversely to elevate the saints through prosperity. He does not believe in any of the economic or social theories, what makes sense is the word of God as he understands and interprets it. Is there then a difference in the Christianity that Myers assumes and that of Bishop Oyedepo?

A Dysfunctional Christianity, not Intersecting with Poverty

It is in relation to poverty alleviation that Paul Gifford in *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, dismisses the Prosperity Preaching strain of Christianity as not Christianity as assumed.¹¹¹ In fact, he refers to Hurton's seminal essay alluding that the African prosperity gospel is the formulation of people who have broken away from Christianity as received and have long fashioned their own kind which he has christened "an enchanted Christianity," a form of Christianity in tandem with African religion and concerned with explanation, prediction and control of events in this world.¹¹²

Gifford does not justify or condemn the prosperity message,¹¹³ but he rather seeks to point out that African prosperity preaching is not in the usual or assumed categories and must be understood as such before conclusions are made.¹¹⁴

Gifford argues that the Winners' Chapel's principles and in fact that of the fastest growing churches in general, do not comply with the Weberian model of the Protestant ethic and will therefore not produce the expected or projected results of poverty alleviation.¹¹⁵ He insists that Oyedepo's Christianity is dysfunctional,¹¹⁶ that wealth and success through the

¹¹¹ Paul Gifford, 2016. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4-7.

¹¹² Paul Gifford, 2016. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 18-19.

¹¹³ Paul Gifford, 2016. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 12.

¹¹⁴ Paul Gifford, 2016. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 12.

¹¹⁵ Paul Gifford, 2016. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Paul Gifford, 2016. *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, 67.

logic of seed-faith is neither biblical nor is it Weberian and is therefore not the adequate response to poverty.

Gifford identifies six qualities of Oyedepo's "poverty alleviation" and argues that if one considers only motivation, entrepreneurship, and personal life skills, then one could give a positive evaluation of his methods. However, Gifford adds that whatever would have been positive is cancelled out when one considers the implications of his "faith gospel,"¹¹⁷ the emphasis on the pastor's anointing and the pervading enchanted religious imagination, all these Gifford insists do not seem like a "collective raft pointed with determination towards modernity"¹¹⁸ as David Martin had earlier alluded.

Ogbu Kalu, a Nigerian scholar, however, disagrees with Gifford's views in *African Christianity - An African Story*. He argues that African Christianity is essentially rooted in the primal religion whose cults are manipulated to sustain the contest for the dwindling resources.¹¹⁹ Prosperity preaching, Kalu claims, must be a brand, a creative response to the deep-level challenges of the environment. Kalu argues that by applying the spiritual resources of biblical theology that the missionaries muted, these prosperity-preaching churches have shown how biblical promises could serve as tools of hope.¹²⁰

Kalu further claims that the churches have exploited the elasticity in the African worldview, especially its capacity to accommodate new realities which though seemingly from the outside, fulfill aspirations within the tradition.¹²¹ According to Kalu, "We can add nothing to the gospel, for this is an eternal gift of God; but Christianity is always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures it encounters..."¹²² As far as Kalu is concerned,

¹¹⁷ Also referred to as "name it, claim it."

¹¹⁸ Martin, *Pentecostalism*, 152.

¹¹⁹ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 4.

¹²⁰ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, 4.

¹²¹ Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story*, (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2007), 4.

¹²² Kalu, *African Christianity*, 6.

prosperity preaching is a means to an end, the use of “indigenous tools” that Africans have to get what they desperately need.

It can be alluded from Kalu’s conclusions that Christianity has found its niche in Africa through prosperity preaching. Kalu therefore urges Gifford to quit comparisons and consider the theology and contextual uniqueness of the movement to understand why it holds such massive appeals.¹²³

Kalu further refutes Gifford by adding, “One is to simply recognize that Gifford’s approach to these churches presumes as normative a Western enlightenment worldview informed by the World Bank reports and a Weberian rational system of governance.”¹²⁴ He accuses Gifford of not being objective enough to understand the differences between the spiritual categories and the secular realms that he so often and so unfairly criticizes. He insists that Gifford simply “... catalogues the discomfort of secularists, Muslims, journalists, and synods of mainline churches about the so-called false prophets. It is like describing dancers without hearing their music...”¹²⁵

Ogbu Kalu summarizes by saying “Gifford is hypercritical,” and urges him to consider the views of those who “are hearing the music” like Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu who is both a Pentecostal and an African scholar.¹²⁶ One wonders what Kalu would have had to say about these issues if he had lived to see the state of these churches today.

However, Asamaoh-Gyadu has his reservations about Prosperity Preaching. Even when he acclaims Pentecostalism for positively changing the face of Christianity in Africa, in *Sighs and Signs of the Spirit*, Kwabena decries the prosperity preaching for generating “new forms of

¹²³ Kalu, *African Pentecostalism*, xiii.

¹²⁴ Kalu, Ogbu. No. 1, Spring 2005. “*PNEUMA The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Volume 27, No. Ogbu Kalu, PNEUMA The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies 27, no. 1, (Spring 2005): 189-191.*

¹²⁵ Kalu, *PNEUMA The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Volume 27, No. 1, Spring 2005 No. 1, Spring 2005*).

¹²⁶ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu or Johnson Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu FGA is a Ghanaian scholar of African Pentecostalism.

spirituality and teachings that fall short of biblical and theological standards.”¹²⁷ He indicts the prosperity gospel, as having “a strong message of empowerment but in some ways, fails to articulate an adequate response to pain and suffering.”¹²⁸ Asamaoh-Gyadu however, makes some differentiations in his article in the book titled *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonization of Development Sustainable Development in Pentecostal and Independent Churches*.¹²⁹

A Positive Appraisal of the FGC’s Intersection with Poverty

African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonization of Development (Routledge Research in Religion and Development) Sustainable Development in Pentecostal and Independent Churches is a collection of articles from a wide range of African scholars and practitioners on the intersection between religion and development in Africa. Judging from its introduction -

This book investigates the substantial and growing contribution which African Independent and Pentecostal Churches are making to sustainable development in all its manifold forms. Moreover, this volume seeks to elucidate how these churches reshape the very notion of sustainable development and contribute to the decolonization of development.¹³⁰

The book is shaped in positive appraisal of African Initiated Christianity’s intersection with development in general. The authors claim that there are a limited number of studies investigating African Independent and Pentecostal Churches’ contribution to development. However, they insist that the few studies indicate that the churches are making substantial and growing contribution to sustainable development in all its manifold forms, that they are reshaping the very notion of sustainable development while contributing to the decolonization

¹²⁷ J. Kwabena Asamaoh-Gyadu, “*Sighs and Signs of the Spirit*, (Eugene Oregon: WIPF & Stcok, 2015), xi.

¹²⁸ Asamaoh-Gyadu, “Sighs and Signs.”

¹²⁹ Philipp Öhlmann, Wilhelm Gräb, and Marie-Luise Frost eds., *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonization of Development Sustainable Development in Pentecostal and Independent Churches*, (London: Routledge, 2020).

¹³⁰ Öhlmann, Gräb, Frost, eds., *African Initiated Christianity*.

of development. They assert that despite these substantial contributions, AICs¹³¹ still lack the recognition given to mission-initiated Christianity in Africa both in the academic literature and in the international development policy discourse,¹³² as development actors.¹³³

To further substantiate their stand, the authors refer to Dena Freeman's edited volume¹³⁴ where she describes a similarity between African Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches and Max Weber's Protestant Ethic. Freeman describes African Pentecostalism this way,

It is a form of Protestantism that not only fits with African sensibilities, but also stimulates a transformation of behaviors that can lead to success, or at least upward mobility, in the contemporary neoliberal economy. It motivates new behaviors and renders them moral. It is the notion that 'God wants you to have abundance' and that this is the divine plan that motivates these new behaviors, not an anxious quest to find evidence of one's election for salvation in the next world. Nevertheless, the consequences are the same: hard work, saving and a limitation on certain types of consumption.¹³⁵

The authors link this idea with Turner who made the same observation about African Independent Churches four decades ago:

Attitudes pervade many of the independent churches, which exhibit a loose parallel to the Protestant work ethic. People do tend to prosper when they join these groups, not only because of moral reform, health improvement, less wasteful spending practices and regular habits built round the 7-day week programme of their church, but also because of a belief that they now have access to the power of the Spirit made available through these churches, their founders, and practices, and through the Bible. This encourages confidence, initiative, perseverance, adaptability to the changing modern situation and freedom from distraction through political or other hysterias.¹³⁶

In Freeman's introductory chapter to her book, she clearly and concisely sets out a positivist position on Pentecostalism just like the AIC book.

¹³¹ The FGCs in Nigeria as mentioned earlier are indigenous churches to Nigeria and are, therefore, AICs.

¹³² See, e.g., Belshaw, Calderisi, and Sugden 2001; BMZ 2016; Gifford 2015; Ilo 2014.

¹³³ Öhlmann, Gräb, Frost, *African Initiated Christianity*, 3 and Dena L. Freeman, *Pentecostalism and Development: Churches, NGOs and Social Change in Africa*, (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2012).

¹³⁴ Freeman, *Pentecostalism and Development*, 20.

¹³⁵ Freeman, *Pentecostalism and Development*, 20.

¹³⁶ Öhlmann, Gräb, Frost, eds., *African Initiated Christianity*, 14.

Pentecostal churches are often rather more effective change agents than are development NGOs...they are exceptionally effective at bringing about personal transformation and empowerment, they provide the moral legitimacy for a set of behaviors changes that would otherwise clash with local values, and they radically reconstruct families and communities to support these new values and new behaviors. Without these types of social change...it is difficult for economic change and development to take place.¹³⁷

The authors of the AIC book explain that in making these claims, they are not trying to idealize the AICs or to minimize their excesses and outright faults,¹³⁸ but that they perceive the African Initiated Churches as a decolonial and postcolonial religious movement that are ideally positioned to contribute to decolonizing concepts of sustainable development. They think the role of these churches has not been recognized because of lack of understanding of its unique dynamics, different from the western norm¹³⁹ possibly because of contextuality and spiritual worldview.¹⁴⁰

In summary, the book makes the bold claim that since the AICs are doing so much but unrecognized both locally and internationally, the book is therefore written to bridge that gap to highlight the work of these AICs, so that they can be duly acknowledged like missionary-Christianity is.¹⁴¹ We will discuss a few of the articles in the volume, especially as they have direct relevance to the subject matter.

Positive Changes in the Focus of FGC Leaders

Asamaoh-Gyadu, writing in the chapter on *Spirit and empowerment: The African Initiated Church movement and development*, positively represents the efforts of the AICs. My interest is in his paradigms of prosperity where he nuances prosperity preachers in Ghana and Nigeria. He draws references from the works of Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori where they refer to sections of the contemporary Pentecostal movements as Progressive

¹³⁷ Freeman *Pentecostalism and Development*, 3.

¹³⁸ Öhlmann, Gräb, Frost, eds., *African Initiated Christianity*, 10.

¹³⁹ Öhlmann, Gräb, Frost, eds., *African Initiated Christianity*, 3.

¹⁴⁰ Öhlmann, Gräb, Frost, eds., *African Initiated Christianity*, 13.

¹⁴¹ Öhlmann, Gräb, Frost, eds., *African Initiated Christianity*, 3.

Pentecostals.¹⁴² The authors define Progressive Pentecostalism as ‘[Pentecostal] Christians who claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus and seek holistically to address the spiritual, physical, and social needs of people in their community.’¹⁴³

Asamaoh-Gyadu acknowledges the charitable works of Mensa Otobil’s International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) and puts him in the progressive category alongside the Nigerian counterparts, David Oyedepo of Living Faith Church Worldwide, also known as Winners’ Chapel, and Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. For Asamaoh-Gyadu,

What this means is that contemporary Pentecostals, which in the past propounded a simplistic gospel of prosperity now combine that with significant emphasis on social and economic development. The emphasis now remains on prosperity as the divine right of every believer, but ... the message is now a bit more nuanced than when these churches started preaching in the late 1970s.¹⁴⁴

Asamaoh-Gyadu yet pulls from Nimi Wariboko to further classify prosperity preachers, by distinguishing between what he calls “the Covenant Paradigm and the Excellence Model.” He describes the Covenant Paradigm as the way prosperity preaching started in Africa, with emphasis on the “name-it-and-claim-it” approach or as Nimi Wariboko describes it using the sowing and reaping agricultural metaphor.

According to Wariboko, the sowing-and-reaping approach to prosperity encourages Christians to “sow tithes and offerings, among other elements of a self-sacrificial way of life, into the church and reap bumper harvests of wealth. Lives flourish when these gifts are blessed

¹⁴² Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁴³ Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 2.

¹⁴⁴ Asamaoh-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. 2020. "Spirit and Empowerment - The Africa Initiated Church movement and Development - Sustainable Development in Pentecostal and Independent Churches." In *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonisation of Development*, by Wilhelm Gräb, and Marie-Luise Frost Edited by Philipp Öhlmann, 33-50. New York, London: Routledge Research in Religion and Development, 45.

by or joined with quasi-magical gifts of certain pastors (the fertile soil). The covenant paradigm emphasizes the status quo or ignores it; it is not oriented to social change.”¹⁴⁵

It seems that the covenant paradigm is the usual prosperity teaching we all know where Christians are encouraged to be positive in their utterances, pay their tithes and offerings, sow seeds of money and other gifts in the life and ministry of their anointed charismatic leaders, and voila, the results in material blessings will be theirs. The prosperity preachers in this covenant paradigm, Wariboko notes, do not merely address poverty and fuel greed, they also produce desires and dreams and connect them to the transcendental God.¹⁴⁶

There is some positive element in the attitude described by Wariboko in that the preachers “motivate believers to become Spirit and empowerment agents of their own personal economic improvement.”¹⁴⁷ Wariboko himself notes however, that “The downside of it is that it takes a simplistic approach to development and leaves those who fulfil their covenant obligations and yet continue in poverty and suffering without adequate answers to the quagmires of life.”¹⁴⁸

Asamaoh-Gyadu’s argument here is that the covenant paradigm theology does not provide an adequate approach to development. He notes that even though this approach continues unabated to a significant extent, it is now prevalent only among a new crop of prophetic figures, the older ones have moved on to the excellence model AKA Progressives. The Progressives have moved on to the excellence model which involves human capability development and Afrocentric sentiments. But Asamaoh-Gyadu does not provide further explanations on when and how that movement occurred. Neither does he provide the reasons why the movement occurred.

¹⁴⁵ Nimi Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester), 234.

¹⁴⁶ Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, 236.

¹⁴⁷ Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, 236.

¹⁴⁸ Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, 236.

Specific Practical Intersections with Poverty

Another article in the AIC book that directly interacts with the subject matter of this study is found in chapter 8 - *Approaches to transformation and development The case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria* by Babatunde A. Adedibu. In line with the general tone of the book, Adedibu starts out by asserting that, “Religious institutions like the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) are one of several examples of African Pentecostalism that are thriving and actively involved in the personal transformation of their adherents and development of the Nigerian state.”¹⁴⁹ He continues by countering Paul Gifford’s volume *Christianity, Development, and Modernity in Africa*. His major grouse was that Gifford misunderstood and so failed to positively acknowledge the role of African Pentecostalism in development.

Adedibu further argues that by describing African Christianity as “enchanted and the historic denominations as disenchanting and alluding to ‘enchanted imagination, prosperity Gospel, and emphasis on the pastor’s “anointing,”” as defining characteristics of African Pentecostalism, Gifford has misrepresented the hallmarks of African Pentecostalism. Adedibu argues on this basis that Gifford’s perspective should be disregarded because it stems from a lack of knowledge of the contextual realities of the lived experiences of Africans.

Adedibu accuses Gifford of negating the multifaceted nature of African Christianity and particularly the need of a Pentecostal ethos which resonates with the traditional African worldview where malevolent forces, curses, demons, witchcraft, and exorcism are everyday experiential realities.¹⁵⁰

Adedibu further criticizes Gifford for failing to acknowledge that what he calls “enchanted Christianity” has in the African clime gone beyond Pentecostal Christianity and is even now a major feature of Catholicism. He adds that Gifford’s “rabid claim to

¹⁴⁹ Babatunde A. Adedibu 2020. “Approaches to Transformation and Development - The case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria.” In *Öhlmann, Gräß, Frost, eds., African Initiated Christianity*, 136.

¹⁵⁰ Adedibu, “Approaches to Transformation and Development,” 140.

discountenance enchanted Christianity might suffice in a relativized society like the western world due to the effects of secularization and enlightenment age but not in African Pentecostalism in Africa or the diaspora.”¹⁵¹

Adedibu therefore, asserts that to appraise the role of religion in sustainable development in Africa and discountenance the contributions of African Christianity while applauding historic denominations is mere wishful thinking. That Gifford’s bloated perception of the contributions of the Catholic Church to the development of Africa as incomparable to other Christian traditions might have been correct during the colonial era in Africa, but that in the last six decades, Pentecostal Churches have responded to some of the criticism of their tradition and have made an impressive impact on socioeconomic, political and educational initiatives in Africa and diaspora as clearly indicated by the changing social, healthcare, economic and educational landscape of Africa which has the footprints of many Pentecostal Churches.¹⁵²

In Adedibu’s opinion, African Christianity is redefining the concept of development from below and as such it is pertinent to interrogate the concept of development from below to demonstrate the contributions of religion using one of Africa’s fastest-growing Pentecostal denominations as a case study.

Adedibu’s aim as stated in the chapter he contributed to in the book, is to contribute to the call for a paradigm shift by critically examining the role of the RCCG in the transformation and development of Nigeria. To defray skepticisms, Adedibu explains that his approach is at variance with normative economic growth models of development (HDIs, HDRs) but within the remit of lived experiences of the Nigerian people. He then went on to describe in broad strokes, the many ways he claims RCCG is engaged in the development of Nigeria through civic engagement, social capital, social transformation, and education.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Adedibu, "Approaches to Transformation and Development."

¹⁵² Adedibu, "Approaches to Transformation and Development."

¹⁵³ Adedibu, "Approaches to Transformation and Development," 140.

Under civic engagement, Adedibu asserts that,

The participatory model of the RCCG might be classified as the salt and light of its community. Various civic engagements of the denomination to ameliorate the socioeconomic life of its members and diverse communities where parishes are situated are in operation. RCCG, in different cities in Nigeria, undertakes charitable activities. Such initiatives include promotion of microfinance banks, youth camps, poverty alleviation initiatives, empowerment programmes, healthcare delivery to the less privileged and contributions to their communities through a wide range of social, spiritual and empowerment programmes as well as educational activities to minimize the effects of the nation's dysfunctional educational system.¹⁵⁴

Here, Adedibu is alluding that the RCCG has been hands-on involved with the Nigerian society and has succeeded not only regarding its missionizing aspirations, but also in contributing to the development of various communities where these churches are situated and with their massive visibility, that impact must be significant.¹⁵⁵

Under social capital, Adedibu writes,

The various testimonies of many adherents who were transformed as a result of their commitment to the Christian faith as well as its moral and religious codes inevitably leads to good citizenship and human development. At the RCCG 2016 Holy Ghost Congress, a young man, an undergraduate at one of the universities in the country, testified that he was a former cultist and engaged in occult practices but after he became born again, he was completely transformed.

He argues that the impact of the many people who are being saved and transformed through the ministry of RCCG is apparent in society. He makes a similar argument under RCCG as an agent of social transformation:

In light of the mission and vision statements of RCCG, its missionary ethos is evident. The religious creativity and innovations through the routinization of charisma by Enoch Adeboye are synonymous with his aspiration to reach out to the unchurched. The multiplicities of programs for virtually every social strata of society are reflective of the fact that RCCG is an agent of social transformation.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Adedibu, "Approaches to Transformation and Development," 141.

¹⁵⁵ Adedibu, "Approaches to Transformation and Development," 141-42.

¹⁵⁶ Adedibu, "Approaches to Transformation and Development," 144.

Adedibu further adds that the above assertion is not only prescriptive, but also revealing and that the liturgical practices of RCCG, rituals and religious practices should produce citizens who intensely manifest purity and divine consciousness leading to reconciliation in relationships with God and men. The impact includes personal transformation and character development which is reflected in moral consciousness and good citizenship thereby leading to reduction of social ills as well as biblical standards as a yardstick for social, economic, and public life.

Adedibu writes that RCCG has been responsive to social and health challenges to ameliorate not only the challenges of its members, but also complements existing healthcare delivery in Nigeria and the diaspora. That RCCG is involved in the rehabilitation of drug-ridden youth as well as resettlement of women involved in sex trafficking. This they do with a network of faith-based organizations in the diaspora.

He also writes about RCCG educational approaches to development and how from a humble beginning at Ebute Meta in 1981, where Folu and Enoch Adeboye pioneered the first primary school, Christ Redeemers School Movement (CRSM) has registered its presence in all the communities where RCCG parishes are situated.¹⁵⁷

Adedibu's argument in all of these is to show that Gifford is wrong in claiming that Nigerian Pentecostal churches are not adequately engaged in development and the whole aim of the AIC book is to show that churches like the RCCG or what I refer to as the FGCs are actively engaged in poverty alleviation in all spheres of the Nigerian society.

But if Adedibu and the authors of the AIC book are right in their claims, will the results of such intentional engagement with poverty alleviation not be evident in the Nigerian society? It does not seem so. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in its recent publication, "Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index" (Feb 2, 2023)¹⁵⁸ disclosed that the number of Nigerians

¹⁵⁷ Adedibu, "Approaches to Transformation and Development," 147.

¹⁵⁸ "Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index."

living in poverty stands at over 133 million, representing 63 per cent of the nation's population. Interestingly, all the areas that Adedibu claims RCCG is engaged in are implicated in the multi-dimensional poverty. While NBS' findings may not outrightly contradict Adedibu's position, one wonders about the quality and quantity of RCCG's contribution to poverty alleviation, viz-a viz its denominational size.

Wrong Emphasis, Wrong Methodology, Wrong Motivation – Another Gospel

In evaluating the nature of Nigerian Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations' social engagement, a Nigerian scholar Sunday Agang criticizes the predominant theology as emphasizing the giving of handouts to the poor instead of empowering them as agents of social change through what he describes as "grass-root mobilization." For Agang such handouts amongst other things, make the poor more dependent, while grass-root mobilization empowers the poor, sets them free and creates a Christian self-awareness that results in a wind of positive societal change and development¹⁵⁹.

Another Nigerian scholar, Ebenezer Obadare does not even believe these churches are poised towards development at all. In *Raising Righteous Billionaires*, Obadare writes, "I am fascinated by the extent to which, given its many contradictions and avoidances ... the prosperity gospel in an African context can be said to represent or offer a cogent formula for economic development in Africa."¹⁶⁰ Obadare by this statement indicts most of these AICs who espouse the prosperity gospel. He raises a question: "How should we think of development within an ideological format in which individual subjects are abstracted from the constraints and necessities of social policy and the political structure?" He explains,

because of its emphasis on the individual believer's direct, unmediated relationship with God, Pentecostalism is liable to ignore social structure. In atomizing the individual – ironically in the process of seeking the same

¹⁵⁹ Sunday Agang, "Nigerian Pentecost and Charismatic Theology of Public Engagement," Academia.edu, (2014): 19. https://www.academia.edu/7400784/Nigerian_Pentecost_and_Charismatic_Theology_of_Public_Engagement.

¹⁶⁰ Ebenezer Obadare, "Raising Righteous Billionaires: The Prosperity Gospel Reconsidered," *HTS Theologise Studies/Theological Studies* ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422.

agent's 'empowerment' – Pentecostalism discounts power relations and the political, and more or less dislocates the individual believer from the social matrix within which his or her agency, never mind the relationship with God, is forged. As a result, not only is its understanding of prosperity necessarily shallow...but also, Pentecostalism's attitude towards the state is extremely permissive.¹⁶¹

Obadare's concern is that the poor live in social contexts, it is therefore not possible to ignore social structures and claim to be alleviating poverty miraculously as most of these AICs do with the prosperity gospel.

As far as Obadare is concerned, the bulk of the recent criticism of the fantastic wealth of a growing number of Pentecostal pastors whose congregations remain desperately poor in Nigeria emerges against the backdrop of the realization that Pentecostal churches seem to have placed an indecorous emphasis on wealth and personal accumulation. Obadare references Bayart's submission in *Global subjects: A political critique of globalization, Polity* as a legitimate criticism and an apt summary of Pentecostalism's prosperity principle:

Pentecostalism sings the praises of material success, a sign of sanctification and liberation from the feelings of jealousy that motivate witches. It emancipates the individual by hailing his personal ascent, blesses capitalist accumulation and the relation to merchandise, and 'armour-plates' believers against the menacing world of the invisible. In this respect, it inverts the 'equation that linked wealth to evil-doing and poverty to sanctity.' (Bayart 2007:170)¹⁶²

Agang puts it in another way while expressing similar sentiment:

Pentecostal and Charismatic churches have the tendency of aligning themselves with the status quo (the oppressors) rather than remaining committed to the plights of 'the least of these' (the oppressed) (Matthew 25:40, 45). Undue attention is paid to those in leadership not only to the detriment of the poor and marginalized, but also to the extent of being snared by the elitist lifestyles. Instead of the whale swallowing Jonah, it is Jonah who swallowed the whale.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Obadare, *Raising Righteous Billionaires*.

¹⁶² Jean Francois Bayart, *Global Subjects: A Political Critique of Globalization*, (Cambridge: Polity 2008).

¹⁶³ Sunday Bobai Agang, *Nigerian Pentecost and Charismatic Theology of Public Engagement*, 2014.

Based on methodology and motivation, Obadare and even Agang, would therefore discountenance the claims of Adedibu and the positive posture of the AIC book on African Pentecostalism as a channel of development by any means. Yet neither Obadare nor Agang investigates the development activities themselves to see if these activities are executed the same way they are projected. This is very important, for how can you effectively criticize what you have not investigated?

In response to the phenomenal rise of prosperity teaching around the world at large and Africa in particular, the Africa Chapter of the Lausanne Theology Working Group issued a statement at its consultations in Akropong, Ghana, 8-9 October 2008, and 1-4 September 2009. The group was emphatic on their concern about the prosperity gospel and its disconnection with meaningful development.

While emphasizing various alleged spiritual or demonic causes of poverty, it gives little or no attention to those causes that are economic and political, including injustice, exploitation, unfair international trade practices, etc. It thus tends to victimize the poor by making them feel that their poverty is their own fault (which the Bible does not do), while failing to address and denounce those whose greed inflicts poverty on others (which the Bible does repeatedly).¹⁶⁴

The Lausanne Committee opines that since the real causes of poverty are hardly recognized by Prosperity Preachers, poverty alleviation remains an illusion. Femi Adeleye for the same reasons summarily dismisses the theology of these churches as “another gospel,” as he puts it, prosperity gospel is “nothing less than seduction into a delusion.”¹⁶⁵

But Folarin another Nigerian scholar, in his article highlights another dimension of the role of these churches. He posits that prosperity preachers engender hope, impart vision, and awaken a sense of destiny through their “success theology.”¹⁶⁶ He adds that these preachers recognize several types of poverty - sociological, psychological, health and spiritual poverty.

¹⁶⁴ “A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel,” Lausanne, <https://lausanne.org/content/a-statement-on-the-prosperity-gospel>.

¹⁶⁵ Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*.

¹⁶⁶ Folarin, “How Valid are the Emerging Responses,” 147-157.

For example, singleness, demonic attacks, poor health, infertility, and ailments that defy orthodox remedies would fall under “spiritual poverty.”

The preachers deal with these types of poverty in three major ways. One by using the word of faith, two, using white handkerchiefs, and three, through the use of anointing oil.¹⁶⁷ So, as far as Folarin is concerned, even if the role of these churches can be in doubt regarding infrastructural development, their role in reducing other aspects of poverty cannot be doubted.

Capacities and Possibilities

What do we make of all this? Is there any reason for optimism that our church growth will eventually lead to poverty alleviation? Mbachirin, is positive. In his dissertation: *The responses of the church in Nigeria to socio-economic, political, and religious problems in Nigeria: A case study of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)*. Mbachirin, Abraham Terumbur makes a case for Christianity in Nigeria as always being at the vanguard of development. He goes back to how missionaries arrived the shores of Nigeria with four boxes and how each of these boxes was a ministry of its own.

Mbachirin explained that one box had the Bible and other books in it, which represented evangelism and education. The second box contained drugs and some medical equipment, and it stood for medical or social services. The third box carried working tools such as hammers, cutlasses, saws, spades, nails, and other tools to help them construct their residences. It represented craft and engineering works. The last box had various kinds of fruits and seeds, and this represented the agricultural ministry.

Mbachirin emphasizes that most of the social, economic, and political influence or benefits came as part of the natural process of being the church. Mbachirin argues that “the primary interest of the missionaries was not economic, but they unavoidably inculcated economic and technological skills to their adherents.”¹⁶⁸ In other words, Mbachirin seems to be

¹⁶⁷ Folarin, "How Valid are the Emerging Responses," 147-157.

¹⁶⁸ Mbachirin, "The Responses of the Church in Nigeria."

making a claim that even when the missionaries were not intentional, they naturally stepped into poverty alleviation by the practice of their faith. So, Mbachirin attests to how Christianity achieved the feat of poverty alleviation in the past, but how about in the present?

Ilo also believes that the church in Nigeria can effectively alleviate the endemic poverty in the land. It seems to me that Stan Chu Ilo, a Nigerian himself, pulls all these authors together in his book: *The Church and Development in Africa. Aid and Development from the Perspective of Catholic Social Ethics*. Using Desmond Tutu's Ubuntu philosophy, Ilo proffers a practically holistic development strategy for the African church that takes cognizance of our rich communal and relational culture and suggests that education should be "weeded of its secular accretions and pass through the rich rarefied fields of African cultural traditions."¹⁶⁹ Ilo believes in the ability of Africans to control their own development, he therefore decries what he calls the "mechanistic classical neo-liberal economic orthodoxy" and instead proposes a more human centered approach which is in tandem with who the society is.¹⁷⁰

Ilo explains Ubuntu as a civilization of love. He says, "the civilization of love represents the whole ethical and social heritage which Christianity offers for the liberation of any society from injustice hatred, greed, poverty, and war and for bringing authentic human development."¹⁷¹ He emphasizes the church's need for a credible public existence in Africa. He critiques its culture of acquisitiveness and greed over a shared solidarity with the poor, he insists that the African Church should be a Church of the poor, a church with the poor, a church for the poor and a church that is on the side of the poor so as to give them a voice."¹⁷²

For Ilo, "Christians should be concerned, for instance, about issues of justice and poverty in our society and suffering in the world; we should care about the abuse of human rights and

¹⁶⁹ Ilo, Stan Chu Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa*, (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 234.

¹⁷⁰ Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa*, 192.

¹⁷¹ Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa*, 192.

¹⁷² Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa*, 204.

the plight of minorities and the weak.”¹⁷³ Ilo goes on to suggest four practical ways through which the church can live out the “civilization of love” in Africa: culture of love and human ecology, culture of communion and solidarity, culture of dialogue and tolerance and a culture of eco-consciousness and care. Ilo confidently believes that if poverty alleviation becomes a priority, the church in Africa has all it takes to alleviate poverty.

In Conclusion - Gaps yet to be Filled

The church is growing in sub-Saharan Africa and specifically in Nigeria and as discussed earlier, it could be reasonably concluded that where the church grows, poverty reduces.¹⁷⁴ Considering the diagnosis of, and the prescriptions proffered for the endemic nature of poverty in Africa, the Christian mission seems best suited to make positive lasting changes in the alleviation of poverty.

According to the FGCs, one of their *raison d’etres* is poverty alleviation, but poverty keeps growing, nonetheless. While some scholars believe that there is a dysfunctionality in these churches that naturally impedes poverty alleviation, there are others who believe the churches are actively and efficiently engaged in the alleviation of poverty.

A consensus among scholars is that the church in Africa and in particular, Nigeria has the capacity to alleviate poverty. Scholars, however, have taken different positions on the current effectiveness of the church in intersecting with the poor and with poverty alleviation.

While it can be said that Christianity in Nigeria has always been at the vanguard of poverty alleviation, this seems to be in the past, especially during the European missionary era.^{175,176}

¹⁷³ Ilo, *The Church and Development in Africa*, 215.

¹⁷⁴ (Wesley 1831), 441, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Woodberry, Robert D. May 2012. “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy, 254, Martin, David. 2002. *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*. Oxford: Blackwell, 16.

¹⁷⁵ B.C.D Diara, Nche George Christian, "European and American Christian Missions and Nigeria’s National Development (1840-1960)," *Journal of Educational and Social Research MCSER Publishing 3, no. 10, (2013):* 98-89, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5901/jesr.2013.v3n10p89>.

¹⁷⁶ Onah, Okwuosa, Uroko, “The Church and Poverty Alleviation,” 7. “The early missionaries that came to Nigeria built schools and hospitals to help the poor. They helped educational development of members coupled

My contribution will be to look beyond and underneath the words and claims of the prosperity-preaching FGCs in Nigeria and to provide factual answers to their contribution to poverty alleviation. I want to know, besides all the prosperity talk, how the FGC are engaging poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

with evangelism. They empowered their members through education. Presently, however, the schools and hospitals owned by the church more often are more expensive than government-owned ones, thereby placing them out of reach to the poor. Such facilities seem to be solely for profit-making and should be discouraged.”

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

This chapter covers the research methodology used to determine how the Nigerian Fastest Growing Churches intersect with the poor, with poverty, and with poverty alleviation.

Data Collection Method

Reflexivity and Data Collection Method

The research was guided by reflexivity. Being reflexive “means being attentive to the “cultural, political, social, and ideological origins of my own perspective and voice, the perspectives, and voices of those I interview or observe, and the perspectives of those to whom I report my research.”¹⁷⁷ As a qualitative researcher, I am a part of the research process, and my prior experiences, assumptions, and beliefs may influence the process. I, therefore, considered my attitudes, values, and biases and so situated myself in the study in such a way that the focus remained on the research and its participants.

According to Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research involves “an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the subject matter...studying things in their natural settings and attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meaning people bring to them.”¹⁷⁸ Qualitative research, “is [also] grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience.”¹⁷⁹ These assertions by Creswell and Sensing hold true for the participants interviewed for this study as they shared passionately about their lived experiences within their church communities in Nigeria.

Quantitative methods of research, on the other hand, “allow for a much broader study to be done, enabling a more accurate generalization of the results across a wider group of

¹⁷⁷ “Reflexivity,” Melbourne Medical School, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://medicine.unimelb.edu.au/school-structure/medical-education/research/qualitative-journey/themes/reflexivity>.

¹⁷⁸ Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, (Sage Publications, 1994), 3.

¹⁷⁹ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 57.

people. It also enables objectivity and accuracy, since closed-ended questions allow for choosing to clear-cut multiple-choice answers.”¹⁸⁰ I employed this method that enabled me to obtain results from many more people than any other method would have permitted. The instrument used was the online surveys.

The qualitative and quantitative aspects of the study established a mixed-methods approach to exploring the social phenomena in question. Mixed-method approaches often have advantages over single-method ones. These advantages arise because the biases inherent in any single method may cancel the biases of other methods.¹⁸¹ The use of a multi-method approach for the research also gave rise to “several sets of rich data, resulting in the possibility for deeper understandings”¹⁸² of the subjects as well as the study in general. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, I further structured the research in such a way as to ensure transparency.

Researcher-Designed Instruments

The study adopted the following researcher-designed instruments for data collection.

1. Individual, open-ended interviews; 2. Focus group discussions and 3. Surveys. I used the Zoom app. for the individual interviews, WhatsApp app. for the focus group meetings, and the surveys were delivered on the Google Forms platform.

I derived benefits from using telephone interviews (WhatsApp). There were logistical conveniences and practical advantages like enhanced access to the geographically dispersed interviewees, increased interviewer safety, and greater flexibility for scheduling.¹⁸³ Other

¹⁸⁰ <https://medicine.unimelb.edu.au/school-structure/medical-education/research/qualitative-journey/themes/reflexivity#:~:text=Reflexivity%20is%20about%20acknowledging%20your,will%20influence%20the%20research%20process.>

¹⁸¹ Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 2nd edition, SAGE Publications, Inc, 2006, 14.

¹⁸² Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 54.

¹⁸³ Moira Cachia, Lynne Milward, "The Telephone Medium and Semi-Structured Interviews: A Complementary Fit," *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, vol. 6, Iss. 3, (2011), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254191430_The_telephone_medium_and_semi-structured_interviews_A_complementary_fit.

methodological strengths of conducting qualitative interviews by telephone included “perceived anonymity, increased privacy for respondents, and reduced distraction (for interviewees) or self-consciousness (for interviewers) when interviewers take notes during interviews.”¹⁸⁴

Telephone interviews, compared to in-person interviews, also tend to “be less intrusive and confer greater power and control to interviewees in terms of negotiating interviews to suit their schedules as well as rescheduling interrupting, or ending the interview.”¹⁸⁵¹⁸⁶

There are other advantages to the use of the WhatsApp app. Messages and calls are end-to-end encrypted, with third-party apps unable to intercept or listen to interviews and messages between the interviewer and interviewee’s phones. The app also can securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software.¹⁸⁷

The interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended. Even though I knew what I wanted from the interview, I did not want to be so rigid that respondents are not able to follow new leads or even give more information when needed. So, as Seidman would say, “I established the territory to be explored while allowing the participants to take any direction they wanted.”¹⁸⁸ It was exciting to see how this brought surprising and unexpected outcomes that further enriched the study.

Focus group interviews used in this study were convenient, inexpensive, data-rich, flexible, and stimulating to respondents more than individual interviews would have been.¹⁸⁹ The group synergy helped to generate even more information as one person’s response

¹⁸⁴ Cachia, Milward, "The Telephone Medium and Semi-Structured Interviews."

¹⁸⁵ (Holt, 2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012; Saura and Balsas, 2014)"

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4722874/>

¹⁸⁷ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1609406919874596#:~:text=A%20key%20advantage%20of%20Zoom,highly%20sensitive%20data%20is%20required.>

¹⁸⁸ Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: a Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, (Teachers College, 1998), 69.

¹⁸⁹ Fontana, A. and James H. Frey. “Interviewing: The Art of Science.” *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, Sage Publications, 1994. 365

prompted or modified another person's memory of an event or detail.¹⁹⁰ Many times, participants were reluctant to end at the scheduled time because of the level of engagement.

The survey employed a lengthy questionnaire with fixed choice responses. The use of the survey method enabled me to reach out to a wider set of participants than I would have with other methods. Links to the survey were sent to participants and they in turn forwarded them to other interested participants. The use of an online survey was also more economical than a face-to-face interview, and I obtained "a rapid turnaround in data collection,"¹⁹¹ as expected. These advantages were useful as I had to send the survey to participants located in different states in Nigeria, from the United States. Both the respondents and I enjoyed the ease of the experience.

Description of Participants and Selection Criteria

I had a total of 366 participants in the study. 10 participants were interviewed, about 80 participants were involved in the focus group meetings, 276 participants were surveyed.

Participants were drawn from these three groups:

1. The FGCs -Christians who are active members of the FGCs.
2. The wider Christian Community. These are Christians from various denominations other than the FGCs.
3. The marketplace. The marketplace sample consists of individuals who might be Christians or any other religion, mostly everyday people who observe the FGCs and Christianity from the outside. This would also include the known critics of the FGCs.

Gender was not a major deciding factor in my choice of research participants, but both males and females were included.

¹⁹⁰ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 120.

¹⁹¹ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, (Sage: 2006), 146.

Recruitment

Interviews

The ten participants who were interviewed were leaders drawn from the three broad categories listed above - the FGCs, the wider Christian body, and the marketplace. I interviewed 4 people from the FGCs, another 4 leaders from the wider Christian body and 2 leaders from the marketplace who were known critics of the FGCs.

I set out to interview the two apex leaders of the FGCs, but I quickly realized that those leaders were not directly responsible for the day to day running of the section of my interest. I then asked and was directed to the people who could authoritatively answer my questions because poverty alleviation programs in the FGCs fell directly under their area of responsibilities.¹⁹²

To get wider coverage, I decided to interview four participants instead of the two I had planned to interview. My concern was to be sure I was talking to bonafide leaders in their organization. The four people interviewed were/are top leaders in the two churches even till date.

Four leaders were selected from the wider Christian body simply because of their position as leaders in their organizations and their experience of Christianity in Nigeria. I had aimed to interview only two people but both participants were present with their spouses. The spousal viewpoint provided some positive unexpected results, making the interview richer and more nuanced.

The two critics interviewed from the marketplace have their work and writings transcending both Christianity and various socio-economic issues in Nigeria. One is a Pentecostal while the other is a Catholic. Both are in their 60s. They both presented unique perspectives on the topic.

¹⁹² I made several phone calls to these churches, most of which were not productive. But I also asked individuals that I know personally, and they were able to introduce me to some of the interviewees.

Focus Groups

I selected twelve diverse people from different works of life and experiences, male and female. Some of them were personal contacts, and some were recommended by others as having a special concern for an aspect of the study. These 12 people were also drawn from the FGCs, the wider Christian body and from the marketplace, from where they also invited their friends to the study. This mode of recruitment gave the study the diversity desired. I preferred a relaxed friendly atmosphere for the study. I did not want anyone to feel obligated to respond in any official way. I, therefore, felt that the relaxed atmosphere was most likely if participants were contacted by their friends and not by a total stranger as I was to some of them.

Surveys

Participants in the survey were selected randomly through a snowball effect method, a method where new units are recruited by other units to form part of the sample.¹⁹³ I put out the survey on my WhatsApp status, I sent the link to people through emails and one contact even posted it on Facebook. There were two requirements for the survey. One was that the participant would have experienced Nigeria and the other is that they must be adults.

The participants came from a wide age, educational qualifications, experience, and status range. Having many participants from different walks of life helped reduce the risk of accidentally having extreme, or biased, groups¹⁹⁴ in the study. I did not want to hear a one-sided story. I believe that hearing from all these categories gave a better balance to the study.

Ethical Considerations

Since every potential research subject has the right to be fully informed of the procedures, risks, and other aspects of the research before voluntarily choosing to participate, I prepared informed consent forms for all the people interviewed from the three categories and an

¹⁹³ “Snowball Sampling,” Oregon State University, Human Research Protection Program, Institutional Review Board, <https://research.oregonstate.edu/irb/policies-and-guidance-investigators/guidance/snowball-sampling>

¹⁹⁴ “Research 101: The Importance of Sample Size,” Hydrocephalus Association, <https://www.hydroassoc.org/research-101-the-importance-of-sample-size/#:~:text=The%20more%20people%20that%20participate,numbers%20of%20adults%20and%20children.>

additional one translated into “broken English” or as it is called in our context, “Nigerian English” for people who may prefer that. Other steps taken include:

1. Each participant was informed that participation is voluntary.
2. I articulated the risks involved for the participants during and after the interview if any.
3. Because participation was voluntary, participants had the right to withdraw at any time during the interview without giving any reasons if they so wish.
4. The participants were informed of their right to have a copy of the results if they so wish.
5. There were no remunerations for the participants.
6. Permission was sought and granted from the telephone interview and focus group participants before I started the recording process.
7. All the participants’ data were anonymized at the earliest possible stage and research materials are stored in such a way that unauthorized access is not possible.
8. Appending their signature and returning the signed forms was the participants’ way of agreeing to join the conversation and their liberty to opt out without any consequences.
9. My contacts were given to the participants in case they have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, its risks, and its benefits.
10. All the participants that helped coordinate the focus group meetings were trained in IRB procedures.
11. The participants were informed that the instruments used for the research will be deleted in the case of recordings and shredded, in case of paper one year after the end of the compilation of the research.

All participants were of sound physical and mental health.

Procedures

Zoom Interview

After determining the names of those I intended to be a part of the study – (interviewees and the 12 key contacts), the following processes took place:

1. I called each of the participants using the WhatsApp app. and expressed my intentions. Upon their agreement, I sent each interviewee an informed consent through either my email address or the end-to-end encrypted WhatsApp and waited for them to sign and send it back to me before setting a day and time for the interview. A relaxed atmosphere was present throughout the study. I did not want anyone to feel obligated to respond in any way. The best locations were chosen by the participants, with no loud noise or distractions.
2. Upon receipt of the signed consent forms, the documents were date-stamped online and stored in a password-protected folder on a password-protected computer. I was the only one who used the computer and the only one with the password to the computer. Copies of the informed consent forms were printed to avoid loss in case of a computer crash or other similar problems. The printed copies were also date-stamped and stored locked drawer.
3. I formed a WhatsApp group for the 12 key contacts. And eight of them formed their own WhatsApp group and included me. From there we coordinated the participation of the dozens of participants. They were involved in creating awareness about the study, orienting participants and answering any questions about the project.
4. Ten participants were interviewed through Zoom. Four were leaders of the FGCs, four were leaders of the wider Christian body who are actively engaged in ministry, and two were known critics of the FGCs.
5. We had a total of eight focus groups, through Zoom. Unfortunately, the recording of one of them was lost.

6. During the interview, I first introduced myself and informed each of the participants of the nature of the study and the confidentiality that goes along with it. I also informed them of my notetaking, as well as the mode of recording that will be used during the interview. I mentioned to each participant that the interview would take less than an hour and that the result of the study would be shared with them and others within and outside the ministry. I started the interview as soon as the participants agreed that it was okay to start, and it all ended in less than an hour. Data collected from the telephone interviews were recorded and securely stored for further analysis.
7. The focus group participants had earlier been informed, and reminded through phone calls, text messages and e-mails concerning the focus group. Before conducting the interview, the room was set up in such a way that all participants could easily participate. Procedures and issues about confidentiality were explained to the interviewees at the beginning of the meeting. The recorded information was eventually transcribed and coded by descriptions and themes for further analysis.

Survey

The Google Form was sent as a link in an e mail with instructions on how to fill the survey with reassurance about the confidentiality and anonymity of the survey restated. A follow up e-mail was sent to remind those who had not returned their form within three days.

Fact-finding Visit

A fact-finding visit was made at different times to the sixteen feeding locations in Lagos, Nigeria by a trained and trusted colleague.¹⁹⁵ The aim was to ascertain the extent and regularity of relief being offered in these centers operated by the RCCG.

¹⁹⁵ I had planned on doing some form of ethnography but was even further determined when I read these articles 1. Over 130 million people impacted in 3 years by His Love Foundation (The RCCG Charity) | Pulse Nigeria, 2. Hunger - The RCCG Charity (hislovefoundation.com). and 3. Investigate our charity claims before drawing conclusions, RCCG tells critics - Church Times Nigeria - News, features and more. I decided to send someone to

In summary, in addition to the fact-finding visits, 10 people were interviewed by Zoom, about 80 participated in the 8 focus groups, and 276 participants returned their anonymous surveys – making a total of 366 individual participation.

Other Means of Information

As a part of my research, I reviewed published reports relating to the RCCG and Winners' chapel. These are:

1. Policies: I reviewed the published statements of the FGCs such as their mission statement and vision statement.
2. Newsletters: I reviewed newspapers and web articles published by the FGCs.
3. I listened to audio and video messages from Pastor Adeboye and Bishop Oyedepo as well as from critics of both FGCs.

Delimitations

1. This study focuses on major Nigerian cities, there may be other dynamics of church planting, growth and poverty alleviation programs taking place in the villages that will be missed out. However, most of the influential Christian personalities are found in these cities so also are the FGCs.
2. Growth in this study is limited to numerical growth. The study does not differentiate between growth by conversion or transfer growth from one church or denomination to another. While all these are important, my interest is in churches that the crowd seem to be attracted to for the moment.

Limitations

1. Some of these FCG leaders were evasive. The pastor in charge of the poverty alleviation program in one of the denominations signed my consent form and was evasive until it became

visit the feeding centers to see firsthand what was happening there. I sent him the posted list of feeding center; he was able to visit and make notes in sixteen of the centers.

apparent that the interview with him would not take place. The many ways he avoided the interview were frustrating and grossly disappointing.

2. I was not able to travel down to Nigeria to conduct these interviews and focus groups for several reasons. These include:

a. COVID-19 was gradually abetting at this time, but travel restrictions were still in place and travelling to Nigeria was going to be cumbersome.

b. The prevailing conditions of insecurity in the country at the time and even now made traveling dangerous. Partners, friends, and family advised us to find an alternative to face-to-face in-country encounters.

c. In addition, the travel costs were also exorbitant.

However, I would have ignored all these and still travelled to Nigeria if not that the alternative methods proved even more resourceful and productive.

Reliability and Validity of Project Design

According to Benard, “Validity refers to the accuracy and trustworthiness of instruments, data, and findings in research,” while “reliability refers to whether or not you get the same answer by using an instrument to measure something more than once.”¹⁹⁶ Creswell lists some steps to take to increase both the validity and reliability of qualitative designs.¹⁹⁷

The following actions describe how I improved on the reliability and validity of the study:

1. I carefully designed and selected questions for the instruments used so that the questions matched the purpose of the study.
2. Some questions were asked more than once in the survey, using a different angle, and with different wording to reveal patterns of association among the participants.

¹⁹⁶ Bernard, Harvey Russell Bernard, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, (SAGE, 2000), 46-47.

¹⁹⁷ Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd edition, (SAGE Publications, Inc, 2006), 190-192.

3. Some of my findings were presented to the study participants, asking them if the interpretations made are consistent with their experiences. Member checking safeguarded the data generated from conflicting with the participants' experience.

To ensure reliability of the project design, as much as practically possible, the following steps were taken:

1. The questions asked were unambiguous. Everyday language was used as much as possible. Any Theological words were carefully explained to the participants.
2. Participants were encouraged many times to ask questions before, during and after the interviews.
3. I served as the sole interviewer for the Zoom interviews as well as the focus groups. This helps to ensure consistency with styles and mode of interviewing throughout the process.
4. I used the same audio recording method for data collection.
5. I was friendly, yet professional throughout the interview processes.

Data Analysis

I reviewed the Zoom recordings multiple times and took notes of words, phrases, concepts, and ideas conveyed by the participants. The data from the Zoom interviews, and the surveys were transcribed and reviewed many times in order to familiarize myself with them. The analysis stages for the results from the different instruments was done the *atlas.ti* software. It was difficult to navigate at first, but it eventually proved extremely useful for all the stages -

1. Coding stage. This is the point at which themes are generated and assigned to the data. This process was refined and repeated with each interview and recordings.

2. Interpretive coding. This involved the clustering of descriptive codes into concepts to elicit the meaning being conveyed by the participant in line with the research questions.
3. The third stage was the derivation of overarching themes spanning the whole data set. These overarching themes facilitated a better understanding of how Nigerian FGCs intersect with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation. The result was then tabulated to determine the prevalence of particular themes, and to compare the prevalence of those themes across the participants.

Chapter 4

Intersection with the Poor - Lived Experiences

Introduction

This chapter is focused on lived experiences. I will be discussing points of intersection of the FGCs and the poor, specifically focusing on how FGCs relate with the poor and vice versa. This is to highlight the dynamics and the effects of the disposition and behavioral attitudes between the FGCs and the poor in their everyday interaction.

In this chapter, I will argue that while the FGCs self-report all the wonderful things they do to help the poor, the picture from the perspective of the poor is nuanced – the majority say that in terms of relationship, the FGCs do not provide an atmosphere where the dignity of the poor is respected and where their aspirations as human beings can be fulfilled. But they yet remain in these churches because they identify with or benefit from certain aspects of the FGC's organization. There are, however, a few adherents who not only identify with all aspects of the FGCs, but they even believe that the FGCs are doing their best for the poor.

In Nigeria, the Fastest Growing Churches (FGCs) preach messages that appeal to the poor and give them hope of a better future. Consequently, the poor throng to these churches in anticipation of the fulfillment of the promises. However, several times in this research, people pulled out this phrase – “the poor you will always have” (Matt. 26.11) to explain why there is not much anyone can do about the poor since the Savior Himself confirmed what had already been written even in the Old Testament that the poor will always be amongst the people of God (Deut. 15: 4-11). I read that same scripture within its context, however, to mean that since God has given enough to go round, there need be no poor people in the body of Christ if the people of God will develop a disposition of generosity that makes allowances for the poor.

A generous disposition to the poor is an attitude that will always be necessary in this world especially in places like Africa and in this case, Nigeria, where poverty is endemic.

This chapter investigates how much of this generous disposition is present in the FGCs.

The chapter is written in three sections. In the first section, I will provide some background to the discussion by explaining who the poor are, why they are in church and why there are expectations that the church will offer some help. The second section elaborates on the attitudes that affect the poor/FGCs intersection and relationship. In this section, we will hear the voices of the poor complaining about the FGCs. Subsequently, we will also hear some officials of the FGCs speaking about their frustrations with the poor. The third section raises discussions on some of the reasons why the poor remain in the FGCs despite the complaints of a poor intersection and interaction.

Section One

In this section, I will explain who the poor in Nigeria are, their categories and their location. We will also investigate why these churches are attractive to the poor and why they have expectations from the FGCs.

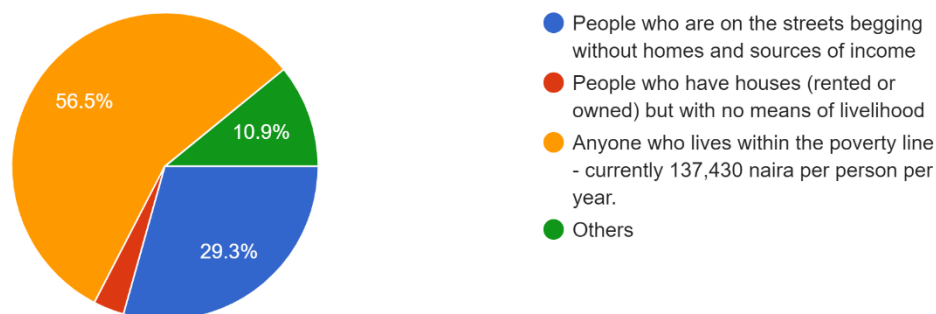
1. Who are the poor?

The majority (56.5%) of the research participants define the poor as anyone who lives within the poverty line, which was ₦137,430 by January 2022 and is currently higher now with the continued depreciation of the Naira. Another 29.3% define the poor as people who are on the streets begging, without homes or any source of income. The 10% that said “others” might be people who claim that mental poverty is just as bad if not worse than physical poverty. The overwhelming majority (56.5%), therefore, define the poor in terms of materiality.

Figure I

8. Who do you consider are the poor

276 responses



These descriptions of the poor therefore broadly identify two types of poor people. The first category is the “usual poor.”¹⁹⁸ In this category are the infirmed, the homeless, the street beggars, lowly job workers who receive minimum wage and below remunerations, possibly not very educated. The second category are those who, though they own houses or live in one, do not know where the next meal is coming from. I can call them the “unusual poor.” This second category may include well-educated people and people who have been wealthy previously. They have not settled into poverty; therefore, they have the greater capacity to spring out more quickly than the “usual poor.”

While the poor can be found anywhere, the “usual poor” normally reside in the slums and the ghettos as typified by Maroko in Lagos,¹⁹⁹ these are usually where they can afford the

¹⁹⁸ Iliffe identifies two types of poverty –structural and conjunctural poverty. He defines structural poverty as “the long-term poverty of individuals due to their personal or social circumstances”. (4) This would then be the “usual poor.” He defines conjunctural poverty as “a temporary poverty which befalls ordinarily self-sufficient people as a result of crisis.” These are the “unusual poor.” See. Iliffe, *The African Poor*, 4.

¹⁹⁹ Nathaniel Akhigbe, “Brief History of Maroko,” *Business Day*, August 16, accessed April 12, 2023, <https://businessday.ng/news/news-features/article/brief-history-of-maroko/>.

rentage. Some do reside in highbrow areas as domestic workers of the rich. The “unusual poor” may still be residing in the high-brow areas waiting it out and expecting a turnaround or they may be in the slums after their rents have run out. A middle-class respondent puts it this way:

You know, there can be people who are living apparently very well and can still be poor, because their fortunes could have taken a massive nosedive. And they may not even say anything at all about it. So even though they are not living in “batchers” (wooded houses usually built in slums in Nigeria), and so on, they are below the poverty line at a point in time.²⁰⁰

Some of these “unusual poor.” are yet too embarrassed to accept poverty and so they fall back on former acquaintances, and some keep “packaging”²⁰¹ as one of the respondents described it.

“Packaging in the sense that you can find clothes and wear, trying to look rich but within you, you know that you are dying of hunger.” The current state of the country has given rise to many more “unusual poor” and even the “usual poor” have sunk lower into poverty. No wonder 97.1% of respondents affirmatively answer that poverty is increasing in Nigeria. Obviously, the increase of poverty in the land translates to an increase in the number of poor people.

2. The Message of the Church and the expectations of the Poor

With dwindling fortunes and an irresponsive government in Nigeria, the FGCs have become a place of hope for the poor. Churches of all types and denominations usually are a place of refuge for the poor but the difference, in this case, is in the theological differences between the orthodox²⁰² and FGCs.

²⁰⁰ Document 36. 25 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

²⁰¹ Packaging is commonly used in the Nigerian setting for describing a situation where people present an image that is not the truth about them to create a desired impression of themselves. so as not to be disrespected.

²⁰² I am referring to mainline churches planted by foreign missionaries – Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists etc.

While mainline churches preach a message of contentment and allude to God's preferential option for the poor.²⁰³ They, therefore, create a safe place for the poor even in their poverty and they yet help them to get better. When mainline churches initiate programs to improve the lot of the poor, the poor are not put under any pressure to give back to the church. They do not hear messages that tell them that poverty is a curse, mainline churches do not say that they are set up to make people rich. They let them be and help them as much as they can.

FGCs, however, preach and display a message of miraculous escape from poverty. The poor are assured that if they will come to church, listen to the man of God, and obey, they will surely get rich. Poverty is seen as a curse that must be removed. Overcoming poverty then becomes a barometer for spirituality. As a result, FGCs attract a good number of people but even more especially the ambitious who draw hope that they too will soon "make it" and get rich.

The expectation of the poor on the FGCs is therefore not manufactured by the poor or by society, it is their response to the promise of the FGCs. While the FGCs are not expected to be NGOs that do nothing but care for the poor, these churches themselves have thrown the bait of poverty alleviation to society and people believe and come to church expecting those promises to come through.

A Christian leader and a university don explained it this way,

Yes. I have said that the level of poverty is what is swelling the church in Africa, in Nigeria. If you were to remove poverty, I bet you, half of the people will not go to church again. In the West, there are social services - you do not have to pray for necessities like electricity and water, but it is not so here, so people flock to those churches because there is no money, the government is not providing anything, then the preachers are now

²⁰³ Emmanuel Orok Duke, Justus Onyebuchi Okafor, "Poverty Alleviation Policies of Selected Churches in Anambra State," *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis*, vol. 3(1), 2020, 40-52. Herein, unlike the ways FGCs articulate poverty, the authors argue that "poverty is a social problem." (40). The church is encouraged to be engaged in poverty alleviation because of their social teachings which emphasize the equal dignity of all men and women as creatures of God, and God's commitment to the poor. (James 5:1-6) (NIV) (41).

preaching what is sweet to their ears. Of course, there are some cases, some success stories here and there, but the messages just keep on saying- you will make it, you will make it - come seven days, believe it, confess it, claim it...²⁰⁴

The following survey result supports the view of most of the respondents as explained by the professor.

Figure II.

16. Why do you think the poor attend these churches?

276 responses



A particular Winner's Chapel congregation in Ile-Ife claims to be a place "where the poor are made rich."²⁰⁵ This can be said to be the motto of all the branches of the Living Faith Ministries. As George O. Folarin, a Professor in Biblical and Theological Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria so succinctly puts it, "Nigerians overwhelmingly see the main emphasis of the ministry as deliverance from poverty."²⁰⁶ Bishop Oyedepo himself attests that

²⁰⁴ (Anonymous, How are Nigerian Fastest Churches intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty, and with Poverty Alleviation? 2022).

²⁰⁵ Folarin, "How Valid are the Emerging Responses."

²⁰⁶ Folarin, "How Valid are the Emerging Responses."

God asked him to go and make his people rich. That is the mandate of his church and many of his messages center on how to move people from poverty to riches.

The research finding substantiates that most of the poor are in the FGCs to overcome poverty. When asked why the poor attend these churches, 54.3% of my respondents unequivocally answered that it was to overcome poverty. While 25.7% answered that it was to encounter God. 80% of people who identified as poor in this study said they were in church to overcome poverty, 10% said it was to encounter God while another 10% said it was for significance-to become significant in the society. One could also say that would mean overcoming poverty. However, the 25.7% that are in the FGCs to encounter God cannot be ignored. Therefore, while poverty alleviation is a major motivation for church attendance, there is also the other aspect of spirituality and style of worship.

There are people who attend the FGCs because they are hungry for an encounter with God and they like the way the FGCs mediate and satiate that hunger. So, while it can be said that the FGCs are growing because poor people who happen to be in the majority in Nigeria, are looking for a way out and the FGCs have promised to give them that needed leverage, it is also true that there are people – poor or not, who are in those churches because they want to encounter God.

Section Two

FGCs and the Poor

For whatever reasons the poor are attracted to these churches, the majority of these poor and the wider society believe that the FGCs do not have a favorable disposition towards the poor in general. This view was however refuted by a few whose voices I felt should also be heard. In the

first part of this section, I would like to highlight some of the voices of the poor on their experiences with the FGCs, while also capturing the rebuttals from the leaders of the FGCs on some of the points raised. The second part will discuss the FGCs concern regarding the poor to explain their frustrations in relating with them.

1. Voices against the FGCs

This subsection highlights the voices of the poor as a result of their lived experiences in relationship with the FGCs.

a. I suffered unbearable indignity.

This is the story of a young man who was transitioning from his paid employment into ministry where he had to live by faith. He could be considered an “unusual poor.” “New in the town, he began attending one of the FGCs and turned to them for help in a time of need.

My spirit was totally crushed going through the process of verifying that I am truly poor and that I was not telling lies. The questions, the suspicious glares, the demeaning instructions, after some time, I just decided that I could not continue. I told myself that it was better to suffer hunger than to further subject myself to such indignity. It was not worth it.²⁰⁷

b. I was treated like I did not even exist.

Another young man who was born into a “usual poor” family but had struggled to go to school and was now a university graduate, but he had no job and had never worked before, and he had the call of God on his life and so was employed as a pastor in one of the FGCs.

I was posted to one of the rural areas; that was not a problem because all I wanted was to serve the Lord. But I observed that unlike other pastors who were part-time and have another means of livelihood, I was not being treated like I was existing. I was despised, even as a pastor, nothing I said or did was important. I endured all the direct and indirect abuses because

²⁰⁷ Document 10.00, Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022

of my calling but eventually, after some years, I was too frustrated to continue. I had to leave the system to recover my worth.²⁰⁸

c. I was embarrassed and humiliated.

This is the story of a Christian brother who was a worker²⁰⁹ in one of these churches and things were exceedingly difficult for him. He could identify as a “usual poor.”

Often, I did not have what to eat but I made sure to scrounge out five Naira²¹⁰ to give for offering. On one of the days after church service, the pastor was checking the offering and saw five naira, he was terribly angry and lashed out at me saying – “Look, look, stop putting this kind of offering in this box,” and he did not care that other people were there. I wept out my heart because, admittedly, I always give five Naira, but that day, I was not even the one who gave the five Naira. When I tried to explain to the pastor, he insisted that I was lying. All these happened in the workers meeting and no one could chip in a word in my defense. The only crime I committed was that I was poor.²¹¹

I was inundated with similar stories like the above during the study. It seemed like there was a pattern of behavior that was common to the FGCs, which though not specifically directed to the poor, affected them the most because of their vulnerability.

Behavioral Attitudes of the FGCs and its Effects on the Poor

When people say they were treated in a certain way, it is important to identify the elements that constitute the actions they experienced to understand their feelings and proffer objective opinions. These elements are inextricably bound to the context and as it is said, context affects content, therefore it is impossible to fully understand words or actions independent of their context. To understand these voices better and extrapolate the crucial elements in the

²⁰⁸ Document 35.00 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

²⁰⁹ Workers in these churches are people who voluntarily serve sacrificially in any capacity needed.

²¹⁰ Not up to a cent.

²¹¹ Document 35:64.52, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

relationship between the FGCs and the poor, it is necessary to briefly explain the set-up of the FGCs – the context from where these voices emanate.

2.i. The setting of the FGCs

To effectively manage the enormous amount of people who come to these churches and to attract even more people, the Nigerian FGCs are organized in a business-like manner. There are fixed ways of doing things, boxes to be checked each week, targets to meet and reports to write. It often resembles a company engaged in mass production where there is hardly time for custom-made products that consider the specific details/needs of consumers.

Also, the pastors themselves are usually bi-vocational, and most have a full-time job, but they must be seen to be effective in their pastoring jobs. Some of the key indices for their assessment are the number of people at each church service and the amount in tithes and offerings received at each gathering. To say the least, the pastors are usually spread thin and under enormous pressure to perform. Since they must juggle so many responsibilities, they choose the ones they consider most important to the organization. Unfortunately, the mix of all these factors and many more has created cracks, resulting in behavioral attitudes which are seen as hostile to the poor.

Human relationships especially for Christians are anchored on the bedrock of a desire for unity which then genders a proper perception of the other, encouraging mutual acceptance, affirmation, and recognition. Where that is lacking, there is lack of sensitivity for the feeling of the other which shows a lack of respect and love. In which case the parties relate with each other dishonestly and with an ulterior motive. This may be the issue between the poor and the FGCs.

I have organized the results of my findings under the following headings of possible human interceptions for greater clarity.

- a. Atomization and Dichotomy
- b. Perception of the poor
- c. Acceptance, Affirmation and Recognition
- d. Sensitivity
- e. Honesty, Transparency and Favoritism
- f. Ulterior Motives
- g. Addition of Value
- h. Staff Renumeration and the Implications

a. Atomization and Dichotomy:

One of the most significant characteristics of the New Testament church was their oneness.

⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2: 45-47(NIV)

It was in that medium of unity that needs were shared and met in the early church.

I discovered, however, early in the research that there is a lack of integration in the Nigerian FGCs. A concerned RCCG leader who is also a regional missions coordinator identified and described it as a lack of fellowship. According to him, “People come to church to fulfill a scheduled activity. The days when people would just go to visit other church members to have fellowship are gone. Officialdom has replaced fellowship. Therefore, the type of integration that only such fellowships can bring is lacking.”²¹²

²¹² Document 12. 5-6, Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

In a deeply communal society like Nigeria, it seems that church members in these FGCs are on their own, and the only activities that bring them together are those that promote the interest of the church. This atomization creates a dichotomy where the poor and the rich hardly intersect. If the medium of organic fellowship is absent, it becomes much more difficult to share and meet needs. Another participant put it this way – “From my experience, I do believe that some people live their lives in such a way that they no longer have any interaction with the poor. So, they do not know in their circle anybody that is poor. So, when you have such a circle, you believe that poverty has been addressed.”²¹³

Unfortunately, some of these FGCs intentionally prevent direct access or interaction with the poor. A man shared his story in one of the interviews of how they were warned not to give to the poor unadvisedly if they did not want their finances to be attacked by the devil.

We were told that giving to the poor is not something you should do directly, that it is better to just give to the church, and that the church would give to the poor. And some people talked about how they gave to the poor, and then the devil attacks their finances because after giving to the poor, they now discover that everything was going financially down for them and link it to when then they gave to the poor. And they looked at the poor as being demonized, that was why they were poor. So, you should be careful even with associating with them.²¹⁴

I agree with the RCCG leader who remarked that this was not the way it was in the 1970s and 1980s, when there was a strong communal relationship amongst brethren in Nigerian churches.

In those days, those who had would naturally share with those who have not - in all simplicity.²¹⁵

²¹³ Document 10, Anonymous Interview. Jan. 2022.

²¹⁴ Document 42.16, Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

²¹⁵ Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, 17-18. Adeleye writes about Christian fellowship in the 1970s: “Love was genuine. It was a sacrificial love that shared freely with others in need. It was a love that gave, not because one expected God to return it a hundredfold but because it was right and loving to do so. I know a student who gave up all his pocket money to pay a sister’s school fees so she would not be thrown out of school. Relationships were transparent, governed by honesty and concern for the other person’s interest such that it was almost like the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles.”

No committee was needed because Christians lived as a community, as a body – and each person felt the need of the other. There was therefore no way one could have too much, and another would be poor. Christian fellowship creates the medium and opportunity for effective intersection of people irrespective of their financial capacity. When that is lacking, the whole body suffers.

b. Perception of the Poor

A lady in one of the focus groups, a successful Christian entrepreneur today, shared her experience as a poor person in one of these FGCs some years ago.

Before we even look at how these mega churches treat the poor, can we look at how they see the poor? From my experience, these churches have become a place where you are not supposed to be poor. While Jesus said, you will always have the poor amongst you, it is no longer relevant in the church today. So, if you are in the church, and you are poor, it is your shame, it is your responsibility. We do not want you here in this church, no one is permitted to be poor, our God is the Master of all, the owner of the universe, how dare you say you are poor?²¹⁶

She raised a pertinent view that agrees with majority of my survey respondents spread across the various categories who believe that these churches perceive the poor as anything from lazy, idle, and unserious to people who were victims of generational curses. Some are regarded as those who are unfaithful to God especially in paying their tithes or are just oppressed and neglected by the government.

I expected the members and leaders of these churches to push back on this view described above, but one of the pastors asked if I was in doubt that generational curses play a key role in making people poor.

Her husband in agreement added:

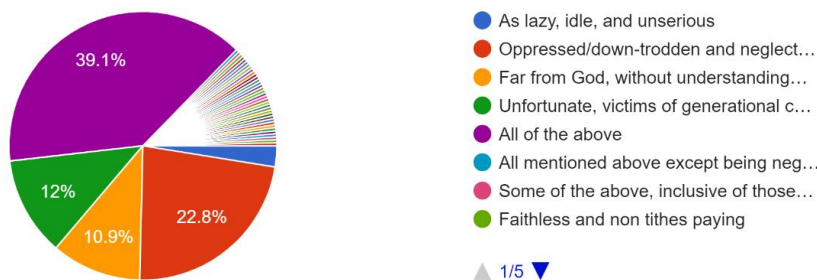
²¹⁶ Document 36. 30, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

If you are poor, you are cursed or have a big problem. So, what we all want to do is, you do not even want to say that you are poor, because that makes you an accursed. Or you know, so it is either you silently bear your problems, or we look for how to cast out your poverty so that you can be welcome in our midst. Is it not an anathema to come to church, and be saying you are poor? How will you be poor? When Jesus rode on a horse and He said greater things shall you do.²¹⁷

While most of the focus groups reecho the above thoughts, the survey results about the perception of the poor in the FGCs is a bit more nuanced.

Figure III

12. How do you think these churches (RCCG, Winners' Chapel) perceive the poor
276 responses



While 39.1% of the participants said that the perception of the poor in the FGCs is a mix of everything possible, a solid 22.8% said the poor were seen as oppressed and neglected by the government. These findings may not have contradicted the above thoughts as generally expressed in the focus groups, however, do suggest that while there might be a dominance of a perception in the FGCs that blames the poor for their condition, there are many people in the

²¹⁷ Document 36. 31, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

FGCs who acknowledge that the poor are poor for no fault of theirs. Putting it all together, these different perceptions play a role in the FGCs' interaction with the poor.

Those who believe that the poor are downtrodden and neglected might be more likely to offer practical help while those who blame the poor or attribute their poverty to the spiritual, might offer motivational or spiritual cure if they care. The next chapter will deal with the causes of poverty in more detail.

c. Lack of Acceptance, Affirmation and Recognition

A huge part of any human interaction is to feel that you are seen for who you are and that your worth is affirmed and recognized. Over 95% of my research respondents did not think this type of intersection was happening between the church and the poor. As a respondent aptly described it, *“he wasn't being treated as if he was existing.”* He was referring to a pastor in one of the churches who he felt was being dehumanized because he was poor.

To support the position described above, respondents across the board gave several instances, some from their firsthand experiences and others from the experiences of acquaintances about how the poor are not stakeholders in these churches. As one of the respondents said, *“If you are poor, you cannot get to a level of leadership. Even if you are faithfully attending the church, there is a leadership they will give to you, but not to the level of being on the decisive seats in church.”*²¹⁸

Another respondent from the wider Christian society elaborated it even further:

No, sister Chi, I think if I may just answer straight, from my experience and the experience of people around me and people I have interacted with, the poor are not actually treated as stakeholders. It is exceedingly difficult for you to see committees handed over to people under this category to chair. In fact, in some cases, it is as if, if you are poor, you do not even

²¹⁸ Document 38. 29, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

have sense, I am telling you from my own personal experience and view. This for me is a fundamental problem that we have in the church. The poor is not taken as a stakeholder, because he is seen as somebody who is “disabled.” He is disabled economically, in fact, he has not much honor. And that is why often, you find out that the rich from wherever he comes, even if he joined the church today, even when the person, in some cases, has not finished foundation Bible class, (for those who have foundation Bible class or believers' class), the person is given a position. Meanwhile, a poor person has been in that church, praying, but he is not seen. He is not heard.²¹⁹

One of the leaders of these churches, a successful realtor, however, pushed back on the arguments stated above. Speaking in support of the church, he argued against giving certain positions in the church to the poor, a position that he sees as being sociologically justified.

He said,

There are some positions in the church that you cannot hand over to a man that does not have the resources to handle it, for example the welfare units. You cannot give the position of the chairperson of welfare committee to a poor man. That does not mean that the church is discriminating between the rich and the poor. But if you were looking for head of follow up or evangelism, it will go to anybody. But positions like the president of Good Women fellowship can never go to a poor person because the president of the good women is the champion, the leader of welfare of that group. So, we should go back to basic social logic.

The question is whether welfare is an entire church affair or a personal venture funded and facilitated by the department leaders. We shall deliberate more on this in the subsequent chapters.

A few people who were active members of these churches but not leaders, asserted that the poor were comfortable in their church, but they still confirmed that there were limits in terms of leadership positions.

The poor are comfortable in my church, Living Faith Church. We do not separate between the poor or the rich, we are all together. All they are after is if you are a committed member and you are dedicated you can get any

²¹⁹ Document 35. 52, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

position in the church. There is no discrimination, they are comfortable. However, there are some sensitive positions they might not put people if their integrity is questionable, but those are only one part of ten in the church.²²⁰

Of course, there are various positions for different people, but I wondered why the chief determinant in church leadership should be financial capacity. I wonder if this respondent was alluding that the integrity of the poor might be in question because of their poverty. But like the church leader said, there might be a sense in giving certain positions to those who have the financial prowess if the aim is to raise the needed funds to execute the tasks.

d. Lack of Sensitivity

Another sore point that some of the participants raised was the lack of sensitivity to the feelings of the poor. Putting it all together, respondents across the board complained about the way money is enthroned in these churches. A young lady who struggles financially summarized it thus,

The way these churches talk about money, possession of vehicles and how they exalt the rich will naturally create agitation in the heart of the poor, making him wonder if they are welcome. Every month, the pastor asks people who have their tithes to come out to the altar, he then declares that things will be tight for those who cannot pay their tithe. He encourages people to sow a “seed” so they can prosper. What will a man who has not even eaten a meal do? How do they sow the seed they do not have? And this is what happens regularly in church.²²¹

The respondents also mentioned other aspects where they believe that the church is insensitive to the plight of the poor. For example, the church offering is often taken in such a way that people who have nothing to give are ashamed and feel excluded. Apart from passing the offering bag

²²⁰ Document 35.00, Focus Group Meeting, Jan, 2022.

²²¹ Document 36.00, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

several times round the congregation, the congregants are made to dance to the altar to give their offerings. That way, you either give or you are shamed. There is no middle ground. Who would want to remain seated when all other members of the church are at the altar giving their offering?

The churches can also ask people to raise their offerings “for heaven to see”²²² so that God will bless it. What will people that have nothing to give or whose offering is in the lowest denominations do?

Then they also have times where they give an altar call and arrange seats in front of the altar asking people to come and support the work of God with different amounts of money. The pastors will pray for them and promise that they will see how God will bless them in the next few days.

In each service, the poor hear testimonies of how people gave and how God blessed them back many times over. The rich are celebrated, while the poor are neglected. How does a sane person without sufficient financial capability flourish as part of all these celebrations of riches? How will they survive and thrive in such an environment? The natural thing is that the poor will endeavor to get money so that they also will be celebrated in church.

e. Lack of Honesty and Transparency, Favoritism

Two other issues raised by the participants are the lack of honesty and transparency in communication with the poor and favoritism. A young man in his early thirties who is doing his best to get out of “usual poverty” told us his story in one of the focus groups. He said,

I needed to get references from my pastor to some of the members of the church that could help me get a better job. As stipulated, I went through my house fellowship coordinator who advised me to send a private message to the pastor which I did, but till tomorrow, I never got any

²²² This means to literally raise the currency notes to public view, while knowing how embarrassing it will be for people to show their small offerings.

response from the pastor, not even an acknowledgment. The house fellowship leader followed up on it, but there has been no response since then.²²³

The young man said that his concern was not that he was not given the references but that no one discussed his requests for those references with him. Each time he tried to bring it up either with his house fellowship leader or the pastor, he felt he was dribbled and that his request was glazed over. He would have preferred to have been told that the pastor would not be able to help, instead of being totally ignored. The young man said that he moved on with his life, and encouraged himself that as a Christian, his help for anything comes from God. He reasoned that God did not want to open that particular door of opportunity for him.

Well, he could not get another job and so his situation did not improve, and he therefore still needed help from the church. He said he had seen the church rendering help to some people living in highbrow areas who needed huge sums of money to help with their rents, (the “unusual poor”) so he considered that since his rents was nothing comparatively, it would even be easier to get the help he needs. Again, he was made to go through all the processes, but he did not receive any help at all. The young man said this type of situation happened to many others in his category of the poor in the church.

The young man further observed that the church would quickly come to the help of the “unusual poor” whose demands were even much more than the “usual poor” who just needed a fraction. He reasoned that it was because the poor did not have the necessary connection with the authorities in church and when they try to come close, the pastors and leaders avoid them because they think they have come to beg for help.

²²³ Document 37.00, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

From his experience and that of others he knows, he says he has concluded that even though these big churches are expanding quite well across Nigeria, the economic impact does not affect the common person in the church. He acknowledges that some of these churches give scholarships and assist the poor by running corporate socially responsible units, they often choose a few people they know, and produce video clips of them more as a propaganda item than true ministry.²²⁴

f. Ulterior Motives

An overwhelming majority of the respondents alluded that even where it seemed like the church was helping the poor, they were doing it with an ulterior motive and not for the love of the poor.

A focus group participant picked randomly from the wider society wondered,

Why will the church bring a few bags of rice and used items to give to the poor in front of a camera? Then, they will subsequently so vigorously publicize these events to give the impression that they continue to take care of these poor people, meanwhile, it was just a touch and go event. But they use these images to generate compassion so that people will give to the plight of the poor, but are the poor the priority or focus of all these?²²⁵

I also asked the same question in my survey and the responses are as shown below.

²²⁴ Christian Social Responsibility – the arm of the RCCG that intersects with the needs of society.

²²⁵ Document 37.00, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

Figure IV

21. Are the poor the priority of these churches (RCCG, Winners' Chapel)?

276 responses



So, what can these ulterior motives be? A respondent in his mid-thirties asserted that,

Some of these churches run like company enterprises if your company is doing CSR, if they want to execute a project, they have a waiver in some of these taxes and all of that, but because churches do not pay tax, if you want to have to acquire a land, to pay government bills etc., they present those records and they waive some of these things for them. From my experience I do not think the expansion of the churches in Nigeria is affecting the average person economically, I do not know about spiritually.²²⁶

Another young man who identified as poor derided the intentions of the FGCs as not genuine and that they run the church purely for gain. He said, “the COVID-19 pandemic was an eye-opener that the church was only “managing” to give to the poor. He further stated:

Despite the tithes and offerings given, the church never pulls from its coffers to give to the poor, Instead, they use the show of concern to the poor to make more money. They must keep asking individuals to give to every new need. When those individuals were no more in church because of the pandemic, the poor suffered immeasurably. The church is where you are supposed to find solace. But when push came to shove, we did not see any help.²²⁷

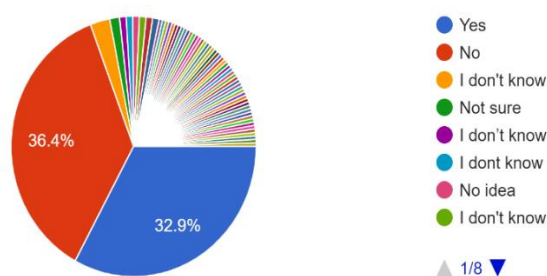
²²⁶ Document 37.00, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

²²⁷ Document 37.00, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

In what might seem like a contrary opinion, survey results show that most participants believe that the FGCs have no ulterior motives in their relationship with the poor. While 32.9% insist they do, 36.4% refute and a further 30.7% are undecided.

Figure V

22. Do these churches (RCCG, Winners') have other motives for Poverty Alleviation?
231 responses



Additionally, when I interviewed an FGC leader, he assured me that there were no ulterior motives in the poverty alleviation programs that they do for the poor. Rather, he says, what seems like rigorous publicity of their help to the poor, was a reaction to the public mindset that the church was not doing anything for society. The church had to find a way “to allow people to see a bit of what they were doing for the poor.” Even then, he confesses that it is a difficult position for the church to balance the publicity that comes out of these programs.

g. Addition of Value

Participants also opined that the efforts of the FGCs towards the poor are not intentional and targeted enough to add value to their lives and to uplift them to meaningful sustenance. All

the leaders of the churches interviewed concluded that the most important thing to do for the poor was to feed them so that they could be alive. They claim that it is when one is alive that every other thing follows.

The poor had other ideas, however. They all agree that though everyone primarily needs to be alive, and that food is primary to that sustenance of life, nobody came to the world to just eat and die. The poor also have dreams and aspirations. The argument is that the FGCs at their best continue to work with the poor at that survival level and they do not seem to have tangible plans for meaningful upliftment of the social status of their poor congregants.

While some of the church leaders rebuffed this position by insisting that they are not representatives of the Government and should not be held responsible for services that the government should provide for her citizens, most of the respondents cited the example of the white missionaries, especially their socially constructive programs and how many parts of Nigeria are beneficiaries directly and indirectly today.

A university professor who is also a Christian leader spoke poignantly about the situation as he compared the FGCs modus operandi with that of the white missionaries of old.

When the missionaries were building schools and churches they were not hidden, but these ones are building schools also, but are they affordable? When the missionaries came, they deliberately made those schools affordable for everyone. They provided scholarships and that is because they reduced their own overhead costs, but when a General Overseer has three jets to manage amidst other things, the funds that would have been used to address poverty as a social service is lacking. So, the lifestyle of the leadership has not made it possible for them to really focus on poverty in Nigeria.²²⁸

²²⁸ Document 9.00, Anonymous Interview, Jan 2022

The professor felt that the lavish lifestyles of some of these pastors made it impossible for them to do social good, unlike the white missionaries who chose a simple lifestyle that enabled them to add value to the lives of individuals and the society.

In yet another focus group, one of the participants, a Christian medical doctor, gave an interesting analysis of the social action of white missionaries in comparison to FGCs. He said that the difference is in the foci of the two groups. He said for the missionaries, social services were a means to preaching the gospel but that for the FGCs, social services have become a business, and to maintain it, they must of need be competitive. As a result, the poor who contribute to building these infrastructures cannot access the services.

The doctor's analysis helps throw light to a reoccurring theme among the interviewees of how church members are levied to build schools and at the end of the day, the average church member's children are not able to attend those schools because they are extremely expensive and elitist. It seems like the church is telling the poor that they should be grateful to be alive, but they do not make serious attempts at lifting them to the level those leaders would wish for themselves and their families.

h. Staff Remuneration and the Implications

The hallmark of the FGCs is their avowed hatred of poverty and their commitment to rid humanity of the scourge of poverty. However, as our discussions have shown, it is not clear how serious and how practical these promises of deliverance are. I stumbled on the issue of staff remuneration and discovered what FGCs have done in creating employment through their various enterprises such as schools, guest houses, restaurants, and even the churches themselves. According to an article,

The Redeemed Christian Church of God has over 25,000 churches across the country, and those over 25,000 churches have individuals 'employed' to manage them. Ranging from the lead pastor to the secretary, to the accountant, to the security men, to the maintenance and other various departments where individuals are gainfully employed. If you do a little math, the number of employed individuals in that church alone will be running close to a million. That is for those directly employed by the church only. If I am to go into those who are indirectly employed, the number will skyrocket.²²⁹

As of 2017, the Living Faith Church had about 23,000 regular employees who take their pay from the church and/or its subsidiaries.²³⁰ In a country with a youth unemployment rate of close to 60%, the efforts of the churches in creating these job opportunities are highly innovative and commendable.

But how much are these employees paid? The Living Faith pastor interviewed told me plainly:

What do the pastors take as pay packets? There is nothing to write home about it. A situation where a pastor stays for five years without promotion, earning about sixty thousand (60,000) fifty thousand (50,000) ... It is only God that can pay pastors like what the bishop used to tell us. And God uses people to bless us. This comes in the forms of not only cash, some can even go as far as building houses for pastors, buying cars for their pastor, or giving them landed property, so these are some of the reasons why I say that it is not a function of how much we are paid but the function of your impact upon your church members.²³¹

To start with, if a pastor is trusting God to provide for his needs through the congregation, then the richer the congregation, the better for him. The poor person may not have anything to offer the pastor.

²²⁹ Sky O, "Church Creating Employment: RCCG Has Over 25,000 Branches With Workers, Likewise Other Churches," Opera News <https://ng.opera.news/ng/en/religion/fa29a1b6b04235b320b05f1c08b531be>.

²³⁰ Bishop Oyedepo: "Winners Chapel Now Has 23,000 Regular Employees," Nairaland, <https://www.nairaland.com/4399813/bishop-oyedepo-winners-chapel-now>.

²³¹ Document 14, Anonymous Interview, Jan 2022.

An interviewee mentioned the story of an individual who has served with the Living Faith Church as a teacher for over 25 years, most of which she had lived in one room with her husband and three sons in one of those squalor neighborhoods around Lagos hoping for a breakthrough. About five or six years ago, the church gave her an official 3-bedroom apartment to rent, which changed their living conditions. However, at the end of the month, by the time the church takes the rent for that property from her salary, not much is left for food. So, this teacher works to pay her rent. Since she is close to retirement, her brother wonders what will become of her when she retires and moves out of the official apartment. If all her current income only pays for their rentals, what are her retirement benefits?

The Redeemed Christian Church of God is not different in terms of staff remuneration. I was reliably told that as of 2022, full-time pastors earn between 20-30 thousand Naira a month. Some earn ₦15,000.00. This is in comparison to the grossly inadequate minimum wage of 30 thousand Naira per month. To give an idea of the purchasing power of the Naira, The average price of a 50kg bag of local rice in Nigeria is currently ₦27,000.

So, the question is this, if the FGCs are intent on eradicating poverty as they say, why are their own pastors and workers so poorly paid? Should charity not rightly begin at home?

2. Voices for the FGCs

While the above are the concerns or complaints against the FGCs, as corroborated by a good majority of the participants in this study, there were a few people who vehemently opposed this narrative and who insist that the church is doing her absolute best in the care of the poor. I met one of those in a focus group where he told us the story of his interaction with the RCCG.

a. The church saved me

This is the story of Obinna, one of the administrators with the RCCG today.

I joined the Redeemed Christian Church of God, as a young graduate, who was poor and without assistance. I joined because I heard God's voice directing me to the church. I did not come to seek greener pastures. However, at every juncture of my life, the church and her people have surrounded me and saved me from various calamities. The church supported me during my wedding, during the burial of both of my parents-in-law who died a week to our wedding. Since my wife was an only child, there was no way I would have been able to bear the financial cost of both burials and the wedding at the same time. The church has provided us with emotional, spiritual, and financial support at every point in time.²³²

Obinna, therefore, refutes the claim that these churches are not helping the poor. He insists that the poor in their church are being taken care of. He is adamant that where it seems like the church is not helping, it is because the poor have put up attitudes that make it difficult for the church to relate effectively with them and for them to receive adequate care from the church.

3. Behavioral Attitudes of the Poor and its Effects on the FGCs

Putting together Obinna's views with the view of a few other people interviewed, one can say that while the poor complain about the FGCs, the FGCs also have their consternations and frustrations about the poor. Chief amongst the difficult attitudes they identified were - their Migratory Nature, and what they called, their Insincerity.

a. Migratory Nature

As the administrator of his parish, Obinna told us of the many efforts the church has made to help the poor and how those efforts were subverted by what he called "wanderers."

There are so many wanderers, who wander from one church to the other because they just need help. As a church, we have had to give money to people all the time, young, indigent people, just for them to start

²³² Document 35, Focus Group Meeting Jan. 2022.

businesses. they returned only 25% to us after six months. Some of them move to another church the moment you give that money. For some we called and called and had to follow up, all to no avail, they were gone. I am not trying to defend the church, in fact, the church may not be doing enough, but I would say there has been a concerted effort at relieving the burdens of the poor, but most times, these wanderers have not cooperated.²³³

Obinna's claim is that there are some of the poor who are not willing to take root in the church, they will move from parish A to parish B, even after receiving help from parish A. An RCCG pastor, pastor N O in one of the focus groups also complained about some of these characteristics of the poor:

I also want us to look at the nature and the characteristics of the poor that make it a little bit difficult to solve their problems. They are migratory, in nature. They go from church to church, one church to the other looking for who will help them. When they attend a particular place, and they become notorious, they leave. How do you trace them if you want to help them further?²³⁴

I felt that was a bit harsh but an employer of labor in yet another focus group corroborated these perceptions.

We need to consider this part. The poor people that came to get jobs, once they get the job, do not come back to the church again. Some of them come to look for help when they get help, they stop coming to church. How do you think the people in church who introduced them to the employers will feel? Can that be the reason the church is not favorably disposed toward the poor?²³⁵

One wonders what percentage of the poor keep moving from one church to the other. The fact, however, is that they remain within the confines of the FGCs – moving from one parish to the other in search of the promised good life.

²³³ Document 35, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

²³⁴ Document 5, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

²³⁵ Document 37, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

b. Insincerity

Obinna explained that there are natural groups also called home fellowships. He says membership and need are validated through these home fellowships since they are the medium for the dispensing of welfare assistance. So, he says,

I am telling you the truth, those of them who have been participating in the church, out of these natural groups or the home cells receive a lot of assistance. For our first pregnancy and delivery, we got a bill of 98 thousand Naira and lost the baby. I was not only devastated but also penniless, the church cleared that bill for us. I have seen a whole lot of help from the church, unfortunately, some are not able to access this help because they are not identified with these churches.²³⁶

The migratory nature and the insincerity are intertwined. The church is committed to helping her members and not just any random poor. They have therefore created a system of checks and balances with the house fellowship to ascertain membership and involvement in the church. The house fellowship is a closer-knit church members of the FGCs who live close to each other and commit to meet regularly for Bible study, prayers and general fellowship.

It would then seem that the people who complain that they have not been helped by the church are those who have not really settled into the churches or are pretending to have, but they do not belong to any house fellowship. Another RCCG pastor who spoke in another focus group complained bitterly when he said “It is a problem that a lot of the poor lie, they deceive. So it is difficult for the church to change them to get them out of the poverty level.” Whatever the case is, it is obvious that there is an uncomfortable situation going on here between the FGCs and the poor.

What we have done in this section is to catalog the behavioral attitudes of both the FGCs towards the poor and the poor towards the FGCs. In all, it seems like there is an overall

²³⁶ Document 35, Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

atmosphere of suspicion between the two groups. While the poor believe the FGCs are not working in their best interest, the FGCs believe that the poor are seeking only for the good of their bellies. In spite of this dichotomy of belief, the church keeps growing, the poor keeps coming and remain within the system in spite of their concerns.

Section Three

1. Why then are the Poor in FGCs?

If these dynamics exist between the poor and the church, then one will wonder why the church keeps growing, and why the poor continue to be in the FGCs. I asked that question in all the focus groups and while the leaders and some members of the FGCs would say that the poor are there because they are being helped, other Christians, even some members and leaders of the FGCs and the critics gave some reasons that can be categorized as follows – 1. Hope 2. Style and Organization, 3. Influence of African Traditional Religion, 4. Handouts, 5. Spiritual Hunger.

a. Hope

The overwhelming reason given for why the poor are in the FGCs is simply hope. The poor keep holding up to hope that as they keep doing the right things-pray, give, evangelize- as instructed by the men of God, there will be a paradigm shift in their financial situations. God will remember them for a brighter future. This hope is engendered by the prosperity messages and reinforced by the testimonies of the positive deviants. These deviants are those who come up during each service to testify to answered prayers and miraculous financial interventions, that keep the rest believing that they would soon the next on the line to be blessed by God.

Participants who have at one point or the other been members of the FGCs speak from experience:

“The Poor are exploited in exchange for hope.”²³⁷

“The poor go to church because the church offers hope that tomorrow will be better.

Unfortunately, nothing concrete is done to better tomorrow other than the nominal charity works here and there. The church raises billions in profit every year and what they do is almost nothing when compared to the monies they realize.”²³⁸

"It is very simple. They give you false hope. They give you hope, then, occasionally, they do something spectacular. And give one person the gift of a car or a house. And you begin to hope that you could be next.”²³⁹

People go there for hope. Because many people are trapped in a cycle of hopelessness. And when they go in there, they get very inspirational messages that cannot but lift them and give them that hope to keep going and hope is a tonic for life. So, when people get hope, they can cope better with their situation and that is why you will find in our settings, you do not find a lot of the psychological problems that you find in other places that people do not go to church, hope is a tonic that keeps them alive.”²⁴⁰

“It is lottery now! It is just like a lottery. They hope that someday, someone will bless them. It is just like lottery, they hope that one day, their luck will come.”²⁴¹

With a failing government, the choice of many is limited. The church seems to be the last straw and people go to put their faith in the messages from the pulpits of the FGCs to relieve the predominant stress and engender hope for a better future.

²³⁷ Document 25.10 Anonymous Survey Response, March 2022.

²³⁸ Document 30.4 Anonymous Survey Response, March 2022.

²³⁹ Anonymous Interview D. 10, Jan 2022.

²⁴⁰ Focus Group Meeting D. 38.32, Jan. 2022.

²⁴¹ Focus Group Meeting Document, 37.33.

b. Style, Organization, and the Crowd

Most of these churches are equipped with state-of-the-art instruments and an ambiance that is attractive to the upwardly mobile. They engage trained musicians who perform in near-concert modes. The churches become melting points for young people in the city and so many are there because they just like the style – the ambiance, the music, and all the trappings associated with modern concert-like worship. Church services are designed intentionally to achieve specific ends.

Such churches start with singing and dancing in ways that are cultural. By the time people come in and sing and dance to their favorite tunes, then pray aloud, each letting out their frustrations and expectations, there is a lot of release and hope. If the miracle did not happen last week, it would happen this week. Then the man of God mounts the podium with motivational messages, and straight quotes from the bible, some of which are interpreted without any reference to any known guideline.

Motivational statements like, “You shall be the head and not the tail,” “Jesus died that you may be rich,” “all those who war against you will die this week,” “God will fight your battle,” “this is your week of dominion!” “All your enemies will bow to you, this week will usher in that breakthrough you have been waiting for,” are common among these churches. The quotes are unending. The difference between many of these services and a secular motivational speaker’s gathering is the regular use of the name of Jesus in the church services.

The congregants will be busy shouting “Amen, I receive it,” and other affirmations to the statements and prayers. The services often end with the congregants sealing the message of hope with what is called in the FGCs’ parlance, “a good offering.” Hope is renewed for the next week.

The next week, people will come in with testimonies of diverse breakthroughs and miracles that happened because of the prayers of the man of God, and their faithful giving of their tithes and offerings. The poor keep believing, “it will be my turn next.” And because there are so many people present, there is never a lack of testimonies or a new thing that God has done. And so, people continue to flow to where the crowd is, believing that so many people cannot be wrong. They feel a type of security in identifying with the crowd.

c. The Influence of ATR

The other reason given by participants is the influence of the African Traditional Religion. Most of Nigerian Christians are either first or second-generation Christians, which means that the influence of the African Traditional Religion mindset on their values is not far-fetched. A brief unpacking of the ATR worldview is necessary to understand what the participants mean.

i. The ATR Worldview:

ATR recognizes an omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, supreme God who is the creator of all things. However, this God is distant, far removed, and remote from human daily affairs.^{242, 243} He delegates and dispenses his power through the hierarchical densely populated spiritual world, made up of spiritual beings, spirits and the living dead.²⁴⁴

These are myriads of intractable and capricious spirits locked in an internecine battle at the center of which is humankind.²⁴⁵ The lesser gods/spirits have the capacity for good and for evil, easily manipulatable, and are often used by human enemies, witches, and wizards to harm one by causing barrenness, death, failure, and a host of other misfortunes. They are also known

²⁴² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 1997), 33.

²⁴³ Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 34.

²⁴⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 74.

²⁴⁵ Okorochoa, “Religious Conversion in Africa: Its Missiological Implications,” 168-181.

to obstruct the release of resources for the good life from God if not counteracted. But because the ATR mindset sees these resources as limited, and God as far away, there is the need to mediate and access him through special human agents designated for such a purpose. Therefore, the place of the priest is a most revered position, recognized as vital to attaining the good life.

The sincerity of the priest who is usually known to be a person of power and of the supernatural is taken for granted, therefore no one questions when demand for sacrifice is made. Along with the characteristic respect for those in authority, wisdom demands that the incurably religious African maintains a cordial and obedient relationship with these priests. This is because for him, religion permeates every sphere of human existence and there is no demarcation between the spiritual and the physical. Therefore, these priests are the “make or mar” of not just religion but their entire lives. It, therefore, does not matter whether you have, or you have not, you are not ever to meet a priest empty-handed, you must bring an offering. In ATR, worship of the gods is motivated by fear – fear of the unknown, fear of enemies, fear of bad luck, and every evil.

ii. FGC Pastors as Direct Equivalents of ATR Priests

With intentional indoctrination using scriptures such as,

“I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen. 12: 3), “Touch not my anointed, do my prophets no harm” (Ps. 105:15), and most importantly, Malachi 3:10-12:

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts.

And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the Lord of hosts. (KJV)

These FGC pastors have institutionalized themselves as the direct equivalents of the Old Testament priests. An ATR mindset will never question loyalty or financial and material giving to a priest. Even much more radical is a Christian with an ATR mindset. Therefore, the followers of these men of God shroud them in awe and mystery with a mix of loyalty born out of fear and scriptural ignorance. They are afraid of the fear of falling out of favor with themselves and their God and therefore missing the blessings of God that they mediate. Some fear that the man of God might curse them, and they will be eternally ruined, so they stay.

iii. The God of the Man of God

The followers of these FGC pastors pray according to the name of the God of their men of God – the God of Adeboye, the God of Oyedepo. They even buy physical tokens such as bracelets, car stickers, handkerchief and so on, from these churches and are told that they will be protected from armed robbers, kidnappers, and “the evil eye.”²⁴⁶ So, they remain loyal to these churches and the men of God, and they not only stay on but also continue to pay their tithes and offerings believing that not doing so will surely incur the wrath of God. As a participant would say “You know that there are slangs in Nigeria, - if you do not pay your tithe, your pocket will be tight. Some of these things will make you find money from somewhere and put it into the church.” I will agree with a participant who says that,

Going to church in Nigeria is more like a social activity or a ritual. It does not matter what is preached there, they believe that just by going to these churches, God will bless you, your business will prosper, your enemies

²⁴⁶ Enemies who have the spiritual capacity to harm, like witches and wizards.

will not be able to harm you, etc - they believe the leader, they believe in the general overseer, they believe the teachings of the churches.²⁴⁷

Belonging to these churches is an identity they highly treasure. So, they will stay with the man of God no matter what happens.

d. Handouts

The other reason people gave for why the poor are yet in the FGCs is that, “The crumbs may fall.” That was how one of the participants explained that there are more chances of generosity in church than most poor people can find elsewhere. As another participant put it, “Because some of them still get help in some churches- you still have some churches that support their children education in some form, help with house rents and things like that. in those places people still go knowing that help may still come. It may not be as much as they want, but they will still get some support, no matter how small.” Handouts could be medical, physical, or just simply food. Such handouts could be from individuals or collectively from people in the church, but from my findings, they are hardly ever directly from the coffers of the church.

Such handouts are mostly given at special seasons like Christmas, Easter, New Year, anniversaries and other prominent events in the life of the church or the Nation, Nigerians inherent generosity flows out in gifts like bags of rice, beans, and cooking condiments. Others may bring in used clothes and other items they no longer need for the use of the poor. All these gifts help carry the poor from day to day and relieve some of the burdens for them until they get another set of handouts.

²⁴⁷ Document 9.32, Jan.2022

An RCCG elder also said that there are parishes that have well-developed and efficient welfare departments with a dedicated bank account where members are encouraged to make regular deposits for the needy in their midst. She said this is not just for handouts to the poor but also for poverty alleviation events to teach skills and other essentials.

At the beginning of our interview, the Living Faith pastor said,

We have been giving scholarships especially to the children of orphans in church, the indigent, and the likes. So those are the people that we have been... even the widows, we have been empowering the widows, them to start something. That is what we do in our church. And that is the reason we have a lot of people in the church because they know once they come to Living Faith or Winners Chapel, they will get solutions to their problems.²⁴⁸

It is difficult to understand the pastor's intention, since as the interview progressed and he became more relaxed, he mentioned that the poor are not adequately cared for in his denomination.

An RCCG elder summarized the issue of poverty alleviation in the church with a deep conviction that the church helps the poor, but then added,

We have an adage where I come from, *omi po j'okalo*, meaning: the water you put in the pot is much more than the quantity of flour required for that water to make a meal. Flour is the help given to the poor; water is the number of the poor. This means the help given in church is too small to suffice for the poor people in church. If the population had been smaller, the impact of the church would have been felt.²⁴⁹

In other words, it is not that the church never helps the poor, it is that there are too many poor people that the help given is not sustainable. Moreover, the poor who receives a one-off help

²⁴⁸ Document 14.3 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

²⁴⁹ Document 5.57 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

from one parish might move on, to get other help from other parishes, because if he continues to stay at one parish, helping him may not be sustainable.

As a result, the poor keep moving around the same FGCs, adding and subtracting its numbers, from one parish to the other, while yet remaining in the same denomination because of their poverty alleviation strategy. It is this category that the FGCs call “wanderers” and “migratory.” It is not that they leave, it is that they circulate from one parish of the same denomination to the other in anticipation of handouts.

e. Spiritual Hunger

Some of the poor in the FGCs are looking for God and believe that He is truly in these churches or that He has led them to do a work therein.

Figure VI

16. Why do you think the poor attend these churches?

276 responses



It is this group of people who eventually become leaders in evangelism, bible study and prayer meetings when their zeal and commitment is noticed and acknowledged by the pastor.

Conclusion

The poor you will always have ...

Deut. 15: 4-11(NIV)

⁴ However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, ⁵ if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.

⁷ If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. ⁸ Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.

¹⁰ Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹ There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

From this scripture, from vs 4, God is saying to the Israelites, there is really no need for any Israelite to be poor because I have blessed you beyond your needs, but He adds a clause – “if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands.” By vs. 7, He is saying again, if however, you will not fully obey and consequently anyone is found poor in the land, this and that are what you should do.

By vs. 11, God is sure that there will always be poor people among His people. So God moves from positive certainty to probability and then to a negative certainty because He understands the nature of the people that are called by His name but His command is still the same as it was from the beginning – display an attitude of generous disposition to the poor amongst you. “The poor you will always have” is therefore not His plan, it is the expression of His disappointment on our collective disobedience.

It might seem like the Nigerian Fastest Growing Churches have leveraged on an endemic problem to craft an attractive message for the poor whose population is constantly growing in Nigeria because of the prevailing political situations that have had immense economic effects on

the populace. Through their words and deeds, the FGCs preach a message of hope that is culturally relevant to the familiar African Traditional Religion beliefs of their congregants, promising a miraculous escape from poverty independent of the current situations. Besides, they also provide an ambience appealing to the upwardly mobile while providing handouts sometimes for the poor. So, the poor throng into these churches in search of hope, and a few in search of God.

While churches have always been seen as a haven for the poor all over the world, the mainline churches are different from the FGCs in their theologies and the way they look at the poor.²⁵⁰ Mainline churches usually preach contentment substantiated by God's preferential option for the poor, they are therefore more tolerant and accommodating of the poor in their condition. In addition, they make more demands on themselves in helping the poor than they make on the poor. They therefore provide a safe haven for the poor in their poverty.²⁵¹ The FGCs however believe that it is not the will of God for anyone to be poor, they hold the poor accountable for their condition while providing motivational and spiritual leeways out of poverty. For anyone to remain poor is an anomaly to the message they preach. It is therefore uncomfortable to be poor and to fully belong to the FGCs.

Therefore, while some of the poor complain about unfair, discriminatory and disrespectful treatments meted out to them by the FGCs, the FGCs also complain about the frustrating attitudes of the poor that hinder relationships. I noticed an atmosphere of exploitation and suspicion between the poor and the FGCs. But the FGCs keep growing and the poor remain in these churches for several reasons. Some, because of the motivational messages they hear

²⁵⁰ Onah, Okwuosa, Uroko, "The Church and Poverty Alleviation," 4.

²⁵¹ Duke, Okafor, "Poverty Alleviation Policies," 50-51.

regularly that keep reinforcing the hope of the good life promised, some because of the default ATR mindset that promotes fear, suspicion, and the constant appeasing of deities.

The poor, therefore become loyal to the man of God, depending on his anointing for protection and promotion. Others go from one parish to the other seeking handouts; they may be said to be migratory, but they hardly leave the FGCs; they are simply searching for the promised help. Others are there just because they like their style – the music, the social environment and all the opportunities it offers. There is however a small but significant percentage that stay because of a hunger for God. These are focused on God and their narrative is usually different.

This chapter has focused on the relationship dynamics between the Nigerian FGCs and the poor, the emphasis has not been on how the FGCs understand their condition or on what they are doing to help them, we have focused on understanding how the FGCs interact with human beings who are designated as poor and how these poor see and interact with the FGCs. We have mentioned in passing about what the FGCs attribute to the causes of poverty; however, the next chapter will deal with the intersection of the FGCs and poverty. We want to know the thoughts of Nigerian FGCs on the causes of poverty and if the identified causes will have any effects on their proposed poverty cure.

Chapter 5

Understanding of Poverty as a Human Condition

Introduction

This chapter discusses the thoughts of the FGCs on the causes and subsequently the cure for poverty in the Nigerian context. It also includes the responses of the wider Christian community and the rest of society to these claims. I argue in this chapter that the FGCs understanding of the causes and cures of poverty and their general articulation of poverty as a human condition is convoluted and might not only be seen to constitute a problem to biblical poverty alleviation, but they could also be said to contribute in some way to poverty in Nigeria.

Prior to conversionary religions, the average Nigerian draws his understanding of the causes of poverty from his basic assumption which is shaped primarily by the African Traditional Religion (ATR). ATR sees God as distant or removed from a world of scarce and competing resources. Therefore, poverty is seen as the norm and wealth as an authentication, a tangible affirmation that one has successfully accessed and found favor from God. As in every sphere of life, ATR believes that the spiritual is the causative realm, while the physical is just the manifestation of what has already been decided spiritually. Therefore, poverty and wealth are both rooted in the spirit realm, it is what one's gods have ordained for him. One may therefore work hard and do all the right things, if the gods are not favorably disposed towards him, he will remain poor.

Since resources are scarce and competitive, generosity is encouraged but not to the point of equality or alleviating another's poverty. Blessing from God is accepted as both a privilege and a responsibility. A privilege in the sense that individuals are recognized for their hard work, ingenuity, favor, or for whatever means God has chosen to bestow His blessings on them. They

are therefore distinguished with traditional titles, and special names, and honored and respected publicly as people to be emulated. However, they can only be so honored if they are seen to extend generosity to their community. Whatever anybody acquired was admittedly for him but also for the benefit of the entire community.

Generosity was not a form of socialism, but a healthy marriage of individualism and communalism.²⁵² Generosity was therefore not necessarily motivated by love as much as it was by status. These communities are the natural filial bonding that divides the world into: “us” and “them”. Every acquisition by “us” was to create envy and competition in “them.” In summary, the essence of ATR, therefore, is to placate the gods effectively to obtain and appropriate the scarce resources needed to safely maneuver this present precarious universe to achieve the aspirations of a good life. This mindset seems to have been inherited from the FGCs.

Somewhat like the ATR understanding, Nigerian FGCs leaders from the pulpit and from their books generally posit poverty as a spiritual curse that can therefore only be broken spiritually if the poor cooperate with God especially through the covenant of sowing and reaping. In this study, however, most of the church leaders interviewed were a lot more nuanced about the causes of poverty. They said that even though the spiritual causes of poverty cannot be ignored, the government of the day has been instrumental in creating poverty in the land.

The chapter is written in three sections. The first section discusses how FGCs understand and articulate poverty. The main understanding here is that poverty is spiritually caused and can also be spiritually resolved through the covenant of sowing and reaping. On a more specific and possibly intimate level, the second section discusses what FGC leaders told me they believe causes poverty. From their premise, they prescribe possible cures or means of getting out of

²⁵² Okorocho, “Religious Conversion in Africa: Its Missiological Implications,” 169.

poverty. While they were a lot more nuanced than from the pulpit, they still would not outrightly deny that poverty is spiritually caused and cured.

The opinion of the wider Christian community, critics of the FGCs, the poor themselves, and some of the pastors of the FGCs is the center of discussion in the third section. Here, we see that the discussion is turned on its head when participants assert that the FGCs create and reinforce poverty in the land through their set-up, their teachings, and their activities.

Section One

This section analyzes how FGC leaders posit their understanding of poverty from their pulpits and in their books.

FGC's understanding/theology of poverty - Discoveries from their Pulpits and Books

The hallmark of Nigerian FGCs is their unique perception of the causes and cure of poverty which differs significantly from the understanding of mainline churches.²⁵³ Although the FGCs will not even agree, their articulation of poverty has major similarities with the African Traditional Religion (ATR).²⁵⁴ Incidentally, therein also lies the core of their theology and the secret of their massive appeal. This section discusses this peculiar understanding of the FGCs and their intersection with poverty.

²⁵³ Onah, Okwuosa, Uroko, "The Church and Poverty Alleviation." These authors argue that the Catholic church for instance, teaches that poverty is not accidental or altogether spiritual. It has been created by decisions and policies in the socio-economic political realms, and it is a matter of justice and injustice. Therefore, the church rejects the claim that poverty is a result of laziness or people's unwillingness to work. She also rejects the notion that wealth, riches, health, and prosperity are God's blessings, while poverty and sickness are curses from God and the actions of evil spirits on men. They teach that every human being must be at the side of the poor. (4).

²⁵⁴ Lloyd Jarrison, "Pentecostal Doctrines, Beliefs, Practices and African Traditional Religion," *Augustine Renewal Fellowship*: 2015. This author outlines some of the continuities of ATR in the FGCs.

The Living Faith Church

Bishop David Oyedepo, the founder of Living Faith Church worldwide also known as Winners' Chapel is the leading prosperity preacher in Nigeria and possibly Africa. Oyedepo claims that in 1981, God encountered him in a vision and commissioned him to liberate the world from the oppressions of the devil through the preaching of the Word of faith. He recounts that God subsequently commanded him to go and make His people rich.

The Living Faith Church has since its inception in 1983 grown from a handful of members to become one of the fastest-growing churches globally. The promise of poverty elimination remains the central message. From his numerous books and messages, Bishop Oyedepo's theology can be summarized thus: The good God can only give good things which is why He created a good world that was marred by sin (poverty) when man disobeyed. Out of His goodness, He sent Jesus to pay the price of sin (poverty) and deliver humanity from the curse of the law and from poverty.

A key part of the Oyedepo's theology is that those who receive Jesus also receive the power to break from poverty. But those who do not, God will humiliate until they bow, because even when the unbelievers have wealth, it is not the kingdom type.²⁵⁵ However, Christians must by faith enter the covenant of sowing and reaping to draw their blessings from God.²⁵⁶

For Oyedepo, in his own words,

“Poverty is not only a curse, but also a disease, the cure is the great physician, and his name is called Jesus and his prescriptions are in this documentary called the Bible and

²⁵⁵ Oyedepo, *Breaking Financial Hardship*, 9.

²⁵⁶ Oyedepo, *Breaking Financial Hardship*, 9.

your compliance with his prescription I am sure of automatic cure of your sickness - the disease of poverty!”²⁵⁷

Oyedepo uses Exodus chapter 3 verse 22 and Exodus 12: 36, to connect Moses’ ministry with that of Jesus. He argues that just as Moses brought the children of Israel out from Egypt with the wealth of the Egyptians transferred to them, so also has Jesus brought us out of the world, therefore the wealth of the world is coming to the children of God. If Moses bailed them out of poverty, then Christ has come to bail believers out of poverty. Therefore, no one in the church shall bear the cost of poverty anymore!²⁵⁸

Oyedepo also claims, “Wealth in the kingdom does not answer to prayers, nor does it have respect for fasting. It only answers to a qualitative covenant walk.” He explains the qualitative covenant walk as giving. “There is only one way to get money. This is by giving away what you have. For you to have money, you must make giving your way of life. Give to God and give to brethren in need. This is the only way you can have money.”²⁵⁹

In other words, the nature of poverty is such that you can give your way out of it because as bishop Abioye, Oyedepo’s second in command says,

Giving destroys poverty mentality and instils superiority mentality over materials. Giving puts you in control of things while keeping puts you under control of things. Give to live, give to live abundantly, give to keep giving, give your way out of penury. The greatest message to the poor is, give. The best time to give is when what you have is insufficient. Place it in the hand of the all-sufficient God. Giving is the principal key to coming out of poverty.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ The entire message is available via this link: <https://youtu.be/VTWtkcqIrHE>

²⁵⁸ <https://youtu.be/VTWtkcqIrHE>.

²⁵⁹ <https://youtu.be/VTWtkcqIrHE>.

²⁶⁰ www.davidabioye.org.

From his understanding of poverty, Oyedepo works on delivering the poor as atomized individuals. He motivates them - infusing a sense of confidence and security through his interpretation of the word of God. He also encourages them to develop their life skills. He offers employment and scholarships through his many enterprises and universities. As a hard worker himself, he encourages people to work hard wherever they are.

However, all these are secondary to the key methodology of poverty alleviation which is basically “sowing and reaping.” He encourages his congregants to sow to the church so that the yoke of poverty can be broken. Oyedepo argues that lack of wealth is a lack of light from the word of God, so, hardship generally is a function of ignorance or inadequate understanding. Those who do not have understanding will suffer hardship. Oyedepo believes that God’s prosperity has nothing to do with one’s profession, career, or family background, but with covenant alignment. Therefore, a child of God who does not activate the covenant by giving tithes, offerings, and special seeds, has only himself to blame.

1. RCCG

Pastor Enoch Adeboye was formerly a mathematics professor at the University of Lagos, Nigeria before he took up the mantle of leadership of RCCG in 1981 when the founder passed. Since then, RCCG has grown from near anonymity to global recognition. Poverty alleviation and the general success in the life of the Christian is a major emphasis of their theology.

RCCG claims not to have any definite theology of poverty or wealth. In fact, it is said that when the denomination started, the church was wary of wealth and was very conservative in its teaching on prosperity. The church is still careful today not to be seen in the forefront of prosperity preaching. Pastor Adeboye, however, lays a certain emphasis on giving, on tithes and

offering that seems to suggest a transactional arrangement between God and the church members. For instance, at different times, he has been quoted as saying,

“Let me tell you the truth, the only reason we still take offerings is to get you out of poverty,”²⁶¹

“God would in the midst of the current global hardship abandon those who do not pay tithe and offerings to starve and die.” He then urged those who had been giving monies to RCCG to go “withdraw (funds) from your account with God.”²⁶²

Also, in a New Year 2016 video, Adeboye said Christians risk losing out on heavenly goodies if they didn’t “bring people to church.”²⁶³ On another occasion, while speaking to the pastors in the congregation, Adeboye said he had an instruction for them. He asked that they return to their congregations and tell them: “Anyone who does not pay his/her tithe is not going to heaven, full stop.”²⁶⁴

2. A Similar Background

From the foregoing, even though Adeboye’s prosperity theology may not be as developed as Oyedepo’s, both seem to espouse a similar theology or understanding of poverty as something to be avoided at all costs. This might be because both men stem from a similar background of family poverty and from the same tribe, therefore upholding the same values from their cultures and traditions.

²⁶¹ Pastor Adeboye on Twitter: "Let me tell you the truth; the only reason we still take offerings is to get you out of poverty #TheFloodGatesOfHeaven" / Twitter

²⁶² Oyedepo disagrees with Adeboye. He says Christians are poor because they don't use their brains (neusroom.com)

²⁶³ Rotimi Akinola, “God won’t Bless you if you don't Bring People to Church-Adeboye,” Newsroom, <https://neusroom.com/god-wont-bless-dont-bring-people-church-adeboye/> (neusroom.com).

²⁶⁴ If you Don’t Pay your Tithe, you’re not Going to Heaven” - Pastor Adeboye | WATCH <https://www.bellanaija.com/2018/04/tithe-heaven-pastor-adeboye/>.

Not much is written about Oyedepo's poor background, but Adeboye describes his family's poverty situation as extreme. "I looked at our situation then; my father was so poor that poor people called him poor! And yet he had two wives and many children." His brother concurs,

"It is said that some people came from a difficult background, but ours was far worse. So difficult was our case that it could be likened to being trapped in marshy land. An attempt at putting the second leg in the mud to remove the trapped leg results in both legs getting entrapped."²⁶⁵

Preaching a sermon with the theme, 'Swimming in Glory, Part 7 (Born to Be Great)' the General Overseer recalled an incident about his father:

I looked at his farm; it wasn't big enough to support his family, yet it was going to be divided amongst us when he died. "So, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to die in that poverty. And I knew that the only way out was to study hard in school. I did and gained admission to Ilesha Grammar School (Osun State, Nigeria)."²⁶⁶

It is interesting to note that while Adeboye claims his exit door from poverty was education, which many Nigerians can identify with, he offers the paying of tithes and offering to his congregation as the major doorway to prosperity. It can also be said that Adeboye got saved much later in life as a University professor, unlike Oyedepo who claims to have been saved at the age of 15 and found his way out of poverty through the covenant of sowing and reaping and so preaches the same to all who desire to be free from the scourge of poverty.

Whatever these parallels and similarities are, even when it is not explicitly stated, Oyedepo's theology seems to be what most FGCs believe about poverty. In sum, poverty is not

²⁶⁵ Bisi Daniels, How I Broke the Cycle of Poverty in my Family, Premium Times. July 14, accessed April 13, 2022. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/entertainment/naija-fashion/340763-how-i-broke-the-cycle-of-poverty-in-my-family-pastor-adeboye.html?tztc=1>.

²⁶⁶ RCCG, The Redeemed Christian Church of God, "Swimming in Glory, Part 7 (Born to Be Great)." *Dove TV*. July 5, 2019, accessed October 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjDGBvKOhxQ>.

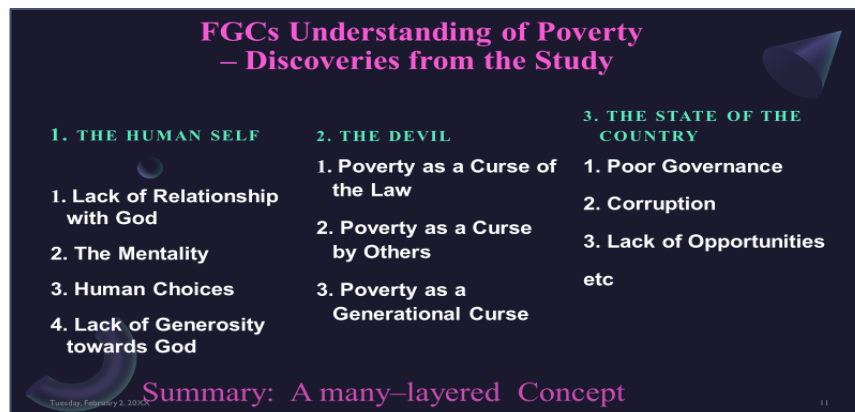
the will of God, it is spiritual, and it can be broken by obeying God's commands of tithing and offering. These activate the spiritual doors of God's abundance and lead the poor to the desired prosperity.

In other words, the FGC leaders tell us that the primary reason Jesus died was to deliver humans from the work of the devil as exemplified by poverty, but to experience this deliverance, people must not only be saved but must also enter God's covenant of sowing and reaping. Despite what other thing they do, poverty will continue to ravage those who ignore these spiritual principles.

In other words, the FGC leaders tell us that the primary reason Jesus died was to deliver humans from the work of the devil as exemplified by poverty, but to experience this deliverance, people must not only be saved but must also enter God's covenant of sowing and reaping. Despite what other thing they do, poverty will continue to ravage those who ignore these spiritual principles.

Section Two

Listening to these FGC leaders from the pulpit or reading their books gives one the impression that the FGCs recognize only the spiritual causes and cures of poverty. But I found a continuum of beliefs as I interviewed the pastors and church representatives. In general, it can be summarized that FGCs recognize three broad categories of the causes of poverty viz - 1. The Human Self, 2. The Devil and 3. The situation in the country. This section therefore discusses in some detail these recognized causes of poverty and how they inform the cures prescribed by the church. At the end of the section, I have summarized my findings about FGC's identified causes of poverty as a many-layered concept.

Figure VIII

FGC’s Understanding/Theology of Poverty - Discoveries from the Study

The RCCG leaders interviewed could not say for sure what the church in general identifies as the cause of poverty. They said that there is not one specific position that could be said to hold for all but that individual pastors preached a variety of things from their convictions. One, however, said that the issue of tithing is significant to what the church believes causes poverty. The other FGC pastors and representatives I interviewed seemed more nuanced about the nature of poverty. While not outrightly refusing the theology of their leaders, they recognized other causes of poverty as secondary sources.

The RCCG pastor who is also in charge of their social engagement structure (CSR)²⁶⁷ for his region broadly speaking identifies the human self, the devil, and the situation in the country as the causes of poverty. The second pastor, a Living Faith pastor felt that “the number one reason for poverty is joblessness, number two is the mentality of the poor and number three is laziness.” This pastor could not precisely identify the root of joblessness, but he took the time to

²⁶⁷ Christian/Church/Corporate Social Responsibility .

explain the issue of mentality and how the church can help. The RCCG regional missions Director said that there was no singular general view of the cause of poverty.

1. The Human Self as a Cause of Poverty:

In seeing the human self as a cause of poverty, there is the assumption that poverty is of the nature that the poor can literally pull themselves up by their bootstraps, albeit with the help of God through the church and the anointed man of God. What the FGCs are saying is that God has already resolved the issue of poverty. The provisions are already made and if the poor make some crucial adjustments, they will receive these provisions and rise out of poverty.

a. Lack of Relationship with God

The RCCG pastor indicated that, “the root of all poverty is sin.” He explains that when people do not know God, it is difficult to access His provisions. One of the participants of the study who has been a member of one of the FGCs said: “Some also feel that you are poor because you are not born again, they preach it, come to Jesus, and all your financial problems will be solved.” This assertion is an ingrained part of the FGC’s theology which explains that when Jesus breaks the yoke of sin over those who come to Him, He also breaks the yoke of poverty over them. They, therefore, invite people to the church; where they will receive Jesus and be set free from poverty.

The entry to the Kingdom of God seems to be littered with gold and only the obedient enter and partake in that gold. This may be the reason why these churches are the fastest growing. They preach a gospel of hope and deliverance from poverty which is exciting to the poor.

The majority of the study’s participants allude to the unavailability of Government

services as a reason for poverty in the country. The only lifeline for the masses is God and these churches assert their place as His representatives, so the poor see them as safe havens where their needs can be met.

b. The Mentality

The Living Faith pastor believes that one's mentality as one of the causes of poverty and he believes that the church can help the poor by changing their mentality. He said:

Some have seen poverty as a normal thing, they don't see it as abnormal, they see it as their lot. And the truth of the matter is that there is no position of a man that God cannot change. You may be poor today; you can become rich tomorrow. People like Bishop Oyedepo have been very, very poor before God made them rich. Because they have another spirit- a different mentality that believes that a poor person today may be rich tomorrow. So, it's all about mentality and I believe that with teaching from the church they can be helped.²⁶⁸

In other words, these “big men” of God at some point in their lives developed a different mentality that attracted the blessings of God and lifted them out of poverty. Another RCCG pastor who was in one of the focus groups agrees with him, he said,

From what I have experienced practically, a lot of people who consider themselves poor have a similar mental belief. You will see a handicapped person, somebody who is crippled, who is on the road, rendering a service. A lot of poor people think and assume that their needs will be met through the rich. And so, they don't even do the bit they need to do. This is one factor that causes poverty.²⁶⁹

The aim of the motivational talk in these churches is likely aimed at curing the mentality of the poor so that they can begin to think rightly to be able to overcome poverty.

²⁶⁸ Document 14.00 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

²⁶⁹ Document 5.47 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

One of the participants a Christian woman leader in her own right explained how it was mandatory to confess the right things in the FCG churches. She said,

You say the things you desire even when you are presently seeing the opposite. The Hillsong song, “Give Thanks” further emphasizes this assertion. They claim, “the scripture says in (Joel 3:10), “Let the weak say I am strong, and the poor say I am rich.” That is to say, you should not speak negatively, no matter your present condition. So, dare to speak and act positively at all times and you will see your condition change for the better.”²⁷⁰

Some respondents believe that poverty could also be due to an individual accepting mental defeat which may lead to discouragement and even laziness. These factors, however, are all seen as issues that can be resolved as people engage in the life of the church by worshipping and hearing the inspirational and motivational messages from the altar. A church faithful explains it this way,

Basically, people in most places are just lazy. The church is also addressing that. We look at society today, we see someone who sits down somewhere, just looking out, looking for somebody to target in church. While they are sharing the grace²⁷¹, they are pointing, they are looking at where they are. While the word is going on in church, and the preacher is talking about what will change people’s lives and their walk with God, they are thinking of the next person they need to meet to tell one story that does not exist. The Church sees laziness as one of the causes of poverty, also ancestral issues, lineage issues, and the church is doing everything possible to help people overcome these challenges.

c. Human Choices

The FGCs see human choices as one of the causes of poverty, not only in Nigeria but also universally. The RCCG Pastor insists that “the poor is where he is circumstantially sometimes as a result of their life choices, poor judgment, and not seizing opportunities.” It goes in line with the contribution of one of the participants in the study, a Nigerian who now lives in the United

²⁷⁰ Document 5.0 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

²⁷¹ In most Nigerian churches, services dismiss with the sharing of grace.

Kingdom (UK) and had been a member of one the FGCs. He said, “Many of these mega churches believe that poverty is a choice. God wants you to be rich. If you are poor, it is your choice.” This stand is further justified with Joshua 24:15,²⁷² “Choose ye this day...,” and so the pastors say, “it is all in your hands, it is your choice, to be poor or to be rich.”

The church members are admonished to always remember that the default position is that God has already made provisions for their wealth and poverty is the anomaly. One of the ways to make the right choice therefore is to agree with the man of God who not only knows the way but also walks the path of prosperity. To agree with the man of God means to faithfully pay the tithes and offerings.

d. Lack of Generosity Towards God

Giving to God is a huge theme amongst the FGCs and it is seen as a major factor among the causes of poverty. These “givings” are under different categories.

The first category of giving is the offering, which is what people give in offering plates during services. However, in some of these churches, there might be upwards of three offerings in one church service. There are also other services apart from the Sunday service, like the mid-week service, including house fellowships and others that come as certain needs arise. Wherever and whenever church people gather, they must give an offering to the Lord.

As was hinted in the previous chapter, in most of these churches, if not all, these offerings are given in such a way that those who do not have to give will be ashamed or at least uncomfortable.

²⁷² Joshua 24.¹⁵ And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD (KJV).

The second category of mandatory giving is the Tithe. The tithe is one-tenth of every income earned and it must be given to the church if you expect God to bless you. Paying your tithe is non-negotiable in accessing the blessing of God and even in making heaven. The RCCG Mission director shared,

Firstly, the church believes that if you don't pay your tithes, things will be tight for you. Which simply means that if you don't pay your tithes, you will be poor, you will not have enough, you will not enjoy abundance. Secondly, they believe that if you don't pay the tithe, you are a thief, you're a robber. And so, robbers will not go to heaven. Thirdly, sometimes when something happens to people, or some people who are poor, so to speak, the first mindset goes like, is this person paying tithe? Maybe the person is not paying tithe, that's why he is poor. So, the tithe aspect is there, and tithe is mandatory. And in some cases, there are tithe cards. So, if you don't have a tithe card, maybe your baby will not be dedicated. But then people get discouraged when they regularly pay their tithes and yet remain poor.²⁷³

The deal is that when you pay your tithes and your offerings, God will rebuke the devourer for your sake. It is these devourers that cause poverty, so if the work of the devourer is still seen in one's life, there is reason to question his faithfulness in tithing.²⁷⁴ As one of the participant's puts it, "Some feel that things are tight for you, because you are not paying tithes, if you are faithful with the payment of your tithe, you should be rich."

The third category of mandatory giving is "sowing" for specific needs. These special needs can be identified in the life of the man of God or the special needs within the church. A church member may decide to sow for a breakthrough in their life or for a promotion in their

²⁷³ Document 12.7 Anonymous Interview, Jan.2022.

²⁷⁴ Mal. 3: 8-11 - **8** Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. **9** Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. **10** Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. **11** And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. (KJV)

place of work. The general understanding is that the more you give, the more God blesses you and the more opportunities to come out of poverty.

2. The Devil

In the Nigerian society, the devil is blamed for anything negative that happens to anyone; whether covert or overt, every factor that does not work for the good of the people is seen to be caused by the devil. The devil is the root of all evil. The assumption, therefore, is that apart from indirectly influencing the other factors mentioned as a cause of poverty, the devil himself is seen by the FGCs as the direct cause of poverty.

In continuing the list of the causes of poverty, the RCCG pastor states that poverty “could be an affliction that comes from the wickedness of the devil, right against communities and even against families, we have spiritual attacks that make people poor.” Some have therefore seen poverty as a curse, not just a curse of the law as scripture attests, but also as specifically inflicted on individuals or on families and on their generations.

a. Poverty as a Curse of the Law

A participant in the diaspora focus group made up of Nigerian nationals who grew up in Nigeria but subsequently moved to other parts of the world for greener pastures had this to say on the cause of poverty,

Looking at RCCG and Winners (living Faith) as a sample for Pentecostal theology particularly, their definition of poverty is seen as a supernatural affliction quite frankly. On one level poverty is a supernatural affliction. It is a curse resulting from the fall of man and sin, it's a devilish affliction, that is the first general definition of poverty, the second is that it is in human terms it's something that results from failure of faith, it's the

consequence of spiritual negligence on the part of the poor. Those two framings are the predominant understanding among those two settings.²⁷⁵

When poverty is said to be caused by the fall, the remedy usually is for the poor to be born again so that he may be delivered from the yoke of poverty as has already been discussed. The promise is that if he is eventually delivered, prosperity will be his natural inheritance.

b. Poverty as a Curse by Others

There is another way that the devil is seen as responsible for poverty. Evil people may use demonic powers to keep others perpetually poor. A university don who is also a Christian leader threw more light on this belief:

Well, I have been in the Pentecostal movement for a long time. In Africa there's this issue of curses, the issue of foundation. And there's so much emphasis on that, that somebody is responsible for poverty, somebody is responsible for you not making progress. I would not deny that. But I believe that there is too much emphasis on that. So, the church leaders will see it as a curse that has to be broken. And that's why some leaders will organize programs in their churches everyday program upon program, because these things are real in the life of people, they keep on flooding there. ... And you know that a pastor told me that - look, I am helpless, I want to say what people will want to hear. And people will want to hear that...., oh, my poverty is because of my grandfather, my poverty is because of my brother, my poverty is because of my mother. People want to shift blame to others.

Basically, people are told that an evil eye is stopping them from making progress in life. It could be their parents or very close relations or close friends or even an outright enemy. They are told that unless these people die or get out of their way, they will remain poor. They therefore pray what they call “dangerous prayers,” asking that such people should die so they can prosper.

²⁷⁵ Document 39.8 Focus Group Meeting, March 2022.

c. Poverty as a Generational Curse

Another way the FGCs see the devil as a cause of poverty is in what is referred to as a generational curse. A Christian leader who is the leader of an international mission organization explained it this way,

One of the very popular ways is what they call intergenerational curse; and they can illustrate it. Because take any African family, four or even three generations down the road, parents were illiterate, uneducated, and poor. And so, they tell them it is a generational curse. And the solution they offer is family deliverance. ...I think there is some truth in the fact that there is generational poverty, but that it is a curse is not necessarily true. There is generational poverty because we have a history of poverty. And the people have not been educated well enough. And those who are educated well enough have not understood how to break generational poverty. So, you find that situation and they cash into it, and they tell you that it's a curse that you inherited and that you need to be free, that's what keeps you coming to them because it is a big man of God that has the power to break the generational poverty. But that's part of what keeps them coming. And he shows you by his own living, that the generational curse has been broken over him. So that's why he has four private jets. He lives in a big mansion. It is his right to drive Bentleys and limousines and to travel first class.²⁷⁶

While the Christian leader dismisses this understanding of poverty, an ardent member of the RCCG has another view. He is one of a few that testify that the church has been a blessing to him. He was in the university when he lost his father, and the church literally took him in. He is one of the paid administrators of the RCCG and strongly validates the church's intersection with poverty generally and especially the issue of generational curses. He says "I am angry, over some statements about the church, let me say this do you know, in Africa, some people are being held down by ancestral curses. Some people are being held down by some issues relating to their lineage. And the church sees part of these things as the cause of poverty."

²⁷⁶ Document 10:8-9 Anonymous Interview, Jan 2022.

When poverty is perceived as caused by these spiritual themes, the church confidently positions herself as the help needed thereby, reinforcing the invitation issued at the beginning, that poverty will be abolished when you come to Christ (the church).

3. The State of Affairs in Nigeria

The third broad category identified by the FGCs as the cause of poverty is the state of the country. As already discussed, the Nigerian situation has been on a slippery decline especially in the last seven years, causing a lot more people to fall into poverty. The problems range from insecurity, corruption, lack of basic infrastructure, nepotism, and general ineptitude resulting in a near collapse in almost every sphere of life – education, health care, trade and commerce, and availability of goods and services. The Naira, Nigeria’s currency of exchange has suffered a 95% depreciation against the US Dollar in the past five years.

The CSR representative explained that an irresponsible and greedy governing class has caused the dearth of essential services that citizens should take for granted, that could enable people to thrive. He mentioned health services, for instance. If standard health amenities are available, he says, people will be healthy and strong, then they will be able to work.

Another RCCG pastor also mentioned the socio-economic aspect as being a contributing factor to the level of poverty in the country. Nigeria is a mono-economy with heavy reliance on crude oil exportation. It is not a manufacturing economy. Nigeria’s prosperity is predicated on the high price of crude oil and proper management of same. Neither has worked well for the country in the past few decades. According to the pastor, “The economic environment is also a factor in causing poverty; people do not have means of livelihood. A lot of university graduates

do not have jobs to do. Some who have jobs to do are underemployed. They are not earning what they ought to earn....”

I asked the CSR Rep. And the RCCG pastor, “if you believe that the state of the country is really the main cause of poverty as many other people do, why then does the church preach what they preach about giving in tithes and offering and how one can give his way out of poverty?” Below is an excerpt of my conversation with the CSR²⁷⁷ Rep.

CSR Rep.:

Every church has their doctrines. If RCCG believes the doctrine, like you said, Give and it shall be given, it’s not the church saying, it is the Bible saying. As you and I know, it’s an adulterated quoting of scripture. It’s quoted like many others, but the thing, the doctrinal base of tithing, there are many ways to look at it. The interpretations, the personnel views, but RCCG as a mission has a position and I am not in a position to discuss that doctrine of tithing. I think it is outside of the CSR thing.²⁷⁸

While there is a consensus on the role that the current situation in the country play in the degree of poverty in Nigeria, the FGCs resort to it as somewhat secondary. Even if the country is so bad, a pastor told me, “People are still prospering here in Nigeria, while there are poor people even in America, the UK and other western societies where the government works. It all depends on what you do with your God.” It is not very clear how certain these respondents are on the role politics and governance play in poverty in Nigeria.

When I persisted in my questioning, the RCCG pastor told me that he believes that,

On a general note, the church has evolved into getting more and more deliberate and intentional about how people need to get out of poverty. Whereas we have always had spiritual emphasis which bothers around preaching on tithing and sowing and reaping and all the like, you cannot devoid yourself from the general environment, if there is a depressed environment... it will affect your financial growth, but that

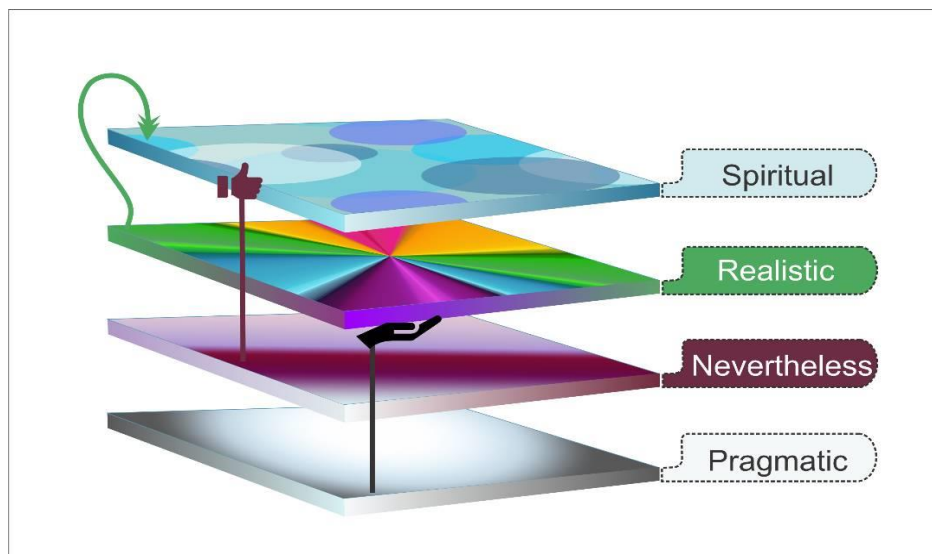
²⁷⁷ CSR is short for Church/Christian/Cooperate Social Responsibility. It is the arm of RCCG that engages with the social concerns of society.

²⁷⁸ Document 11. 10-11 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

notwithstanding, pulpits are shifting and we have to make it clear that we have to look at things from a very balanced view.

What does the above statement imply? Has the church evolved to a place where their original understanding of the cause of poverty is no longer tenable and so is no longer preached or is it an upgrade of the old? I think the FGCs have articulated the causes of poverty in a many-layered concept as described below.

Figure VIII²⁷⁹



The FGC's understanding/theology of poverty – A many-layered concept

I discovered an intriguing feature in this study. There are layers/pages to the FGC's understanding of poverty. It is like a kaleidoscope. The first impression you get is this simplistic theology of poverty, that poverty is spiritually caused, poverty can be spiritually cured, and we

²⁷⁹ Patrick Anyanwu, FGC's Understanding/Theology of Poverty – A Many-Layered Concept, 2023.

have the power to do it if you will comply. I call it the Spiritual layer. This is what is preached and what the public sees.

But when you get a bit closer, that layer is turned over like the pages of a book to reveal a more nuanced view of poverty where other factors are incorporated. This is the Realistic layer. When you want to hold the FGCs accountable to the contents of the first page, they appeal to your sense of reasoning and expect that you should understand how these things work. Unfortunately, the public/poor stay hooked on that first page.

And yet there is a third layer which again establishes the first and frees the FGCs from the responsibility of the second layer. I call it the Nevertheless layer. That layer says, yes, there are these factors in operation but despite all that, if you will do your bit as xyz have done, you will be delivered from poverty. This layer is then reinforced through testimonies of the few positive deviants who got results by whatever means and who are used as examples of the veracity of the doctrine. Now seeing those few, the poor keep holding on expecting that they will be next in line for a miracle. If the church member is not getting the expected result, they are told to examine themselves. It may be that the individual is not carrying out the specified responsibilities.

There is yet another layer, a more recent one which is a response to the public outcry over the perceived indifference to societal poverty by the FGCs. This fourth layer says we are engaged with the second layer; we are doing all we can to address poverty. Can you now leave us alone? But how can people be on that first page and still be meaningfully engaged in poverty alleviation? – a condition they believe should not even exist.

So, everything is muddled up until you understand what page your respondents are on. Occasionally, the respondents move from one page to the other in very quick succession. One minute they are telling you how poverty is a choice, the next they are blaming the government,

the next, generational curses, and before you know it, they are telling you how invested they are in helping the poor. Therefore, discussing how the FGCs intersect with poverty is like the proverbial legend of blind men trying to describe an elephant – it all depends on which part or which layer you are speaking from.

But there is yet another unexpected dimension to the quest for the causes of poverty in Nigeria. That will be the focus of the third section of this chapter.

Section Three

FGC's Understanding/Theology of Poverty – Responses

In this section, we will report how research participants responded to the FGCs' identified causes and cures of poverty. I observe that there are no clear divides in the responses. For instance, some FGC leaders and members' pushback on these FGCs identified causes and cures of poverty as much as the other categories do. A brief explanation of the various categories of participation in the research will help in understanding the discussions in this section.

A. Categories of Participants

For this research, recall that I sought participants from three different categories. The first are leaders and members of the two foremost Nigerian FGCs. The second are the wider Christian community, that is, Christians who are not members of the FGCs. This includes prominent Christian leaders with different mission groups, those involved in apologetics, civil leaders, and other everyday Christians who are aware of FGCs and who may or may not agree with them but who are known to be concerned about the integrity of the Christian testimony.

The third category I refer to as the marketplace – the public space where real life happens, the arena for authentic application of theologies, ideologies and beliefs. The participants from

this category include prominent critics of FGCs' characteristic prosperity preaching and other members of the society who do not have to be Christians but are active in the marketplace.

B. Responses

1. The responses on what the participants described above think about FGC's understanding of the causes of poverty and the remedies they proffer is organized below into three broad headings. These are an agreement, a disagreement, and an opinion.

An Agreement

The three categories of respondents described above agree with the FGCs that the human self, the devil, and the state of the country could be causes of poverty in Nigeria. In fact, they emphasize the issue of mentality and laziness and acknowledge that the devil could work in many ways to impoverish humans. They insist, however, that the state of the nation is a major issue in the conversation. They remarked that the same Nigerians who are "oppressed" by the devil leave the shores of the country and make progress all over the world where they go.

If it was the human self and the devil that were chiefly responsible for poverty, would their situation not have remained the same or even worse since those two factors did not change in their new location? Instead, what changed was that they left the country, therefore they insist that it is the country that is bringing the worst out of its people and making it seem like the devil is more active than he really is.

2. A Disagreement

Most participants, especially from the second and third categories, and even some pastors and members of the FGCs felt that the cures for poverty the FGCs propose are only means to people's pockets. They strongly asserted that poverty alleviation was never a priority; that the leaders of the FGCs are manipulating the poor and exploiting their vulnerability to sponsor their expensive lifestyles. In fact, some of the critics and surprisingly even some members of the FGCs claim that the church is one of the causes of poverty in Nigeria.

3. An Opinion: FGCs, a Cause of Poverty?

The discussion was turned on its head when I began to hear participants across board insisting that there are ways the FGCs reinforce the causes of poverty in Nigeria. It was interesting to hear two FGC leaders make that assertion as did many from the other two categories. But there was a little bit of dissonance in that submission. A few participants, precisely two ladies who I later learned were influential members of RCCG acknowledged that there is such an impression that the FGCs are contributing to poverty, but they vehemently disagreed with the opinion. One of them said,

“I know that churches preach, “bring your money even to the poor, bring what you have, you must pay your tithe and your offerings” and all of that. Yes, that is there, but those are not at all the principal or in fact it doesn't even feature as one of cardinal reasons for poverty in the nation.”²⁸⁰

The other lady had almost the same view as the first lady, she says,

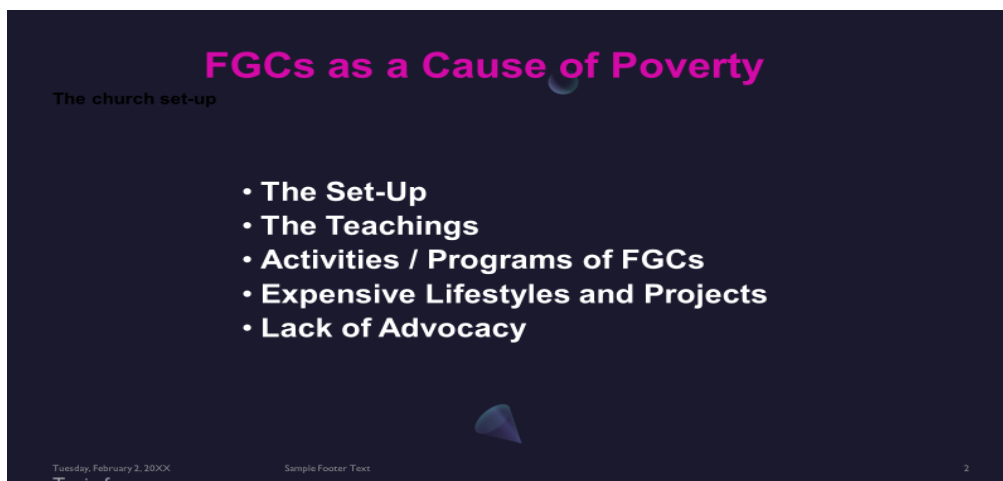
And I know that a lot of these are being pushed out there and that's part of the mistrust a lot of people have about the church. That the focus is more of what the church can get out of the people than what they can give to the

²⁸⁰ Document 5.00 Focus Group, Jan. 2022.

people. Yes, that is there. But if we're asking the question that what is actually the cause of poverty in Nigeria, it is not so much about what the church is preaching and how much the church is trying to get into the pockets of people.²⁸¹

Well, the significant issue for me in this discussion was that despite the ladies' allegiance to their churches and how eager they were to defend them, they still acknowledged that these situations are real happenings in the FGCs. I then had to pay attention to know how the FGCs could be said to be a cause of poverty in Nigeria and I got an earful.

Figure IX



Research participants pointed out several aspects of the church that they felt caused poverty. They talked about the set-up of these churches as intentionally designed to make money from the naivety of the poor, others talked about the lifestyle of these pastors, their reluctance to speak truth to power, but the overwhelming emphasis was on the teachings of the church and how it affects the psyche of the poor in response.

²⁸¹ Document 5.00 Focus Group, Jan. 2022.

a. The Church Set-up

One of Christian leaders I interviewed seemed to have pulled together the opinion of many about the set-up of the FGCs. While I was about FGCs understanding of poverty, he faced me up and said,

All these Mega churches you mentioned - How are they registered in Corporate Affairs Commission of Nigeria? What is the ownership structure? When the founders pass away, who will take over? Who succeeds them? When you look at the leadership structure, I'm sorry, I can only conclude it is a business. People are running family businesses, because where family members have failed to succeed them, it often results in a crisis, and they further split. If I set it up for my son to succeed me, and put the structure that makes it impossible for non-family members to succeed me, what do you call that? It's a business, and if it is a business, it is for profit, and if it is for profits, then they are not designed for building God's kingdom, they are building family businesses. So put the two of them together and answer the question whether it is deceit or not.²⁸²

He is insinuating, as are many others, that the FGCs are not designed to understand poverty in such a way as to help the poor, that they are set up as a family business aimed at profiteering. Participants gave several examples to substantiate the point. This could be an issue for Living Faith Church, but it is still difficult to see how RCCG for instance can be said to be a family business since the original founder is long dead and his children did not succeed him. The argument then is that every business does whatever it can to make gains, it can sometimes do some giveaways just to attract more customers.

b. Teachings of the Church

Another Christian leader took the time to identify the highlights of the teachings of the FGCs and how these teachings affect the members of the FGCs.

²⁸² Document 10.00. Anonymous Interview Jan. 2022.

It is the poor who really fill these churches, if you want to look at the proportion of rich people to the poor, the poor will be like 90%. Most of the money that these churches have come from the poor. And it is based on the teachings that they have received – they talk about the woman, that widow in the Bible, who gave all she had. They also emphasize the fact that if you can't give when you have little, then you can't give when you have much. Then they quote all these scriptures, there is one that withholds much, but it tends to poverty, but there is one that ...scatters and receives more... (Prov. 11.24) to encourage people not to be tight-fisted but to give liberally to them. So that's just the basis why the poor keep giving, because they hope for a greater tomorrow that someday, they will give and as the preachers say- you can give your way out of poverty.²⁸³

Respondents took a good amount of time to discuss these teachings and they insist that the basic teaching of the FGCs has inherent problems and does not have what it takes to alleviate poverty, if anything it could even create poverty when taken seriously as most of the members do. They identified several ways these teachings are faulty. These are the teachings are based on a wrong premise, it misplaces emphasis and absolves direct human responsibility in poverty alleviation and hinges everything on the spiritual and the miraculous as well as having no relevance in the marketplace.

i. Wrong Premise

A Christian leader from the wider society who has been in the FGCs until recently responded this way –

The message of the FGCs is based on an unreal premise that God wants everyone of His children to be rich and that God has put in a man the anointing that makes everyone rich. So, what it does is that it creates unfulfillable expectations and because of that people go out on a wild goose chase, creating desires that are unrealistic and unfulfillable. That on its own is a wrong premise. The focus of the gospel is not in making people rich, the aim of salvation is not wealth, it is not deliverance from poverty, although that happens, but it is not the chief pursuit, salvation is the focus, and every other thing will come by the side. And when you tell people, - I am not saying you should not work hard, I am not saying you should not acquire skills but the chief means of getting out of poverty is by giving. What is that supposed to mean? So, you are in effect downplaying the well proven methods of self-sustenance that God has put in place which is work. but now work has

²⁸³ Document 9.00. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

become secondary and the main way you say for people to get out of poverty is by giving and giving to the man of God.²⁸⁴

The interesting thing is that these messages are preached regularly and openly and the poor who are desperate do all they can to abide by them so they can get out of poverty.

ii. Self-Responsibility

Participants present these teachings which are the bedrocks of these FGCs as in themselves inimical to progress and to self-responsibility. They claim that people are looking for breakthroughs, for that miraculous thing that will happen to get them out of poverty, everyone is on the lookout for their miracle. They ask: “what percentage of people get it? What happens to the majority that never experience this breakthrough?” One of the Christian leaders continues on this theme and said,

So, people go giving the little they have, they call it “sowing seed”, not because they love God or that they want to meet a need but because they love themselves and are hoping for this great thing that will suddenly happen to give them this huge breakthrough where the money, they gave will be nothing comparatively. In most cases, nothing happens, life continues as normal, but they have given out what they could have used to do one thing or the other to improve their lives. When they have done all these and they are not getting what they are told will happen, - the miraculous breakthroughs eluded them, they are now told that maybe it is a bad eye, an evil relation, a generational curse and they now begin to accuse people of hindering their progress. This also creates seeds of discord in families, amongst friends. Meanwhile all these would have been resolved if people are taught to work hard, put in your best, God will bless your work, but be contented with whatever you have as you continue to work hard and spend frugally.²⁸⁵

It therefore seems like contentment has no place in this set-up, since it is the will of God for everyone to be rich – you must be great, confess it, claim it, act it until you get it etc. Your

²⁸⁴ Document 38.00 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

²⁸⁵ Document 38.00 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

breakthrough is on the way, and it will only come when you have given to the man of God – to a fertile soil as they call it - meaning a ministry that is potent enough to command the blessings of God – usually that ministry is theirs. As a result, self-responsibility is de-emphasized and the whole focus is placed on giving. This is not even to mention the anarchy that these teachings create in families and in society.

A catholic Reverend Father from the Catholic Church in Nigeria collaborated these views to show how these teachings diminish human agency.

There is a sense in which Pentecostal teaching can contribute to the diminution of human agents. People tend to locate the source of their problems outside of themselves, because they tell you that it is somebody from your village, it is some demonic or spiritual possession. But, in most cases, we can explain scientifically why you are poor. Either you have come from a poor family, you have not gone to school, or you have not learned a trade. I'm not denying that there could be demonic or spiritual influence. But I'm saying that these teachings promote irrationality in terms of how they explain social realities. In a country with bad governance, you're likely to have a higher rate of unemployment, this is what you should expect normally, when society doesn't work well. But when you explain it as somebody who is trying to manipulate your destiny in the village, it doesn't tell you that you can do A, B, C and D to get out of your situation, it tells you that what you should do to get out of your situation is to attack the spiritual root of your problem. So, it diminishes human agency, people do not take responsibility for their own growth and upliftment. They tend to locate their problems in things outside of themselves.²⁸⁶

iii. Community Participation

Thirdly, respondents also talked about how the understanding of poverty in the teachings of the FGCs minimizes community involvement and responsibility. They posit that as a general principle in scriptures, poverty is not such that the poor can substantially help themselves out, they must be supported by the community to make headway. As another participant opines,

²⁸⁶ Document 18.00 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

From the Bible, the church has always understood poverty as requiring community effort and the expectation is that poverty is alleviated through the fellowship of the brethren. was not a magical thing that happened miraculously, it was as practical as those who had more gave to those who had little and that was the same principle of manna, those who gathered too much did not waste and those who gathered little did not lack. It was God that through human generosity mediated so that there was no excess and there was no lack.²⁸⁷

These participants claim that by telling people to “sow” for their personal breakthrough, FGCs create or reinforce poverty by diminishing community participation and responsibility.

Meanwhile the church is a body, a community and the Christian life can never be truly lived outside of community.

iv. The Marketplace

Additionally, one of the FGC pastors also complained that members are not taught how to live the Christians life in the marketplace. According to him, the gospel messages that are taught are “hanging,” they are not such that people could relate with as a menial job person to enable them to move from one level to the other, especially from poverty to sustenance.

You know, so I’m not taught to be a Christian in the marketplace. I am taught to be a Christian in the church. The poor will remain poor if they don't practice the practical aspects of Christianity in their offices or in their businesses, The bible message should be something that we can relate to, something that is practical, something that meets the need of people. But that is not the case, because the messages are too virtual, too abstract, too disconnected from real life. So, these are some ways I think the church is not helping.²⁸⁸

Closely related to this concern of detachment from real life is the complaint of participants about the influence of FGCs programs and demands on the members.

c. Activities / Programs of FGCs

²⁸⁷ Document 18.00 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

²⁸⁸ Document 12.03 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

A leader in the RCCG told me that,

Some of the church programs create poverty. Why will you have programs during workday when somebody is supposed to be at work and at work times, not lunchtime? If you take for example, a person who sells small things, maybe a roadside groundnut seller, the time the person should be at the store selling, the person comes to church, and you think it's spirituality. I don't think so, I have a problem with that, and I have spoken up severally to the effect, but it continues to happen.²⁸⁹

He is trying to describe a situation where members of these churches are asked to come to church almost every day of the week. Sometimes, there are programs running in church during working hours and on weekdays. Some SMEs close shops just to be in church. Since they have been told that it is not their business that will bless them, it is the miracle of God, a special breakthrough that will change their lives miraculously, it is easy to close shop to go for the program, who knows if that is when the said breakthrough will come, after all, how much do they make in a day when compared to the breakthrough they are expecting?

It should also be noted that offerings are taken in each of these services. So, the poor end up burning their candles from both ends. They do not have enough time to do their business, they also must give to the church the little they have made as tithes and offerings.

We also heard the story of a woman whose employer refused to grant her a week to go to one of the FGC conferences, but she “by faith” still went for the conference, when she came back, her employer sacked her. Without a job, she plunged into poverty and the church was not there to offer her a job or the help she needed.

Sometimes, these conferences are out of town, and members must do whatever they can to be there. A doctor told us of an experience he had with a woman whose child needed medical attention, but she had to go to a church event, by the time she came back after a week, the

²⁸⁹ Document 18.00 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

malaria disease had progressed into the cerebral form, and the child went into a coma. The child came out of a coma when they started her on quinine, but she spent two weeks in the hospital and a lot of money, all because somebody has been telling her a lie.

The doctor also told us how he met people in the hospital who brought small bottles of holy water from these churches. He said “I asked her how much each bottle costs. She said, 5000 Naira. I said, Oh my God, it means if I have a 500-gallon of “Holy Water,” I'm going to be a billionaire by selling small bottles for 5000 Naira each. This is money taken away from a very poor person. Somebody has been telling him a lie. That is why they are in poverty. So, the church is teaching a lie.”²⁹⁰

There were numerous stories of this type, how ordinary people engaged in their personal business, though little, joined the church and lost focus. They were either always in church praying and believing for a breakthrough or they were running around serving the pastors, or they ended up sowing what little they had into the church in anticipation of the promised miraculous breakthrough. In all the cases, those members ended up worse than they were financially before they joined the church. The doctor rounded it up by saying,

When Christ enters a life, He truly changes the dynamics. It changes our relationship with people, it changes your priorities in life, changes your focus, it changes so many things that if you have been empowered to know, the change that Jesus really desires to bring, you should be able to build the network that will pull you out of poverty. And unfortunately, because we are putting a lie, the people that are supposed to help pull you out of poverty are the same people pushing you into poverty. Because they set up programs that not only deprive you of work and relationship time but also make extraneous demands on your purse.²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ Document 38.08 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

²⁹¹ Document 18.00 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

The doctor is affirming that Christianity does set off the process of getting people out of poverty when well appropriated. He however regrets that this has not been the case with the Nigerian FGCs where people seem to have been fed a lie.

This does not mean that everyone in the FGCs neglects their businesses and becomes poor, the RCCG leader clarified that this applies chiefly to those who are struggling financially and who come to church as a safe net. His emphasis is that members should be told the truth about life instead of being tied up by endless activities that hardly add value to their lives.

d. Expensive Lifestyles and Projects

Participants also noted other ways that they felt the FGCs create poverty. They mentioned how offerings from the poor are used to fund big projects and the expensive lifestyle of the men of God and their families. Here are some of the contributions from the survey:

The church in general, not just the RCCG or Living Faith preach prosperity and even take the little from the poor in the name of sowing seeds and tithing in faith. Some people don't even have enough, and you preach that they shouldn't deny God of seeds, first fruits, tithes, numerous offerings and so many other means to take the little from them. All they say to them is that they are exercising their faith. The poor people in these churches don't even have access to good health care or schools owned by the church and yet, they are manipulated to make 'donations in faith'. These churches unknowingly encourage crimes among the youth as they begin to think that you are blessed by God when you have money. The church has fundamentally depleted the society.²⁹²

These churches have made things worse in Nigeria. They grow on the labor and sweat of the poor while the pastor is further enriched and acquiring unnecessary property.²⁹³

Most of the money that these churches have come from the poor. And it's based on the teachings that they have received – like for instance Living Faith when their first university - covenant University was being built, I think they were being levied. They levied the members. They levied according to maybe your income, so the media talked about these things, it

²⁹² Document 25 p1 in Participant 25-34. Survey Response, March 2022.

²⁹³ Document 32 p1 in Participant 35-44, Part 7. Survey Response, March 2022.

was built for the poor who funded it, yet those poor cannot attend the school.²⁹⁴

I have decided not to overlabor these points because I consider them all offshoots of the teachings of the church, but they are still worth mentioning. In addition, participants suggest that apart from creating poverty, “these churches unknowingly encourage crimes among the youth as they begin to think that you are blessed by God when you have money.” Consequently, the teachings and displays of the FGCs are named as complicit in the prevailing nationwide corruption.

e. Lack of Advocacy

Asides from the teachings of the FGCs, participants claim that Nigerian churches reinforce the causes of poverty by their reluctance to speak truth to power. In my discussion with one of the FGC leaders responsible for poverty alleviation for his region, I said that I totally understand the use of handouts and other means of poverty alleviation methods as palliatives, as first aids, but I then asked: if as you have told me, poor governance is the root cause of poverty in Nigeria, how will these efforts ultimately get us out of poverty without engaging the government in any form of advocacy or is the church just intentionally first-aiding poverty?

The leader’s reply was telling. His reply was that the church cannot be held accountable for bad governance and that he did not think that advocacy was part of their poverty alleviation blueprint. He added that there is a lot of engagement between Nigerian Christian Organizations and the government at different levels but that he is in no position to speak for them.

The Catholic Priest however, brought out an interesting perspective when he talked about the use of public funds to promote religion.

²⁹⁴ Document 9.32 pp 3-4. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

There are government officials who may not even be directly corrupt but use public funds to promote their religion. Imagine that there are Christian governors who get invited to churches and they give millions of state money to the church, an amount they will never give if it were their personal funds. And some people make this argument that sponsorship of religious causes is also part of public good, maybe, but the truth is that public funds should be used for public purposes, not for the promotion of any denomination or even religion. These funds were assigned for something and when they are not used for their purpose, the public is impoverished. And how can the church rebuke its sponsors if they falter?²⁹⁵

The Reverend Father implies, and participants agree, that the church could have been compromised by receiving money from government officials and may not be able to speak out against their excesses and corrupt practices.

A participant noted that some of them speak boldly against the government whenever the need arises. He reminded us that Oyedepo has always condemned the government's attitude towards Christians, while Adeboye along with other pastors recently staged a peaceful demonstration against the rampant killings in the country, so it may not be true to say they do not speak truth to power. To which another participant reminded us that advocacy and criticism are not the same thing, he said,

Many of those in government are Christians, they belong to these churches, do their pastors hold them responsible to deliver their promises to the public? Who holds them accountable after they have given their big tithes and offerings? That is what we are talking about. It is not to stand up on the pulpit and lash out on a Muslim president, but to raise agents who can plead the cause of the poor in integrity.²⁹⁶

The Reverend Father further added,

Politicians in Nigeria don't take religious leaders seriously because they know that you can stand in the pulpit and shout in the morning but at night you are in their house. And when you are leaving, they give you an

²⁹⁵ Document 18.00. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

²⁹⁶ Document 18.00. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

envelope that has \$10,000, \$20,000. So, whatever you are saying they just know that this one is just making noise, don't mind him, was he not here last night? So, that's prophetic witness. That's one thing that we are lacking in Nigerian Christianity.²⁹⁷

Apart from the church's engagement with government officials, many more participants are concerned with the quality-of-life Christians from these churches live once they get into the government. They also wonder if the top leaders in the churches themselves are not compromised in the way they receive public funds for church and personal consumption. In all these ways and possibly more, participants insist that Nigerian FGCs actively impoverish and reinforce the causes of poverty in the country. More of these impacts on society will be discussed in further detail in chapter 7.

Conclusion

However, there need be no poor people among you ... (Deut. 15:4).

In summary, it seems like the FGCs have a seven-step approach to their intersection with poverty. These are:

1. Give your life to Christ. In other words, join the church. This is the beginning of your miracle.
2. Be faithful. In other words, get involved in the programs of the church, evangelize i.e., bring more people to church.
3. And most importantly, be faithful in giving, tithes and offerings. You may not make heaven without faithfully participating in giving.

²⁹⁷ Document 18.00 Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

4. Have faith, and continue to sow i.e., give whatever you have to fund church programs.
God will surely remember you in due season.
5. Go through spiritual deliverance if the breakthrough is unduly delayed since generational curses could be involved.
6. Testimonies - Testify to the goodness of the Lord always even when you are yet to see the full miracle.
7. Handouts, Scholarships, Seminars, and skills acquisition workshops – The church continues to distribute these as much as it can to people who yet remain in poverty.

Although poverty is a common human phenomenon, FGCs have little or no tolerance for its existence. It is an enemy that must be confronted, attacked and aggressively eliminated. FGC leaders see poverty as a cancer that must be excised, it is not only a curse, but also a disease that has no place in the body of Christ because Jesus by His death on the cross has delivered humanity from the curse of the law.

While this FGC position on poverty might sound extreme, it could be close to God's stand as Deut. 15:4 says and as we reiterate, "there need not be any poor in the land." The only difference in these positions might be in the understanding of the causes and cure of poverty.

The causes and cure of poverty have been at the center of our discussion in this chapter. While FGC leaders in their messages and books attribute poverty to spiritual causes and therefore proffer spiritual cures by insisting that poverty is a curse that must be cast out by no other way than by generously giving to God in tithes, offerings, and in pledges, the FGC leaders I spoke with had a broader approach. They did not in any way deny the spiritual causes of

poverty, but they also added other factors like the state of affairs of the country and the mentality of the human self, both of which could impede the progress of individuals, thus creating poverty.

At the end of the two sections, I felt like the understanding of poverty in FGCs unfolds in at least four layers or circles – the spiritual, the realistic, the nevertheless, and the pragmatic. It was not easy to pin down a general opinion of the causes of poverty in these circles, rather people spoke from where they were in their beliefs at the time.

The wider society affirmed most of the claims of the FGCs on the causes of poverty but then added that the FGCs themselves are complicit in creating poverty in Nigeria. They claim that by positing poverty as a spiritual problem and drawing remedies from that premise, the FGCs go against the biblically known ways of poverty alleviation that entail human responsibility; they, therefore, create a lot more problems than there already are. They could even be said to be causing or reinforcing the causes of poverty in the land.

I do not hear them saying that the FGCs are the only causes of poverty in Nigeria, they claim that most of the other known causes of poverty are either escalated or reinforced by the practices of the FGCs.

We have discussed the existential relationship between the poor and the FGCs in chapter Four. In this chapter, considering the massive population involved in Nigerian FGCs, articulating what FGCs think about the causes of poverty is important because it could help throw more light into the dynamics of the relationship between the poor and the FGCs. In addition, that knowledge will help in understanding the premise of FGC's poverty alleviation priorities and strategies, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Intersection with Poverty Alleviation as a task – An Organizational Analysis

Introduction

Following the discussions on FGC's intersection with the poor and their understanding of the causes and cure of poverty, this chapter is an organizational analysis of the poverty alleviation structures and efforts of the FGCs. The chapter starts from the mission statements to investigate the place of poverty alleviation in the agenda of the FGCs and concludes that though there are efforts to the effect, poverty alleviation is not the priority of Nigerian fastest growing churches.

Some research respondents believe that the FGCs are not primarily concerned about poverty alleviation, hence the lack of mention of poverty alleviation in their mission statements.

One of the respondents puts it this way:

“RCCG has a welfare department and CSR for social good, but they are not properly funded. Seminars and skills acquisition workshops are done, but the Church's vision and mission statement do not have anything to do with the poor, so I believe poverty alleviation is not a major concern.”²⁹⁸

The respondents acknowledge that there are structures set up for the care of the poor in the FGCs, but they most argue that these structures cannot operate optimally because of the lack of proper attention given to poverty alleviation even from the articulation of their mission statements.

I have therefore, drawn from interviews of different pastors and church representatives, from the churches' websites, and from ethnographic studies of some of their programs to first

²⁹⁸ Document 33 p1 in Participant 45- 55, part 1, Survey Response, March 2022.

understand their initial thoughts and beliefs about poverty alleviation and to investigate what they are currently doing for the poor.

The FGC leaders I talked to understand the need for poverty alleviation and most agreed that it is a Christian responsibility. However, when I asked for the details of how it was done, there was no fixed general method of poverty alleviation that was common to all the church parishes. It seemed like each parish did what they could.

In the first section of this chapter, I focus on the mission statements of the FGCs, searching for their concern for the poor and their plans for Poverty Alleviation. While some other Nigerian churches who are actively engaged in poverty alleviation spell it clearly on their mission statements, practical poverty alleviation is not mentioned in the mission statements of the FGCs. The second section discusses the Poverty Alleviation methodology of the FGCs. The FGCs have welfare departments established to take care of the poor in the church. Additionally, RCCG also has the Christian Social Responsibility (CSR) that connects the church with the needs of society. The third section of the chapter synthesizes responses to decipher the place of poverty alleviation in the Nigerian church. It concludes to say that poverty alleviation is not a priority of the FGCs.

Section One

In this section, I argue that whatever position the FGCs take regarding poverty alleviation is a product of a deeper dynamics of their DNA and will therefore be reflected in some way in their mission statement.

A. Poverty Alleviation and the Mission of the Nigerian Church

I have extensively pulled from the website of both the Redeemed Christian Church of God and the Living Faith Church to understand their initial thoughts on poverty alleviation. In both cases, their documents had no mention of any attention to poverty alleviation as a task.

1. Redeemed Christian Church of God

The RCCG has on its website an elaborate description of what it considers to be its mission and raison d'être.²⁹⁹

Mission & Vision

1. To make heaven.
2. To take as many people with us.
3. To have a member of RCCG in every family of all nations.
4. To accomplish No. 1 above, holiness will be our lifestyle.
5. To accomplish No. 2 and 3 above, we will plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries.
- 6) We will pursue these objectives until every Nation in the world is reached for the Lord Jesus Christ.³⁰⁰

On the section on Beliefs, it explains it to such details that there are no doubts what its self-understanding of its mission in the world and to Nigeria is. It talks about God, the Trinity, the devil, repentance, water baptism etc. The closest the document came to

²⁹⁹ "Mission and Vision," RCCG, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://www.rccg.org/mission-and-vision/>.

³⁰⁰ "Mission and Vision."

addressing the poor was on the topic, “Our Garments.” The garment to be put on here is charity. The document says,

We believe that any born again soul is a child of God and is clothed with white garment which is the Righteousness of Christ. It is received freely, a gift unto them that lead a victorious life – Rev. 19:7-8. **Furthermore, we are advised to put on charity**, which is the bond of perfectness – Col. 3:13-14. It is not our policy to have special robes. We believe that all members must be moderate in adornment. “Not with braided hair, or gold or pearls, or costly array, but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” I Tim. 2:8-9; I Peter 3:1-6; Gen. 35:1-4; Ex. 32:1-8.³⁰¹

Again, there was no mention of the poor, poverty, or poverty alleviation.

2. The Living Faith Church

The Living Faith Church aka Winner’s Chapel spells out their mandate on their website:³⁰²

“Our Mandate for ministry was received from the LORD Himself, in an 18-hour vision. During this vision, a commission was received from the LORD to liberate mankind in all facets of human existence, to restore broken destinies, to bring healing to the infirmed.”³⁰³

This was the Divine mandate received from the LORD:

“Now the hour has come to liberate the world from all oppressions of the devil **through** the preaching of the word of faith, and I am sending you to undertake this task.”³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ RCCG IT Department, “The Redeemed Christian Church of God,” accessed March 28, 2023. <https://www.rccg.org/>.

³⁰² Living Faith Church Worldwide International, <https://faithtabernacle.org.ng/>.

³⁰³ “Living Faith Church Worldwide.”

³⁰⁴ “Living Faith Church Worldwide.”

“Today, testimonies of liberation *through* our messages, books, tapes, magazines, and other periodicals are most humbling. The word of faith is working like fire for the liberation of mankind across the nations.”³⁰⁵

The document asserts that,

the Holy Ghost further inspired the servant of God, Dr. David Oyedepo, to classify the Word of Faith He has committed into his hands into the specific areas of emphasis, in direct response to Isaiah 40:6, “The voice said, Cry. And he said, “What shall I cry?” He has named these 12 areas of emphasis as the 12 Pillars of our Commission. We have crossed Jordan into power, bearing the ark of liberation. Here are the 12 stones, after the order of Joshua 4:1-8, 20-24. Having stood firm upon these twelve stones! And they have resulted in breakthroughs - both for the ministry and all that are partakers with us, of the same grace.³⁰⁶

These twelve areas of emphasis are identified as **1) Faith, 2) The Word, 3) The Supernatural,**

4) Praise, 5) The Holy Spirit, 6) Prosperity - "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." 3 John 2. "Cry yet, saying, thus saith the Lord of hosts; My cities through prosperity shall yet be spread abroad..." (3 John 2; Psalm 35:27; Zech. 1:17),

7) Vision, 8) Prayer, 9) Healing, 10) Wisdom, 11) Consecration and 12) Success - "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success." (Joshua 1:8-10).

In the RCCG, poverty alleviation did not make the list of their focus. In the Living Faith Church, it seems like poverty alleviation is the core of the mandate, however their promise is that

³⁰⁵ “Living Faith Church Worldwide.”

³⁰⁶ “Living Faith Church Worldwide.”

it will be done through the preaching of the word. In both, there is no mention of any specific practical method of poverty alleviation.

iii. Other Churches

In comparison, two churches that have been known to be practically involved with the poor in Nigeria had poverty alleviation prominently displayed on their website. The first is the Omega Power Ministry (OPM) with its headquarters in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The document from her website reads: “OPM Foundation is the charity arm of Omega power Ministries. OPM believes in practical Christianity through giving to others. Our foundation help many less privilege persons through series of humanitarian schemes.”³⁰⁷

This church is known for her massive poverty alleviation efforts. They have a world class hospital that gives free medical care to the poor including free maternity care before and after delivery. They have free schools and free accommodation for the poor. They give scholarships to the indigent to study in Nigeria and outside the country, they train people in skills and set them up in different jobs after. The founder Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere says he funds all these projects from the tithes and offerings he receives from the church.³⁰⁸

The other is This Present House led by Dr. Tony Rapu and headquartered in Lagos. They also state their commitment on their website this way, “Social Outreach: Our vision is to reach out, give hope, rehabilitate, educate, and empower impoverished persons in order to achieve

³⁰⁷ Omega Power Ministries, “OPM Headquarters,” [https://opmworldwide.com/.OPM foundation](https://opmworldwide.com/.OPM%20foundation).

³⁰⁸ Omega Power Ministries, “OPM Headquarters,” [https://opmworldwide.com/.OPM foundation](https://opmworldwide.com/.OPM%20foundation).

individual and community transformation.³⁰⁹ This church is known for the rehabilitation of drug addicts.³¹⁰ They also have a free school for the indigent.³¹¹

Another reference church is House on the Rock led by Pastor Paul Adefarasin. It is not known for any commitment to the poor but is seen as a church that helps network elites. They have stated on their website that,

Our mission is to position the unexpected and the unlikely for the prolific move of God in the 21st Century and beyond. We are committed to ministering to your destiny; to assist you through the Word and covenant relationships to become all that God has called you to become, and to do all that He has called you to do. You have a destiny in God.³¹²

These reference churches are not included in the FGCs because though they might have a large following, they have not attained the population of any of the two churches in this study command.

The point here is that the mission statement of any organization is a good place to discover their priorities since it is articulated by the founders to show what they consider fundamental to their existence. Since the FGCs promise poverty alleviation as their *raison d'être*, it is expected that the methodology of poverty alleviation will feature prominently in their mission statement.

One might then conclude as earlier stated that the lack of mention of poverty alleviation in the mission statement of FGCs is significant and should be duly considered in discussing their intersection with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation.

³⁰⁹ “About House on the Rock Cathedral Christian Church.” House On The Rock, June 7, 2021, <https://houseontherock.org.ng/lagos/about-us-2/>.

³¹⁰ Vanessa Obioha, “Freedom Foundation Offers Refuge to Drug Addicts,” THISDAY, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2018/05/20/freedom-foundation-offers-refuge-to-drug-addicts/>.

³¹¹ Mrs. Nkoyo Rapu - Freedom Foundation - Freedom Foundation, <https://www.freedomfoundationng.org/>

³¹² “About House on the Rock Cathedral Christian Church,” House On The Rock, June 7, 2021, <https://houseontherock.org.ng/lagos/about-us-2/>.

Poverty Alleviation - A Priority or an Addendum?

During this research, there was this undertone from respondents of the FGCs suggesting that “poverty alleviation is not the church’s mandate and even though we will do our best, nobody should think that is what we are set for.” One wonders if this disposition is a result of their stated mission. For instance, in a particular focus group, an RCCG Pastor who was obviously irritated and defensive at the ongoing discussion of the responsibility of the church in poverty alleviation said,

We need to consider what the role of the church is? Why is there a church? What is the mission of the church? Because the emphasis has been on whether the church is set up just for the poor, who need food, and all that stuff. If you look at Isaiah, chapter 61, verses one and two, it talks about the purpose of the church. You know, it is about good news to the meek, it is about binding up the brokenhearted, liberty to the captives, opening of prison doors to those that are bound, proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord. So, I would rather look at the needy and the intervention of the church.³¹³

But he yet went on to tell us about how much RCCG (the church in which he pastors) has expended on the poor.

The church should do more than feeding, handing out food, and so on and so forth. And let me talk from the example of RCCG. RCCG has a platform called His Love Foundation. In the past three years the church, through this platform has invested a whopping sum of 18.4 billion naira (\$41,207,002) in interventions at different levels. Both feeding, housing, healthcare, roads, rehabilitation, and so on and so forth. The churches are not industry, they are not manufacturing companies.³¹⁴

It is difficult to put together what this pastor is saying but he is trying to say that, even though the central purpose of the church is not poverty alleviation, that they have done very well. In yet another focus group, another prominent leader of the RCCG had this to say:

I am one of those who do not agree with a lot of people's position about the church. The primary objective of the church is not welfare. Welfare is

³¹³ Document 5.44. Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

³¹⁴ Document 5.45. Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

just like an addendum. The church is to grow us spiritually. We learn from the Church, we go out there with whatever we are taught in the church, and we conquer. Now, the Bible says that there will always be the poor in our midst, we should take care of them. But I do not think it is the primary objective, or role of the church.

We just paid almost 18 million Naira (\$40,311) to take care of a child who is in Egypt now. A lady just did thanksgiving last Sunday, we raised almost 14 million naira (\$31,353) for her to do kidney transplant. The church did not give a dime, but the money came from within the church. So, the church is, for me, a society where people dwell, and the poor, the rich, and those in between they all get settled by way of network.³¹⁵

What I hear him saying is that poverty alleviation is what the church should do and is doing, but it is not center stage, it is an addendum that should not interfere with the main objectives of the church. One then wonders if these responses are more in alignment with the mission of the church than the expectations for poverty alleviation. Going back to the initial statement of inquiry.

The RCCG has a welfare department and CSR for social good, but they are not properly funded. Seminars and skills acquisition workshops are done but the Church's vision and mission statement do not have anything to do with the poor, so I believe poverty alleviation is not a major concern³¹⁶

From this perspective, it might seem like poverty alleviation is truly not a major concern. But that is not the totality of the story.

Section Two

While some respondents argue that poverty alleviation is not of priority concern to the FGCs, it does not mean that they do not help the poor. If anything, there are structures set up to

³¹⁵ Document 35.54 Focus Group Meeting, Jan. 2022.

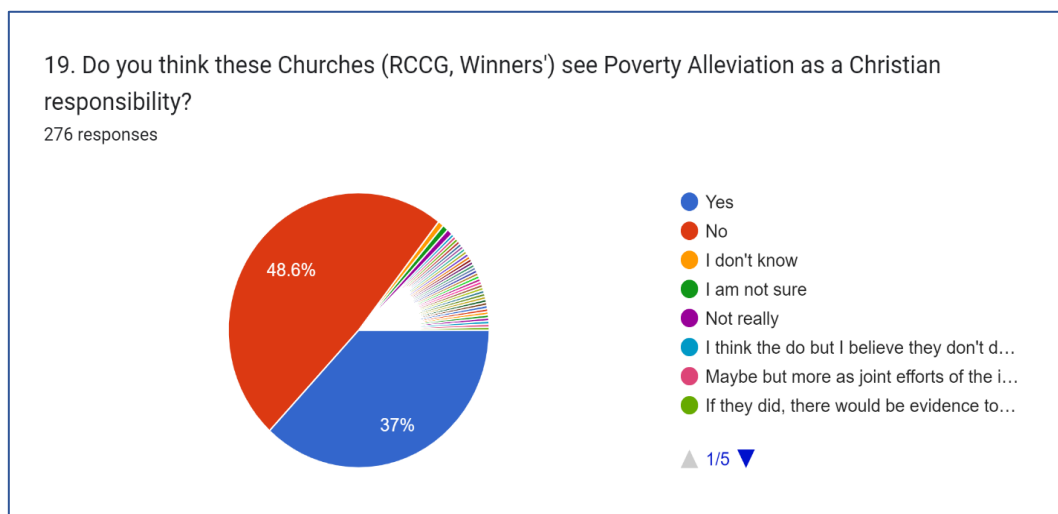
³¹⁶ Document 33 p1 in Participant 45- 55, part 1, Survey Response, March 2022.

assist the poor and to create intersections with society in general. This section discusses the poverty alleviation structures and efforts of the FGCs.

FGC's Intersection with Poverty Alleviation

48.6% of my research respondents do not think that the FGCs consider poverty alleviation as a Christian responsibility, 37% think they do, while 14.4% cannot say for sure. However, RCCG leaders informed me that CSR - Christian Social Responsibility is an organized response to the needs of the poor as is clearly written in the policy statement of the RCCG CSR Program.³¹⁷

Figure X³¹⁸



A. RCCG

Since it is said to be RCCG's response to the poor, this part of the section focusses on CSR and its organization and activities.

³¹⁷ PowerPoint Presentation (hislovefoundation.com) RCCG CSR POLICY DOCUMENT PART 1

³¹⁸ Survey Finding.

What is CSR – Christian/Corporate Social Responsibility

Being an exclusively RCCG organization, CSR has been described as a conscious avenue for Christians to make visible impact in various key areas of society. On this website³¹⁹ they refer to it as Corporate Social Responsibility and assert that it is rooted in Christianity because “the church is meant to be an example for the world to follow and not the other way round.” They further elucidate: “Where many see societal challenges and its scale all around the world, we see an opportunity to take decisive effort to creating solutions as we work with people, communities, leaders, and governments worldwide.”³²⁰

Yet on another website, it is referred to as Christian Social Responsibility, the Christian replaced with Corporate. Here, it is described as “a faith-based obligation to meet societal needs through the demonstration of love that positively impacts communities and individuals.”³²¹ Whether referred to as “Corporate” or “Christian,” CSR serves as a bridge from the RCCG to the wider society.

I was not able to decipher the year of inception of CSR. One pastor said he did not know for sure. The other said it is what the church has always done, but some respondents explain that Christian charity has never been absent from the RCCG but that the organized response in the form of CSR, is a recent move to ward off public criticism of the church’s seeming lack of intersection with the poor.

³¹⁹ RCCG CSR.

³²⁰ RCCG CSR.

³²¹ PowerPoint Presentation (hislovefoundation.com) RCCG CSR POLICY DOCUMENT PART 1.

i. Organization

The CSR initiative is sub-divided into eight identifiable sections. These are, Social, Health, Education, Business, Arts and Culture, Government and Sports; represented by the acronym SHEMBAGS as described on their website.³²² Therefore, CSR is not only concerned with poverty alleviation, but it also intersects with other aspects of society. It is established to positively impact society globally by creating intersections with individuals and organizations.

ii. The Biblical Foundations of CSR

As seen from their website, CSR's convictions are based on the implications of the following biblical passages and parables.

Job 29:12-16 and Revelation 14:13 highlight the rewards of charity, while Luke 16:19-31 is the story of the rich man and Lazarus, obviously emphasizing the eternal implication of neglecting the poor. James 1:27 clearly defines the care of widows and orphans as the definition of true religion and James 2:14-16 tells the importance of works as an expression of genuine faith.

The CSR document emphasize Acts 2: 44 – 47 as an example of the care of the poor from the New Testament church and the parable of the goat and the sheep (Matt. 25: 25:31,32,41-46) to emphasize what is most important to God.

In sum, the leadership of RCCG CSR insist that attention to social concerns is “a matter of life and death, heaven & hell”³²³ and that in line with Christian tradition, the church must not ignore glaring human concerns if the Church will not lose her influence and relevance globally.

Confirming the written documents, the RCCG pastors interviewed showed a clear understanding of the need for poverty alleviation. One of the pastors in charge of a regional CSR

³²² RCCG CSR.

³²³ PowerPoint Presentation (hislovefoundation.com) RCCG CSR POLICY DOCUMENT PART 1.

explained that CSR is primed after the SDG, the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations and is therefore holistic just like the Christian life itself is. He explained that social responsibility is integral to the Christian life, therefore CSR is concerned about the spirit, the soul, and the body.

Drawing from the early church, the pastor says that he sees God's addition of masses of congregants to their church as a trust with implications for their holistic care.

So, it is like saying that, if we cannot guarantee their holistic well-being, then why do we bring them into the church? So, the Lord God Almighty will bring souls to you because he has entrusted you with the ability to take care of them. And that ability includes feeding them. Jesus Christ, for example, when he had worked with the people, for a couple of days, and they were about to leave, because they were hungry, he charged His disciples to feed them. He was not going to allow them to go without feeding them. So, poverty alleviation is integral to the ministry of Jesus Christ. And if we want to be who we claim to be as Christians, then it is just our lifestyle. It is not something that is outside who we are, what we stand for.³²⁴

He emphasized that what the Bible defines as true religion is the care of the vulnerable in society and for him, Matt. 25: 41 suggests that such engagement seemed to be “the marking scheme” of the life of a Christian. He, therefore, wondered how anyone would neglect the implication that “our marking scheme is about the things that we do, not just about the prayers that we pray, not even all about evangelizing alone. It is really about the responsibility we bring into the entire body.”

³²⁴ Document 44.5. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

iii. Structure of CSR

RCCG CSR is centrally led by The Assistant Continental Overseer and The Intercontinental Overseer CSR, Pastor Idowu Iluyomade. From the intercontinental level, CSR distils to the regions, to the provinces, to the zones, and finally to the parishes. Each parish is autonomous and must craft its own CSR activities according to the needs around them. Every province has assistant pastors in charge of CSR who are mandated to have a 7-man committee that drives the CSR for each province spread across the country. And one of the things that this committee does is needs-assessment.

I asked why the headquarters of CSR, a ministry to the poor, is situated in Lekki, the affluent area of Lagos, I was told that the location of the headquarters has little or no influence on the functioning of the provinces who must do their work according to the felt needs around them. As seen in the document, there is an elaborate plan on how to engage in the eight SHEMBAG categories which differ from province to province.

iv. Activities of CSR

This subsection discusses the activities of the CSR at the national level comprising of the regions, provinces, zones, and parishes and at the Intercontinental level.

1. Parishes, Zones, Provinces, and Regions

Parishes may, from their needs assessment, decide to focus on some specific needs usually targeted towards society at large. However, in practical terms, it seems like the regional level is more functional. For instance, a region took up issues around social upliftment. They therefore visit prisons, hospitals, and orphanages. They donate to the needs of the inmates,

encourage them by the preaching of the word. In addition, they also target nearby slums to provide medical services, food packs and encouragement. They establish feeding centers in the churches and dispense food daily to the neighborhood. They also have a rehabilitation center, where drug addicts and mental health patients are cared for.

The church also runs schools. Each of those schools is owned by provinces and can grant scholarships to students. The pastor explains –

We placed somebody in the Olu community near where the Redeemed secondary school is located on scholarship – from beginning – his first year to when the boy completed school. That was a deliberate intervention. We did not know the person; we only asked the community leaders to give us somebody that we were going to sponsor in the school. Now, that is just one of the kinds of isolated cases which I can speak about. But like I said, I mean, this activity runs across all provinces. So, in each of the provinces, the CSR activities are based on the needs that they have assessed in that area.³²⁵

On trying to find out if these programs are simply ad hoc or if they had programs designed to take people from poverty to sustenance, the CSR rep. I interviewed said their programs were not just ad hoc but mostly sustainable and gave several examples to the effect. Educationally, he said there are people who are funded all the way from secondary school, schools that are equipped and some adopted for funding. They commit to the school by equipping their library; they follow up on the students, check their results and assess their needs, supply them with water and other necessities.

The rep. further said that the vocational training program does not end with the people acquiring the skill; rather, the church sets them up in a trade and follows up on their progress.

³²⁵ Document 13.6-7. Anonymous Interview, Jan 2022.

They hold them accountable by making them repay part of the money to make sure they do not abandon the trade at the slightest challenge.

As a result, the trainees stay, and they do the trade and achieve results. In addition, he mentioned to me that they have also adopted the community where they are located, that they provide health care and offer jobs to some of those they trained through the vocational program. He concluded by assuring me of the sustainability of their programs, but he also added that he can only speak for his own region, he knows that the blueprint should work as well for all other regions, but he cannot guarantee what the others do with it.

So, for me that is sustainable, it is not touch and go. So over time, individuals are going to emerge, who you can easily point out and say their lives have been transformed because of their encounter with the church's CSR program. That I can tell you. Now I am not able to speak for every region, every province, but I can tell you that the blueprint is structured to take care of both long term and short-term programs.³²⁶

2. Intercontinental Level

On the intercontinental level, "His Love Foundation," the global charity arm of the Redeemed Christian Church of God's Christian Social Responsibility (CSR), recently celebrated the church's 70th anniversary with the dedication of two Dialysis Centers donated to the South-Eastern Region of Nigeria. This brings to ten the total number of Dialysis Centers set up by the foundation in various states of the country. These centers are usually named after the General Overseer and his wife, Enoch and Folu Adeboye. Each of the new centers will have 3 units of Dialysis Machines, and a Medical Water Reserve Osmosis Purification System, in addition one center will also get a power generation plant.

³²⁶ Document 11.7. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

During the COVID-19 crises, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, RCCG, Pastor Enoch Adeboye donated some medical supplies to the Lagos State Government to support its efforts in equipping medical staff with necessary protective gears needed to contain the coronavirus pandemic. The items include 8,000 hand sanitizers, 8,000 surgical face masks and 200,000 hand gloves.

As at date, the intercontinental overseer of CSR Pastor Iluyomade states that “His Love Foundation” has executed close to one million projects and has impacted over 166 million lives with over N32 billion (an equivalent of \$76,648,288.00) on its various projects nationwide in the last four years. This he says is in fulfillment of its strategic objective of “Help for the helpless, Hope for the hopeless, Food for the hungry, and Strength for the weak.”³²⁷

V. Budget and Funding of CSR

The importance attached to any initiative is usually reflected in its level of priority on the organization's budget. I therefore sought to investigate how CSR is funded and its place in the budget of RCCG.

It was not possible to find out the budget for CSR, whether at the national level, parishes, zones, provinces, or regional level. Neither was one available at the intercontinental level. The CSR representative told me that he does not have the budget for his own province but that there surely will be for the national level, that it is possible that the people in charge are not willing to disclose it. When I kept pressing, the leadership I interviewed told me plainly that there is no budget for the CSR. The church does not apportion/designate a particular amount of money at the start of the year to the financing of CSR. That for me was quite confusing. So, I went ahead to ask for the source of funding for the CSR.

³²⁷ YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAUEXK7b1Os..>

The CSR rep. interviewed told me that he may not be able to speak for the general operations of CSR but that,

It is possible that the provinces are levied a certain amount that they must contribute towards CSR. I do not know that amount and it just depends on the guy in charge of the region and how he wants to do it, but I know that the regions, the provinces have a mandate to ensure that they impact on significant CSR activities.³²⁸

Speaking specifically for his parish, the CSR Representative told me that CSR in his province is funded by the church, with church here meaning the individual members of the church.

There is a designated account and so there is no limit. For example, this is the beginning of the year and I have asked the team to put their plans together for the year. When they tell me what they must do, I will have a budget and we will look at it. So, it is not like there must be a certain amount of money. It is not money driven. It is more like project driven. And then if we have a project that we want to do, now, we do not have enough money in our bank account, then we will source for funds either through the church leadership, or we have partners who are church members as well who are happy to be part of our projects. So, usually there are several ways to fund things.³²⁹

I expressed my concern that several things that are well done and that are priority are usually put on the budget, like I would expect them to indicate that no matter what happens, the church will put in this percentage of whatever fund we have into the CSR.

The CSR rep. explained that there must be a budget at the national level, but that he does not know exactly how much, since he is not in the administrative hierarchy. He says he only knows for his own sphere and that he has already told me how he operates and how their activities are not limited to/by budget. However, he insisted that there is a budget.

³²⁸ Document 11.3. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

³²⁹ Document 11.3-4. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

But there is a budget, it is not like there is none. There is for sure. They may not want to tell you because of the organization's structure. They may not have the leverage to share that, I am serious. But they are in the position to, and it depends on who you are speaking with. If you speak with pastor Frank (not his real name) for example, that is an assistant pastor in charge of the province's CSR, all he will tell you is what his province spends on CSR. He will not know what the region spends, and nobody is going to tell him that.³³⁰

Well, I also did contact pastor Frank, and he told me flat out that there is no budget for his province and that he does not know about any for the national church.

In concluding my discussion with the CSR Representative, I asked if the methods he described are unique to his parish or if this is how CSR works in all the parishes, or if his methods are borne out of his personal vision and zeal. He replied,

There is a blueprint that includes all of this and even more. So now the extent of implementation or execution, whichever one would then depend on the leadership within the area, province, or region. So, yes, there is a global blueprint that if discussed in detail will accomplish a lot more than what I have told you. But whether it gets done to that extent or not would depend on who is at the steering wheel.³³¹

The Representative told me that these things are done by the people, so it is not like the church draws from the tithes and offerings of the people to execute these projects, but that people contribute towards the CSR. In other words, the functioning of CSR for any of the categories depends on the magnanimity of the members of these parishes, provinces, or regions.

vi. Funding of CSR - The Trinity Towers

³³⁰ Document 11.3-4. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

³³¹ Document 11.3-4. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

RCCG intends to end the scarcity of funds for its CSR operations through the construction of the multi-billion Naira Trinity Towers. Despite all the arguments against, it seems like funding of CSR activities is a problem indeed and they have decided to solve the funding problem through the construction of the Trinity Towers.

The Trinity Towers is in a prime location of over 13,000 sq. meters of contemporary real estate spanning 12 floors within easy reach of Lagos' finest commercial and residential environments. It boasts of a multi-story car park for 670 cars, 5000-seater concert hall, other multi-purpose halls sitting over 2000 people, indoor amusement for children and shopping strip. Other attractions for the tower include two cinema halls, a gymnasium, rooftop swimming pool, a helipad, rooftop tennis court, a food court and a games arcade. A medical center, a café and restaurant, banking halls, and an ATM gallery are other attractions in this tower under construction.

According to the RCCG authorities, the design of the structure is deliberate to achieve the objective of raising consistent, long-term funding for social intervention programs as most of the floor spaces will be leased out. Trinity Towers was set up to generate income that would enable the church to carry out its wide range of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. Since according to them, all the funds will go to charity, the expected rental income which will be more than N2 billion (about \$4.5 million) per annum is the kind of money the church will have for its CSR.³³²

To generate funds for the project, the church in the interim has engaged in crowd funding by offering attractive packages to donors.

³³² "Trinity Towers," RCCG CITY OF DAVID - About Trinity Towers, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://cityofdauidng.org/about-trinity-towers>.

CSR - Another Perspective

I was still curious about the workings of CSR nationally, since the rep. I interviewed was in Lagos, I also spoke with an RCCG leader from a different region for further clarification.

I got a slightly different perspective of CSR from my interview with this pastor-insider who has been with the church since 1983 and have been involved in the mission department since 1985. He is currently one of the regional missions' coordinators. On asking about the CSR and its operations, he casually responded: "We use CSR for go-a-fishing."³³³ "Because sometimes they do some things like building of well, borehole, all those things, so we use them." I recalled that an RCCG pastor had earlier distinguished between CSR and the welfare department when he said,

You may argue that sometimes we do have an interplay between what welfare is and what CSR is, which will probably be looking at the fact that welfare will be what you do internally, and CSR will be what you do externally, but the reality at the end of the day is that whether internally or externally it is a sum total of the human beings that exist in the environment. So, at that point, then you cannot really separate. So, one can say that CSR is the response of the church to both what is done internally and what is done externally to the entire society in poverty alleviation.³³⁴

I did not understand those nuances before then. Even though he later tried to play it down, I realized that he was telling me that CSR is for the outsiders, a form of evangelistic public relations aimed at people who are not yet inside the church. The information equipped me to ask this RCCG insider if there is any set of guidelines on how to intersect with the poor in the

³³³ Go-a-fishing is a set time when the church goes out to evangelize in order to plant more churches. One of the key missions of the church is to plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries.

³³⁴ Document 44.8. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

church, to which he offered some clarity on the inner workings of the church and to further confirm the earlier remarks on the differences between welfare and CSR.

There are two sides of people who are poor - the ones that are members of the church, and then the ones that are not members of the church. For the ones that are members of the church, there is a welfare department, which is very inadequate because they depend on support from members of the church, and usually, it is poor. What they have in their coffers is usually very little and so they are not able to take care of the poor people who are members of the church. If they have need for anything, they go meet the welfare department, and the department will refer them to their house caring fellowships. If you don't belong to a house fellowship, it is difficult for them to attend to you, that is the welfare.

Sometimes the parishes do what they call Jesus' supermarket like once in a year, when they have family week, they sell items, you know, at the lowest possible price. They ask people to bring items like clothing, biscuits, food stuff, etc. And they sell them like garage sales. And that is for members of the church who are poor, they are given the privilege to buy items at the lowest prices.³³⁵

He then explained how the church through CSR intersects with those they are evangelizing who are not church members.

Then on the other hand, for those who are not members of the Church, we engage them outside when we go for church planting. And most times, when we go for church planting, we go with used clothes, sometimes we start with medical missions, reaching out to them with drugs, we cook bags of rice and give them food for the period – not longer than a few days. And it is also not adequate. The downside is that after we do those things, we leave. But the needs are still there. So, it is not sustainable. After you plant the church, everybody leaves and then only the pastor is there, then those people who came and ate the rice and everything will start disturbing the pastor. And at that time everybody had left. So sometimes what we do is not sustainable. And it also more or less backfires.³³⁶

³³⁵ Document 12 p4. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

³³⁶ Document 12 p4. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

He told me he wishes that the CSR could get involved in meeting the felt needs of the people with more sustainable projects that will endure even when the church has done its activities and left. He gave an example of where they renovated the community school because they needed to use the school as accommodation during the church planting activity. He says that the community has remained grateful for the gesture. He lamented that, “The level of sustainability of our CSR projects is just about 20%.”³³⁷

On asking, he told me that there is no plan in the church that takes a poor person to sustenance.

There is no such plan. In fact, when these indigent people come to the church with needs, most of the pastors feel that they are being taken advantage of. Maybe they are fraudsters who are just telling you they need money, so there is that suspicion. And so, they will want to ask- Okay, which is your house fellowship group? So, if you do not belong to any, we cannot give you anything. And then sometimes, they will announce that people should go through their house fellowship centers to get something from the church in terms of welfare. But plan as per plan, there are no such plans and there are no budgets. In some cases, when churches account for money used, you will discover that welfare is the lowest, the money they use in servicing generator, the power plants is more than the money they use for welfare.³³⁸

The pastor-insider listed several reasons for the lack of sustenance plans for the poor and explained why one cannot blame the pastors alone for such a situation. He said that when auditors come and they discover that the pastors assisted a poor person with a certain amount of money, they do not believe it, in fact, they act as if the pastors have embezzled money.

The pastors are therefore restricted from attending to poor people the way they would have loved, lest anyone accuse them of embezzlement. He added that in some cases, the pastors are given a ceiling of amount of money that they must not exceed under any circumstance. So,

³³⁷ Document 12.01. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

³³⁸ Document 12.01. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

there is nothing the pastor can do even with glaring poverty. Under those conditions, the pastors do not attend to the needs, or they give different excuses, toss them around until they are frustrated, give up and leave the pastor alone.

He went on to tell me about the dire circumstances of members during the pandemic. He recounted how people were out of work, and the economy was down, but they still come to church, they still give an offering, and they pay transport fare to church. Sometimes the church organizes programs during the day and still requests offerings, further impoverishing the parishioners. He complains that when they are finally down and out and ask for help, they are told that the financial ceiling limit has been reached.

So, I told him all the things I had heard about CSR and asked if it was a ruse? What does CSR do? He explained that,

CSR is the corporate social responsibility of the church. They source the funds needed to finance capital projects which most of the time are not exactly targeted towards poverty alleviation. I will say that CSR is more of boosting the image of the church, rather than helping the poor per say. For example, they take photographs to show that we are doing something - not necessarily that we want to meet the needs of these peoples. There is a lot CSR can do if we are intentional in helping the poor and if the church can provide the needed funds. But as it is now, CSR officials must source the operational costs. It is difficult for the pastors too. He must raise money from the same congregation to give to CSR and for the general running of the church. So, he is agitated that if they give money to CSR, when the time comes to buy a new microphone, or to renovate the church building, they will not have money. So, if for example, RCCG designates a certain percentage of the offering to CSR, I think it will help a great deal.³³⁹

This again goes to confirm that as important as they posture it, there is no specific budget designation for CSR in RCCG operations.

³³⁹ Document 12 p4. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

A. Living Faith Church

This part of the chapter concentrates on the poverty alleviation methods of the Living Faith Church

i. Basic Ideology for Poverty Alleviation

From both the written-out mandate and his numerous messages and books, the president and founder of Living Faith Church Bishop David Oyedepo maintains a spiritual perspective towards poverty alleviation. In his recent message titled the subject of Divine Provision or godly prosperity, he encapsulates all that he has taught for years as he preaches thus,

This is what God says – quoting from 2 Cor. 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. So, in redemption, the curse of poverty was averted. The day Christ was crucified on the tree, your lack and my want were crucified with Him. So as far as God is concerned, we are not permitted to be poor, we are not permitted to be in lack and want because Jesus became poor that you and I through His poverty might be made rich. So, it is an open-ended provision – he became poor that you and I through His poverty might be made rich.

He goes on to explain that there are conditions to the provision:

And God’s condition says – while the earth remains, seed time and harvest shall not cease. Therefore, Give and it shall be given to you good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over shall men give into your bosom. Gen. 8:22 and then you go ahead and read other scriptures Lk. 6:38.

Bishop Oyedepo reiterates that they have “giving” as the capital access into that provision of abundance but that even that is not enough, there is more to it than just giving. And he then explains,

So, according to 2 Cor.8.9, our provision for prosperity is established in redemption; there is no questioning that fact, but our access requires that we possess a working knowledge of the conditions. Our capital access therefore is giving, but not just giving, giving according to the guideline of

scriptures. What are the guidelines? Giving is God's gateway to abundance but how do we give acceptably, productively, how do we ensure that our giving generates results?

He insists that if scriptural guidelines are not complied with, the giving may not be effective in eradicating poverty.

Now, this is a powerful giving church made up of powerful giving people but why is everybody not experiencing the abundance of blessings that come along with it? Because the scriptural guidelines are not comprehended. Think of it! It says – if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what a man has not according to what he has not. So, for your giving to be acceptable, it must be coming from a willing mind. Whatever you do not give willingly, you have lost foolishly. 2. Cor. 8:12³⁴⁰

He stresses that the right attitude is crucial in triggering the promised provision of God,

Also, God's word says – every man according as he purposes in his heart so let him give, not grudgingly nor of necessity for God loveth a cheerful giver. 2 cor.9.7 so, it is not just your giving that matters, your attitude in your giving matters as much. You are giving, willingly, you are giving cheerfully, otherwise, you are losing out gallantly. It is not so much whether you give or not, it is much more whether you give according to scriptural guidelines or not.³⁴¹

For Living Faith Church, therefore, the intersection with Poverty Alleviation is primarily to help congregants to not only give but also to give acceptably.

ii. Practical Poverty Alleviation Efforts of the Living Faith Church

The above, however, does not mean that the Living Faith Church does not assist society in some practical way. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Oyedepo donated medical equipment

³⁴⁰ You can't remain poor if you understand and practice this || Bishop David Oyedepo – YouTube. This clip was not available as at 5/1/2023, but similar clips are all over the internet like this one - (The Evil in Poverty 2021)

³⁴¹ You can't remain poor if you understand and practice this.

and relief materials to Lagos and Ogun States in his bid to register their support to the Nigerian government and to the global efforts to win the war against what they refer to as the “unseen but common enemy, COVID-19”. These include ambulances, test kits, thermometers, amongst other items.³⁴²

In addition, the church also organizes poverty alleviation workshops. At a particular session in Abuja, they trained 285 members in productive business skills like bead making, vulcanizing, cooking, installations, and other skills. They thereafter empowered them with working tools to start off small scale businesses. The resident pastor said that the program was to ensure that they are not only preaching to people to be born again, but that they are also impacting their lives. He said “in most cases, people come to the church for alms, food and help in one way or another, but giving them something to make money for themselves will reduce that. We are trying to teach them how to fish and not giving them fish to eat every time.”³⁴³

B. FGCs Poverty Alleviation Efforts in Summary

The main summary here is that even though most participants do not believe that the FGCs see poverty alleviation as a Christian responsibility, RCCG is engaged in poverty alleviation through CSR, but probably not as much as they will like people to believe. As that participant mentioned earlier, poverty alleviation may not be on the front burner in the church.

He says,

³⁴² David Oyedepo, “Covid-19: Oyedepo Donates Medical Equipment, Relief Materials to Lagos, Ogun.” Vanguard News, March 31, 2020, accessed May 9, 2023, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/03/oyedepo-donates-medical-equipment-relief-materials-to-lagos-ogun/>.

³⁴³ Living Faith Church, Winners Chapel In Kubwa Abuja Begins Poverty Alleviation Workshop, July 27, accessed August 8, 2022. <https://naijagists.com/living-faith-church-winners-chapel-in-kubwa-abuja-begins-poverty-alleviation-workshop-for-unemployed-members/>.

“The RCCG has a welfare department and a CSR for social good, but they are not properly funded. Seminars and skills acquisition workshops are held, but the church’s vision and mission statement do not have anything to do with the poor. I believe poverty alleviation is not a major concern.”³⁴⁴

So, it seems like the RCCG has decided to circumvent the challenge of funds through the building of the Trinity Towers.

The Living Faith church, on her part, continues to approach poverty alleviation through its’ promised method of the word of faith- pushing in positivity and the “can-do spirit” into their members. They also sparingly provide palliatives and other empowerment. What is not certain is whether these efforts meet the needs of the poor or not.

Section Three

This third subsection analyzes responses from research participants to decipher the importance of poverty alleviation in the agenda of the FGCs. While most respondents argue that poverty alleviation is not of any prime importance, a few insist that the FGCs have performed credibly in the care of the poor.

A. The Place of Poverty Alleviation in the Mission of the FGCs – A Task or a Means to an End?

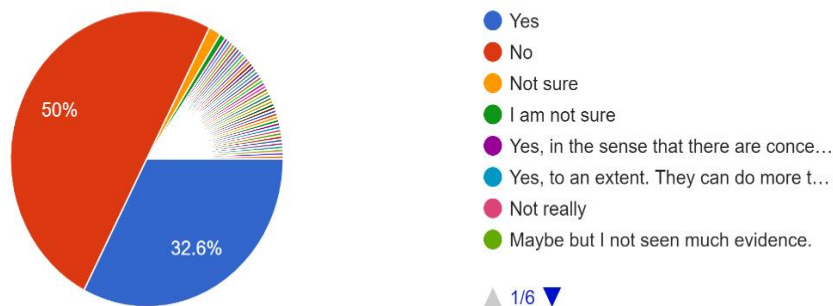
I asked research participants if they thought the FGCs are actively involved in poverty alleviation, 50% of respondents answered to the negative, they do not believe the FGCs are actively involved in poverty alleviation, 32.6% are sure they are, and another 17.4% cannot emphatically say yes or no.

³⁴⁴ Document 33 p1 in participants 45-54 part 1. Survey Responses, March 2022.

Figure XI

20. Do you think RCCG/ Living Faith/Winners' are actively involved in Poverty Alleviation?

276 responses



Here are a few responses from the 17.4% who could not make up their minds on whether the FGCs are involved in poverty alleviation:

- “Yes, in the sense that there are concerted efforts to address poverty through teachings and extended help to those who need it, albeit within their own space. Also no, in the sense that it is not effectively structured to engage the larger society. Maybe that is not their purview really.”³⁴⁵
- “To an extent, majorly through outreaches that provide short-term palliatives. They are invested in long-term poverty for just a few poor people, not nearly enough to make a strong difference.”³⁴⁶
- “They have some programs, but just not enough.”³⁴⁷
- “On the scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest, I will say 5.”³⁴⁸

³⁴⁵ Document 24 p1 in Participant 55-64 Part 1. Survey Responses, March 2022.

³⁴⁶ Document 30 p1 in Participant 35-44 Part 5. Survey Responses, March 2022

³⁴⁷ Document 31 p1 in Participant 35-44 Part 6. Survey Responses, March 2022.

³⁴⁸ Document 34 in Participant 45-54 pt 2. Survey Responses, March 2022.

- “Yes, they do but not so much. I mean there are few churches who focus on sound poverty alleviation schemes. They're not very consistent generally.”³⁴⁹
- “Yes, but not significant enough for the difference to be noticed.”³⁵⁰

While those who are definite might have their reasons to maintain an absolute stand on the poverty alleviation activities of the FGCs, these in-between respondents were saying that the FGCs might be involved in poverty alleviation but just not enough to make a significant difference. The question to ask is why? Are the FGCs limited by the poor themselves or their understanding of poverty or is it the lack of burden or resources to care for the poor? Where exactly does Poverty Alleviation fall in the mission of Nigerian FGCs?

i. Poverty Alleviation is not a Priority

Many participants along with the survey results suggest that poverty alleviation is not the priority of the FGCs. They said many of these churches were built from scratch by members through aggressive fund raising by members. The ownership by members is not obvious anymore. The respondents insist that if poverty alleviation were of prime concern to these churches, poverty will not continue to grow at the rate it is, they would have known tackled it better than they currently do.

³⁴⁹ Document 25 in Participant 35-44 pt 4. Survey Responses, March 2022.

³⁵⁰ Document 33 in Participant 45-54 pt 1. Survey Responses, March 2022.

Figure XII

21. Are the poor the priority of these churches (RCCG, Winners' Chapel)?

276 responses



I interviewed a senior pastor of the Living Faith Church who has been with the ministry for over 40 years - from its inception. A full transcript of our conversation might give more insight into his thoughts which I think are relevant to this discussion.³⁵¹ At the beginning of the interview, he confidently told me about the mission of Living Faith and the cruciality of poverty elimination but as we dug deeper in the conversation, he let me know that in truth, poverty cure - alleviation or elimination, was not really the focus and priority of the church and that the church had other priorities and concerns.

In line with the general ethos of the church as stated above, he explained that the Living Faith Church has a mission to deliver humankind from every oppression of the enemy. He went on to state some of the ways they cooperate with the government to help the poor.

We believe so much in working with the government to alleviate poverty, because government cannot do everything. Like quite a lot of our students, like I said, even nonmembers of the church have been given scholarships, especially orphans and indigents. We also empower them to start trades. That is what we do in our church. And that is why we have many people in the church because they know once they come to Living Faith or Winners Chapel, they will get solutions to their problems.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Conversation with a Living Faith Pastor on the church and poverty alleviation.docx

³⁵² Document 14.00. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

He insisted that because there is no poverty in heaven, poverty is meant to be eliminated here on earth if we really want to have a taste of heaven on earth, otherwise, our Christianity is questionable.

That is the reason Jesus came. He said for this purpose the Son of Man was made manifest. So, there must be a reason, there must be a purpose. There must be an objective. For this purpose, the Son of man was made manifest that He might destroy the works of the devil. One of the works of the devil is poverty. So, if you have not succeeded in destroying poverty in the lives of the people, forget about the gospel.³⁵³

In fact, he told me that God raised his Bishop for the purpose of poverty elimination.

You know there was a time Bishop Oyedepo shared with us. He said he was in America, United States of America. He was at a conference, Kenneth Copeland's Conference. The Lord spoke to him, He said get back home and make my people rich. He said he left. He did not even wait to finish the conference.³⁵⁴

But when I asked him how the church has fared with poverty alleviation or elimination since that time, he surprisingly said not much has been done. He then brought an interesting perspective.

You see, the church's current problem is materialism, - acquisitions. We are so much concerned with projects; we are not building the people. Take for example, the 50,000-seat auditorium that we built in 1999 in Canaan land. It took a lot of billions of Naira to build, and at the expense of the poor people in Nigeria. Now we are embarking on another project called the ARK. From the statistics made available today, we are spending between 1.5 billion and 2 billion (\$3,336,818.40 - \$4,449,091.20) every week on construction.

I am saying that we are too project minded. We are not considering the poor or minding them at all. Our focus is who has the biggest church in Nigeria, so it has become a competition. It is not a matter of who has succeeded in alleviating poverty, who has succeeded in bringing poor people out of their poverty. That is not a yardstick now. Success in ministry is about the size of your church, so we have gotten it wrong.³⁵⁵

³⁵³ Document 14.00. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

³⁵⁴ Document 14.00. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

³⁵⁵ Document 14.00. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

When I asked to confirm how the church prioritizes the poor, he responded thus -

No, not at all, forget about it, Forget about it. The poor are not the priority; it is better we spend money on projects that do not have anything to do with the poor... Self-aggrandizement! I have the biggest church in the universe. What has that got to do with the poor? And when Jesus said I will build my church, He was not referring to physical building any way. He was referring to the body. If the body is sick then, we must ask ourselves a lot of questions as ministers of God, as leaders.³⁵⁶

He then went on to recount story after story of how the poor are not esteemed in the church and how there is little, or nothing mapped out for the care of the poor.

When I asked him why these later submissions conflicted with his earlier testimony about the mission of the Living Faith Church and their poverty alleviation efforts, he told me that it was not like those things he mentioned earlier were not happening, but that the thing to consider is the percentage and the regularity of the help offered to the poor. He let me know unequivocally that his church and the FGCs in general have not placed a high premium on poverty alleviation.

The mission representative of the RCCG also made similar remarks while commenting on the CSR. In addition, while most of the pastors interviewed obviously have a heart for the poor, it seemed like they struggled to justify some of the ways the church was going about its poverty alleviation activities. Many could not decidedly say that poverty alleviation was a priority. At best, they said “we know we can do better, but no one can say we are not doing anything.”

³⁵⁶ Document 14.00. Anonymous Interview, Jan. 2022.

Poverty Alleviation is the Priority

While these two leaders above and 68.8% of research respondents argue that poverty alleviation is not the priority of the FGCs, many other leaders and 15.6% of research participants insist that the church is putting in her best efforts into poverty alleviation.

Pastor Idowu Iluyomade, the Intercontinental Overseer, Christian Social Responsibility of RCCG has asked critics to investigate their charity claims before drawing conclusions.³⁵⁷ In an exclusive chat with Church Times Nigeria, pastor Iluyomade while replying to the allegation that the church saps members of their finance and does nothing to impact society, said that such conclusions were based on ignorance of the facts.

Iluyomade challenged those who accuse the church of doing little or nothing to impact society to make private investigations on what the church is doing rather than jump to hasty conclusions. He expressed confidence that the church operates a transparent system and gives no room for lack of accountability. He said,

I like to tell them that our work shows that we are accountable, the work we do is measurable. To those naysayers, they should just look around and see our interventions. 130 million Nigerians impacted in three years. We are in 197 nations of the world, in Nigeria alone we have 43,000 centers that we do Christian Social Responsibility (CSR). We have daily feeding centers; they can go and check these claims. I pray that after they see, they will make an informed decision to see that we are real.³⁵⁸

I took Pastor Iluyomade's lead and went on to investigate sixteen feeding centers of the RCCG CSR.³⁵⁹ See appendix for list. The conclusion was as follows,

³⁵⁷ Church Times, Nigeria, 2021. *RCCG Charity: Investigate our Claims before Criticizing us-Iluyomade* (*churchtimesnigeria.net*), (62) *To make it to heaven, you have to do CSR | Idowu Iluyomade | Part 2 - YouTube*. July 26. Accessed August 10, 2022.

[https://www.google.com/search?q=RCCG+Charity%3A+Investigate+our+claims+before+criticising+us-Iluyomade+\(churchtimesnigeria.net\)%2C+\(62\)+To+make+it+to+heaven%2C+you+have+to+do+](https://www.google.com/search?q=RCCG+Charity%3A+Investigate+our+claims+before+criticising+us-Iluyomade+(churchtimesnigeria.net)%2C+(62)+To+make+it+to+heaven%2C+you+have+to+do+)

³⁵⁸ Iluyomade, *“Investigate our Claims.”*

³⁵⁹ RCCG Feeding Program.docx

1. The feeding program is a corporate social responsibility of RCCG alongside the mandate and church planting vision of the church. It is not taken seriously as widely publicised.
2. Only provinces and parishes that have the means, do observe this charity.
3. The timing for food sharing is not specific except for those done in primary schools like Glittering Stars and Hope centre mentioned above.
4. The number of persons fed is usually very small compared to those who are in dire hunger. Between 5 to 20 persons in each centre and this is not even consistent.
5. Finally, from my finding, poverty is not reduced at all through this charity.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown some of the ways the FGCs are engaged in poverty alleviation and the priority they place on the care of the poor. Knowing that actions are a result of belief, we started by looking at the vision and mission statement of both churches to understand their commitment to poverty alleviation. For RCCG, there does not seem to be any indication of poverty alleviation in the vision and mission statement, but they have a CSR which is dedicated to intersecting with the needs of the society in eight broad categories of Social, Health, Education, Business, Arts and Culture, Government and Sports.

The RCCG claims that the CSR's ministry is beyond poverty alleviation, in other words, CSR was not established just for poverty alleviation but for wider societal impact. The CSR has a sound mission statement grounded on biblical verses that indicate a deep understanding of the needs of the poor and poverty alleviation. They also have wide publicity and are involved in some activities, but they are not as much involved as they say.³⁶⁰ Also, their involvement is not

³⁶⁰ Alaba Ajileye, "RCCG feeding program.docx," Lagos, 2022.

a uniform act, it is subject to the magnanimity and wherewithal of the members of the individual parishes.

Generally, funds are a challenge in the execution of many of the CSR's well-intended projects, including the rehabilitation centers, the feeding projects and the day-to-day running of their activities at the parish level. As a result, RCCG decided to construct a multi-million dollar building to rent out and raise funds for the proper execution of CSR activities.

The Living Faith Church has consistently promised to alleviate poverty through the preaching of the word to inspire the "can-do" spirit in her members. They also believe that giving is the way out of poverty, so they encourage their members to give to the church and to sow into the various projects. Some members claim they have experienced the promised "breakthrough" through these ways, but many are yet to be helped.

This does not mean that the Living Faith Church does not offer handouts to society or some help to their teeming parishioners. During the last pandemic, they donated materials worth millions of Naira to the public. They also organize skill development workshops to help their members establish and run their own businesses. In addition, they have been involved in job creation through their many establishments.

Despite all this, most participants insist that poverty alleviation is not a priority of the FGCs. In fact, some pastors and representatives of these churches are the first to argue that this is not the best the church can do. They believe the FGCs have failed to care for the poor because the FGCs have a different priority. They argue that the values of the FGCs have been arranged in such a way that poverty alleviation is down on the list.

Even though most leaders of the FGCs will like the society to think differently of them, many believe that contrary to Weber's Protestant Ethic argument, that the impact of the FGCs show that they are established for their own aggrandizement and not for the public good.

The similarities between the Puritans who displayed the Protestant Ethic and FGCs are shallow. A careful look will reveal that the discrepancies between them start way back from their theologies. The motivations and psychological rewards derived from these two traditions are not the same. This may be the reason that the church growth in Nigeria is not producing a commensurate reduction in poverty.

One thing that must be understood is that wealth creation or poverty alleviation in the Protestant Ethic model was a "side effect" of the singular focus of the Puritans. They were other-worldly focused yet this-worldly engaged. On the other hand, the FGCs are other-worldly engaged for a this-worldly focus. As Smith aptly puts it, "faith in Jesus is framed as the key to fulfilling this-worldly ambitions."³⁶¹

The motivation for the Prosperity Preachers and their adherents is utilitarian. They want to be rich. People are coaxed to do anything not for the love of God, but because of what they hope to gain. Greed seems to be the common denominator in both the preachers and their adherents as it is with the society; worse still, the church "sanctifies" her materialism as "breakthrough."³⁶² Since the psychological reward is the material output, the overwhelming pressure from both the society and sadly, the church, results into covetousness, which can only be satisfied by corruption - the bane of the Nigerian society. As a result, nothing works.

³⁶¹ Smith, *A Culture of Corruption*, 212.

³⁶² Breakthrough" is termed a miraculous release from God in response to probably a financial "seed" sown to a Man of God.

Many are looking for how to cut corners to make gains for themselves. There is a lack of basic infrastructure because contractors, many of whom are Christians, conspire with government agencies to embezzle money. The strain of Christianity growing in Nigeria is anti-development. Even though the emphasis is on how to get rich, unfortunately that aim eludes because of the surrounding circumstances of lack of virtue. There needs to be a general atmosphere conducive to development before development can take place.

The Puritans created their wealth, inadvertently through “the methodical-rational organization of life and the systematic economic activity that became the motivation and psychological reward arising from their belief.”³⁶³ If self-discipline and virtue are recognized, people will go into public offices and shun corruption, there will be development directly and indirectly leading to wealth. No one is expecting the FGCs to dole out money to every poor person, the expectation is that they can contribute to creating a flourishing environment through virtuous conduct. These effects on society will be the focus of the next chapter.

³⁶³ Weber, Kalberg, *The Protestant Ethic*, 234.

Chapter 7

Missiological Implications

Introduction

This chapter is written in three sections. The first summarizes the findings of the research, the second part discusses the cumulative effect of Nigerian FGC's intersection with the poor, (with poverty and with poverty alleviation) on the mission of God in the Nigerian society, while the third makes suggestions as to the way forward.

In agreement with majority of research respondents, I argue that the FGC's intersection with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation has not had a positive impact on the spread of the gospel³⁶⁴ and on the goal of the church of God in general which is the transformation of humans into the image of Jesus. Contrariwise, the expected visible impacts of church growth are lacking in society, while poverty and crime grow alongside the church. FGCs present poverty alleviation as a Christian responsibility and what they want to do, but poverty alleviation is not central to the life of the FGCs.

Drawing from Deut. 15:4-11, the original intention of God is that His people would be so blessed that there would be no poor amongst them. But if by any chance anyone of them was poor, the generosity of the people of God would bail them out of poverty. God's intention is that there would be a certain mindset, a certain attitude in His people towards the care of the marginalized that will mark them out as different from the rest of the world.

Section One

³⁶⁴ When the Bible says – “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Matt. 5:14–16.) It follows that our actions can either bring honor or dishonor to God and to the gospel. The claim here is that the manner of FGCs' engagement with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation has not affected society positively for the gospel.

Summary of Findings

1. Intersection with the poor

I found out that the lived experiences of most of the poor in the FGCs suggest that these churches do not provide an atmosphere where the dignity of the poor is respected and where their aspirations as human beings can be fulfilled.

It might seem like the Nigerian Fastest Growing Churches have leveraged an endemic problem to craft an attractive message for the poor whose population is constantly growing because of the prevailing political situations that have had immense economic effects on the populace. Through their words and deeds, the FGCs preach a message of hope that is culturally relevant to the familiar African Traditional Religion beliefs of their congregants, promising a miraculous escape from poverty independent of the current situations.

Aside from that, they also provide an ambience appealing to the upwardly mobile while sometimes providing handouts for the poor. So, the poor throng into these churches in search of hope from God.

It was noted that while churches have always been seen as a haven for the poor all over the world, the mainline/orthodox churches are different from the FGCs in their theologies and the way they look at the poor. Orthodox churches preach contentment substantiated by God's preferential option for the poor, they are therefore more tolerant and accommodating of the poor in their condition. In addition, they make more demands on themselves in helping the poor than they make on the poor. They, therefore, provide a safe haven for the poor in their poverty.

The FGCs however believe that it is not the will of God for anyone to be poor, they hold the poor accountable for their condition while providing motivational and spiritual leeway out of

poverty. For anyone to remain poor is an anomaly to the message they preach. It is therefore uncomfortable to be poor and to fully belong to the FGCs.

While some of the poor complain about unfair discriminatory and disrespectful treatments meted out to them by the FGCs, the FGCs also complain about the frustrating attitudes of the poor that hinder relationships. I noticed an atmosphere of mutual distrust between the poor and the FGCs. But the FGCs keep growing and the poor remain in these churches for several reasons. Some, because of the motivational messages they hear regularly that keep reinforcing the hope of the good life promised, others because of the default ATR mindset that promotes fear, suspicion, and the constant appeasing of deities. They therefore become loyal to the man of God, depending on his anointing for protection and promotion.

Others among the poor go from one parish to the other seeking handouts; they may be said to be migratory, but they hardly leave the FGCs; they are simply searching for the promised help. Others are there just because they like their style of worship, the music, and the social environment with all the opportunities it offers. There is however a small but significant percentage that stay because of a hunger for God. These are focused on God and their narrative is usually different.

2. The Understanding of Poverty as a Human Condition

I discovered that the FGC's understanding of the causes and cures of poverty and their general articulation of poverty as a human condition is convoluted and might not only be seen to constitute a problem to biblical poverty alleviation but could also be said to contribute to poverty in Nigeria.

While the FGC leaders in their messages and books attribute poverty to spiritual causes and therefore proffer spiritual cures by insisting that poverty is a curse which must be cast out by

no other way than by generously giving to God in tithes, in offerings and in pledges, the FGC reps I spoke with had a broader approach. They did not deny the spiritual causes of poverty but added other factors like the state of the country and the mentality of the human self, both of which could impede the progress of individuals to create poverty.

I felt like the understanding of poverty in FGCs unfolds in at least four layers or circles – the spiritual, the realistic, the nevertheless, and the pragmatic. It was not easy to pin down a general opinion of the causes of poverty in these circles, rather people spoke from where they were in their beliefs at the time.

The wider society affirmed most of the claims of the FGCs on the causes of poverty but then added that the FGCs themselves are complicit in creating poverty in Nigeria. They claim that by positing poverty as a spiritual problem and drawing remedies from that premise, the FGCs go against the biblically known ways of poverty alleviation that entail human responsibility; they therefore create a lot more problems than there already are and could even be said to be causing or reinforcing the causes of poverty in the land. I do not hear them saying that the FGCs are the only causes of poverty in Nigeria, they claim that most of the other known causes of poverty are either escalated or re-enforced by the practices of the FGCs.

3. Intersection with Poverty Alleviation as a Task

An organizational analysis of the poverty alleviation structures and efforts of the FGCs details some of ways the FGCs are engaged in poverty alleviation and the scale of priority they place on the care of the poor. I started by looking at the vision and mission statement of both churches to understand their commitment to poverty alleviation. For RCCG, there does not seem to be any indication of poverty alleviation in the vision and mission statement, but they have a CSR which is dedicated to intersecting with the needs of the society in eight broad categories

- Social, Health, Education, Business, Arts and Culture, Government and Sports. They make bold to say that CSR is beyond poverty alleviation. CSR has a sound mission statement grounded on biblical verses that indicate a deep understanding of the needs of the poor and poverty alleviation. They also have wide publicity and are involved in some activities, but not as much involved as they say.

Also, their involvement is not a uniform act, it is subject to the magnanimity and wherewithal of the members of the individual parishes. Funds are a challenge in executing many of their well-intended projects, including rehabilitation centers, feeding projects and the daily running of CSR activities at the parish level. As a result, RCCG decided to build a multi-million dollar building to rent out and raise funds for the proper execution of CSR activities.

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Section Two

Missional Implication

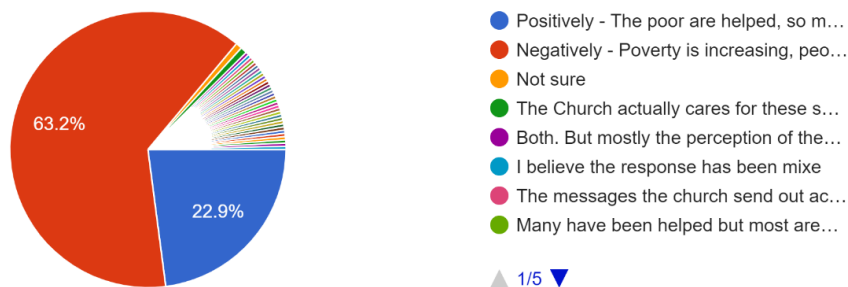
This section discusses the cumulative effect of the FGCs' intersection with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation on the mission of God. It calls attention to what the center of the FGC's message is and its implication on society.

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Figure XIII

23. How has the intersection of these churches with poverty affected society's response to the gospel message?

266 responses



1. The Center of the Message

The cardinal factor in the FGCs intersection with society that has affected the mission of God in Nigeria is the transactional nature of the message preached, which is a culmination of their theology. This is the entry point; it is the reason people are trooping to church. From the onset, that message frames people's expectations, it preempts their responses and their experiences too. But who is at the center of it all? Simply put, the center of the message is how to come out of the biting poverty and how the man of God is anointed to help achieve that.

Transformation is secondary, it is a means to the end. And honestly, one must not undermine the fact that over a hundred and thirty million people, (over sixty three percent) of the population live in multidimensional poverty.³⁶⁵

a. When Human Need is at the Center

However, as critical as poverty is, it yet cannot be the center of the gospel message if the expected transformational outcome of the Christian mission is the goal. One may also argue that

³⁶⁵ "Nigeria Multidimensional Poverty Index."

the FGCs' message may be a type of contextualization. Poverty alleviation might be all that salvation really means for Nigeria.³⁶⁶ This where Newbigin adamantly says no. Newbigin writes that regarding the temptations of Jesus, "one could sum up the substance of the suggestions of the Evil One in the phrase: "Begin by attending to the aspirations of the people."³⁶⁷ He explains,

Authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ.... and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people in the way that Jesus attended to them, knowing that the real need is that which can only be satisfied by everything that comes from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4).³⁶⁸

Newbigin insists that the gospel must be allowed to come to life in its entirety in every context on its own terms and that the world must not be allowed to dictate the issues and the terms of the meeting. He stresses that if this is not done, the result is that the world is not challenged at its depth but rather absorbs and domesticates the gospel and uses it to sacralize its own purposes as we currently observe with Nigeria. Newbigin warns that the results of such assimilation are usually disastrous and could be the reason evil is on the rise while, yet the church is growing in Nigeria. He stresses that true contextualization is not assimilation.

The gospel has a sovereignty that accords it a unique agenda in every context. It is not intended to be ancillary to any program, never a means to anyone's, any society's aspiration.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁶ Abiola Mbamalu, "Prosperity a Part of the Atonement': An Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 8:9." ResearchGate, accessed April 13, 2023. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283834541_%27Prosperity_a_part_of_the_atonement%27_An_interpretation_of_2_Corinthians_89. Mbamalu here discountenances such understanding that prosperity is part of the atonement and affirms the traditional view that the scope of the atonement of Christ does not imply financial abundance. The atonement of Christ, however, does have financial implications, for it has brought about a new community that cares for its members.

³⁶⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 151.

³⁶⁸ Newbigin, *The Gospel*, 151.

³⁶⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel*.

When human need is at the center of the message, it is no more the gospel, it will produce fruit contrary to the gospel message and the need itself may not be met. This is the reality of the Nigerian context.

Figure XIV



b. *Koinonia – When God is at the Center*

Koinonia is used in the New Testament to describe the sharing of one's common life within the body of Christ at all the levels of existence and experience viz - spiritual, physical, moral, intellectual, emotional, and economic. Koinonia is the natural result of a community centered on God and it is within this context that Christianity grows unhindered as described in Acts 2:40-47 (NIV).

⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ Those who accepted his

message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The disciples preached a message that spurred people to repentance and salvation. Participation in the life of the church further pulled them towards God, their primary pursuit, and, towards one another to form an organic community where everything was shared. Although the focus of their message was not poverty alleviation, the needs of the poor were met in Koinonia until it was said that there was no needy one among them (Acts 4:32-35), thus confirming God's original intention in Deut. 15:4.

The situation is different in the FGCs where the poor hear messages that give hope of deliverance from poverty. They therefore throng to these churches in search of that hope but soon discover that everything is not exactly as promised. But they keep hoping and searching for the expected breakthrough while participating in the life of the church. However, motives are not easy to hide.

Before long, both parties see themselves for who they really are, and then comes the lack of cohesion and distrust which leads to exploitation and suspicion. Eventually, people attend church together and participate in the programs, but Koinonia is lacking because there is no transformation, each is interested in meeting their personal needs and the church too is more interested in her own expansion.

The differences between the early church and the FGCs start from the messages preached and then continues to the responses these messages elicit. The focus of the early church was on reconciliation with God. It was a message applicable to both the poor and the rich. As the church grew, Koinonia grew, and poverty eradication was the side effect. On the other hand, the FGCs focus on poverty alleviation, which then breeds people who see God as a means to meeting their ends, leading to selfishness and greed.

2. Dysfunctionalism – The Spiritualizing of Poverty

Another impact of the message of the FGCs is that it spiritualizes poverty, creating a dysfunctional Christianity where the real causes and cures of poverty are muffled and therefore not properly addressed. The poor are blamed for their poverty. They are seen as people who have failed to access the grace of God and are then required to spiritually break the yoke of poverty by giving the little they have to the man of God or the church.

The rich, on the other hand, are honored by the church for their success irrespective of how they came about it. The idea is this: How will the rich be wealthy if God did not allow it? The impact of this mentality on society is myriad.

The FGC leaders themselves must be seen as successful before they can have an audience with people. Since human need is at the center of their message, humans justify the sources of their wealth, even when the process is fraught with corruption. Consequently, the country is submerged in evil, from the pulpit to the pew, to the corridors of power and to the rest of society at all levels. This is one reason the FGCs are accused of being one of the causes of poverty in the land.

When God said to His people, the Israelites,

⁴ However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, ⁵ if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands, I am giving you today. (Deut. 15.4 NIV)

Those commands were addressed to the rich whom He expected as His people to be different from the rest of humanity by having a heart devoid of greed and being willing to share with the poor out of the abundance He has given them. It was on that basis that He could say that there would not need to be poor people among them.

⁷ If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. ⁸ Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. ... ¹⁰ Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. Deut. 15:7-8,10 (NIV).

¹⁶ This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.’” ¹⁷ The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. ¹⁸ And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed. Num. 16: 16-18 (NIV).

Instead of spiritualizing poverty, God’s aim is Koinonia, a situation where His people are different from the world of greed around them and instead of accumulating and hoarding resources, the abundance of one fills the lack of the other, thereby fostering fellowship and community. The FGCs however atomize members and put the responsibility on the poor to overcome poverty miraculously. They posit themselves in opulence as poster representatives of wealth. In such a situation, organizational attempts at poverty alleviation can only be tokenism.

3. Tokenism

Tokenism is defined by the Webster dictionary as the policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort. I like the way Asamaoh-Gyadu explains tokenism in the context of the FGCs.³⁷⁰ Being a Pentecostal himself and from Ghana, West Africa, Gyadu understands the workings of the FGCs in the African context. He shows how these FGC preachers have preached a transactional message of deliverance from poverty for years, asking congregants to give to them so that they, the members, can prosper. He explains that even the ones who were honest and believed that they were helping their members overcome poverty have come to see that it is not working as preached.

Also, society has bitterly criticized the FGCs for the effects of their messages. Gyadu asserts that the theology of the FGCs does not accommodate poverty alleviation unless it is in hopes of gaining even more resources, he unequivocally said that they engage in poverty alleviation as a token gesture just to fulfill all righteousness and to ward off public criticism.

Gyadu's assertions make sense because in all honesty, the FGCs cannot be accused of non-involvement in poverty alleviation, but what is in doubt is the priority they place on it especially in terms of funding.

With the massive amount of resources available in these churches, I believe that if the FGCs are determined to fight poverty, they will know what to do and a lot of ground will be covered in a short while. They may not be able to annihilate poverty all over Nigeria, but at least they can alleviate poverty in the church. Sometimes, it may not even be directly, since advocating for virtuous conduct in society through their messages will have a ripple effect of promoting righteousness and providing a level playing ground for all in the society. The presence

³⁷⁰ Asamaoh-Gyadu, interview by author, Wilmore, March 2, 2023.

of a level playing ground in society, in business dealings and governmental responsibilities could aid in taking a lot of people out of poverty.

a. The Real Focus

If the FGCs commitment to poverty alleviation is only tokenism, what do they do with their resources?

Since the display of wealth is an indication of the possession of the power and favor of God, the men of God must present an image of affluence to show that they are blessed of God. Gifford calls it the “Big Man’ syndrome.”³⁷¹ These pastors have the most elaborate auditoriums, private jets, and mansions. For instance, Oyedepo has four private expensive jets, a fleet of luxury cars and a chain of money-generating ministries managed by members of his immediate family. Oyedepo built one of the best universities in Nigeria with the tithes and offerings of followers, yet only the rich can attend the school. Respondents suggest that this is where the resources are expended, after which, they trickle down tokens on the poor.

The Church has an active representation in many facets of government and corporate life in Nigeria, yet with minimal positive impact on national life. Policies are hardly changed for the better, evil is hardly resisted, if anything, these Christians might just be as corrupt as the rest of society. The public witness of Christians in government most times contradicts the Christian mandate. Nigeria has hardly reaped the positive fruits from the church growth, rather greed has

³⁷¹ Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Development and Modernity in Africa*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 67.

been “sanctified”³⁷² in such a way that believers may partake and not feel guilty. The Nigerian situation does not portend the shalom that is concomitant with the kingdom of God.

Section Three

Recommendations

Considering their humungous public image, section three makes recommendations for the leaders of the FGCs drawing from the biblical narrative and from the life of John Wesley.

A. FGC Leaders are Committed to the Course they Propagate

First, to be referred to as Nigerian Fastest Growing Churches is to acknowledge the expansive work done by the leaders of these two churches and others in their category. These are people who believed the word of God and swam against the currents of their time to do what was not popular or even acceptable at that time. While one started a denomination from scratch, the other took an unknown denomination and both have now built these denominations into global fame. There is hardly any nation of the world where these denominations are not found.

For the most part, they were not sponsored by foreign organizations; but internally raised the funds used in building the colossal human and material structures they own. Both men rose from extreme poverty and ignominy to extraordinary wealthy, power, and popularity. They must have put in a lot of hard work and firm discipline. Pa Adeboye is said to be 1 of the 50 most

³⁷² Though not exactly the same, but so much like what Birgit Meyer describes in her article. Birgit Meyer, “Commodities and the Power of Prayer: Pentecostalist Attitudes Toward Consumption in Contemporary Ghana.” *Development and Change*, 1998: 751-776.

powerful people in the world by Newsweek in 2008.³⁷³ Adebayo was cited as one of the Top 100 most influential Africans by New African magazine in 2019.³⁷⁴ Indeed, Adebayo and Oyedepo both stand as solid proof of the efficacy of their message. In a country of endemic poverty, where everyone is seeking a breakthrough, it is difficult for anyone not to believe their report.

For instance, what do you tell a man who believes he received a mandate to make people rich and has been working on it with remarkable results for over forty years? What will you tell his six million followers who esteem his word as gospel? The truth is that the FGCs have gained substantial ground in Nigeria and even those who are not outright members of these churches have one way or the other been affected by their theology, even Muslims.³⁷⁵

However, this study shows that the massive influence of the FGCs has not had a net positive impact on the mission of God in Nigeria. If anything, it has, in many ways, brought Christian standards to an unimaginable low in many facets of our nation's life. And it is clear to many that changes need to be made and priorities redefined if we are to reclaim the mandate of God's mission.

On what basis can I then make recommendations to the FGCs? I do not have the age, the experience or the achievement that qualifies me for the task. However, it is culturally acceptable in our context to refer them to people who qualify to offer advice and maybe, even some rebuke.

The recommendation will therefore be drawn from the biblical history of God and His people as personified by Jesus, the owner of the church, who has earned the rights to define the

³⁷³ Lisa Miller. "The NEWSWEEK 50: E. A. Adebayo." *Newsweek*. December 19. Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://www.newsweek.com/newsweek-50-e-adeboye-83039>.

³⁷⁴ Nigerian Tribune, *Pastor Enoch Adejare Adebayo (General Overseer of Redeemed Christian Church of God)*. March 8. Accessed March 30, 2023. <https://tribuneonline.ng.com/pastor-enoch-adejare-adeboye-general-overseer-of-redeemed-christian-church-of-god/>.

³⁷⁵ Biwul, "Preaching Biblically in the Prosperity Gospel Context." Biwul writes about Nigeria: "Nigeria is also among the key participants (in the shift of the 'Christian change of gravity') in that Nigeria has many churches, preachers, and professing Christians. She is a nation full of religious zeal such that being religious is synonymous to being a Nigerian," (4).

mission of His church. On a human level, John Wesley, who successfully completed his ministry and whose legacies continue to impact the world, provides a good example. John Wesley like these men also rose from poverty and lived in a world whose conditions are like theirs, if not worse. He was actively engaged with the poor in a way that one would encourage these leaders to be. I hope they will listen to Jesus and to John Wesley.

B. Biblical Perceptions of the Poor, Poverty and Poverty Alleviation

a. The Original Plan

God created humans in His image and put them in a “very good” world, where there was perfect equilibrium, a place where all that was needed for life and godliness was included. (Gen. 1:26-29). There is no doubt therefore that Eden is God’s idea of what the world should be. A flourishing community of equity and justice where there is abundance, and every constituent is fulfilled and thriving because God is at the center. From Eden to the promised land and to the New Jerusalem, repeatedly it is said “It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us.” Deut. 1:25, 8, 7-9. Rev. 21- 22. Human flourishing, equity and justice are God’s desire for the world not material poverty and lack.

b. Causes of Poverty

However, that equilibrium embedded in God’s creation was disturbed by sin when humans disobeyed God and fell to the ploys of the devil. The impact of sin became too broad, and creation became twisted and moved from abundance to scarcity because the economic, political, and religious systems had fallen out of synchrony with God, as creator and sustainer.

One of the side effects was poverty, the unequal distribution of resources. Sin is at the root of poverty; this is not necessarily the sin of the poor but the sin nature that marred creation in Eden.

The death and resurrection of Jesus breaks the power of sin over everyone who believes, yet it does not automatically redeem and restore the world to what it was at Eden. Those who believe can break free from the compulsions of choices and habits that lead to poverty, and can get out of poverty but there are going to be many who believe but are poor because of the circumstances of the unredeemed broken systems they live in.

c. God and the Poor

There is a trend throughout the Bible that suggests priority being given to the well-being of the poor and powerless of society in the teachings and commands of God as well as the prophets and other righteous people, Exod. 22:20-2-26, Ex. 23.6, Prov. 17.5 Prov. 22.2.

Whenever the poor were maltreated, it was a signal that the nation was turning against God, of which the prophets constantly decried (Jer. 5.28, Ezek. 16. 49, Am. 2.7, 4.1, 8.6, Zec. 7.10).

God's identification with the poor became even more evident in the New Testament. Not only was Jesus born in a poor home and became poor, but none of His disciples could be considered rich. He announced that He has been anointed to preach the good news to the poor in Lk. 4.18 and asked those who expressed intent to become His disciples to identify with the poor, some by selling all their possessions (Mt. 19.21, Lk 12.33, 18.22). Jesus out rightly pronounced that the poor are blessed (Lk. 6.20). In fact, He warned that it would be most difficult for the rich to have entrance into His kingdom (Matt. 19.4, Lk. 6.24), and he encourages his followers to seek first the Kingdom (Matt. 6.33).

In both Testaments, the poor sacrificed to God, but it was not a means of getting out of poverty, it was to enable them to exercise their rights like other citizens. If the poor desired to make a vow to the Lord, the priest was asked to discuss an affordable amount (Lev.27.8). When a

poor person gave in the temple, Jesus made a big deal out of it and considered it much more than all that the rich had given (Lk. 21.3).

God required Israel to take adequate care of her poor and to provide for her needy. Jesus urged people to give to the poor, in fact giving to the poor was considered the pristine indication of spirituality (1Cor. 13.3). While Jesus did not neglect the felt needs of the people – (he fed the hungry, he healed the sick, he raised the dead), He maintained that “my kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18.36)). He did not make material prosperity central as also His disciples did not (Lk. 9.3, Acts 8.20. 1Tm. 6.10). He warned believers to keep their lives free from the love of money, (Heb.13.5, 1Pet 5.2) and to be content (1Cor. 6.6).

d. Poverty Alleviation

Whatever the cause of poverty, God always makes provisions for the poor. He lays firm guidelines on how to care for the poor:

1. Work: As earlier stated, poverty was not part of the original plan. God’s plan was that humans created in His image would join Him in His work in the world and that work would provide adequately for their needs. In other words, humans were created to work. After the account of creation in Genesis chapter 1, Genesis 2 seems to give the hint that more could be done when we read,

⁵ Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth^[a] and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, ⁶ but streams^[b] came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. ⁷ Then the LORD God formed a man^[c] from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2.5-7, NIV).

In *The Social Entrepreneur*, authors suggest that when it was identified that there was no one to work the ground, “God’s solution was to create man and give him dominion over the living

things and land that God had created, “to work it and take care of it”³⁷⁶ therefore to work is the default mode for humans created in the image of God and it is for that reason that we are created in His image. “A measure of God’s creative capacity is, amazingly, given to us: the capacity to remember, to analyze, and to imagine new possibilities for the beautiful and the good.”³⁷⁷ The ultimate therefore in poverty alleviation is to recover and restore this human capacity of productive labor to the poor. 2 Thess. 3:10.

d. Generosity

Deut. 15:4 – “*there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you...*” (NIV) is God’s original model. However, God also acknowledges that there will be poverty even amongst His people and He therefore commands generosity. (Deut. 15. 7-8, Lev. 19.10).

In the New Testament also, believers are commanded to share with one another (Jn. 13.5, Gal.6.2) so that one’s excess makes up for the lack of another as is modelled in Acts 2. 42-47 and as exemplified in the collection of manna in Exodus 16. The Church like the Israel of old is called to take care of her poor who Jesus sadly reiterates will always be there (Jn. 12.8).

3. Empowerment

“If any of your people—Hebrew men or women—sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. ¹³ And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. ¹⁴ Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you. ¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today” (Deut. 15. 12-15, NIV).

³⁷⁶ Kevin Brown and Kevin Kinghorn, *The Theological Impetus for Social Entrepreneurship*, In *The Social Entrepreneur - The Business of Changing the World*, Edited by Robert A Danielson, 15-26. Franklin Tennessee: Seedbed Publishing, 16.

³⁷⁷ Brown, Kinghorn, *The Theological Impetus for Social Entrepreneurship*, 17.

Deuteronomy 15 shows yet another type of biblical poverty alleviation in the form of empowerment. God encourages His people to be generous enough to not only free their slaves but also to give them the supplies needed to set them up for gainful productivity.

God's aim is that the poor are eventually rehabilitated and reintroduced back into society as productive citizens. Unfortunately, there will be some who may never have the capacity to work again and will therefore live on handouts but handouts or a once-in-a-while charity are not sustainable and may hurt the poor even more.

Therefore, biblical poverty alleviation is not a random act, it is an intentional venture that holds in tandem the imago-Dei and the community. Biblical poverty alleviation recognizes that the most significant fact about the poor is not their poverty, it is their humanity – that the poor are first of all, human beings created in the image of God for a noble purpose and so deserving dignity and honor. It also recognizes that the Christian community in its entirety is designed to engage poverty alleviation as a wholistic venture - involving spirit, soul, and body. The poor are not expected to lift themselves by their bootstraps, they are to be supported until they can stand on their own and can then join to help others.

John Wesley exemplified some of these principles in his work with the poor.

C. John Wesley and Poverty Alleviation

Wesley manifested his desire to help the poor in a variety of ways depending on the conditions of the poor. As leader of the Methodist movement, Wesley helped develop programs for the poor. In 1738, he purchased an old, dilapidated factory, later called the Foundry, which became the base of Methodist operations, especially on behalf of the poor. Out of the Foundry, the early Methodists provided much that a contemporary rescue mission might: food, clothing, shelter and

medical care. Wesley also founded a home for poor widows, a home for orphans, and several schools aimed especially at the education of poor children.³⁷⁸

The first was the work projects. Wesley's characteristic response to unemployment, which for him was the root cause of poverty, was to try to seek employment for the unemployed. But when it became almost impossible to find such jobs, Wesley went ahead to establish work projects of various sorts. In one instance, he trained several people in the processing of cotton and later employed them.³⁷⁹

Secondly, Wesley also attempted to work out long range solutions to the economic predicaments of his people by establishing a lending stock in 1747. The Lending Stock was like a sort of credit union through which means people were able to borrow limited amounts of money without interest for those without work wanting to start their own businesses. The lending stock continued in operation for many years after the time of its inception.

Thirdly, in cases where people were in no state for work or for business or when they needed immediate help, Wesley would offer relief. The normal mode of relief was the outright collection of money either for direct distribution or for the purchase of clothes, food, fuel, and other necessities for the poor. Wesley or his stewards would first determine the needs of the poor in each local society, appropriate the method of relief, and then to raise the necessary money.³⁸⁰

Wesley constantly impressed on the United Societies their responsibility for caring for the poor. There were projects that asked for the donation of clothes, cash and kind to assist the poor.³⁸¹

³⁷⁸ Viewpoint, "John Wesley on Homelessness and Poverty" June 1, accessed November 16, 2021. (<https://viewpoint.pointloma.edu/john-wesley-on-homelessness-and-poverty/> 2011). *John Wesley on Homelessness and Poverty*.

³⁷⁹ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* vol. I, (England: Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, Dec. 1740: 292.

³⁸⁰ *Works of John Wesley*, vol. iv, 296.

³⁸¹ *Works of John Wesley*, vol. iv, 309.

The fourth way Wesley went about his poverty alleviation program was through the Strangers' Friend Society. This was another example of Wesley's attempt to relieve distress through humanitarian action. The organization supported by Wesley, was started in London in 1785 by a group of Methodists. It was "wholly for the relief, not of our society, but for poor, sick, friendless strangers."³⁸² Wherever Methodism was established, such societies were quick to spread.

These then were some of the ways in which Wesley sought to provide relief for the economically distressed. There may have been many more but even these alone would be a great effort and should provide sufficient examples to tackle a constantly pressing problem.

C. Key Issues

From the biblical account and from the example of John Wesley, FGCs need to pay attention to the following key issues that bear directly with ripple effects upon the essence of the calling of God and the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.

1. The Theology

FGCs need to clarify and align their theology in consonance with the Christian mission especially with regards to their identity and their mission.

Presently, the message of the FGCs is centered on human need and what people need to do to get God's attention and intervention. It is transactional. Even when salvation, holiness and other virtues are mentioned, it is still to be able to effectively access God for His power. It therefore seems like using divine power to fulfill cultural aspirations. It is as if Christians have discovered a more effective "*Babalawo*"³⁸³ whom you only need to keep well remunerated to succeed in life.

³⁸²Works of John Wesley, vol. ii, 17, (July 1746), p. 81 (Jan., 17481, vol. iii, 270 (Jan. 1767); and Edwards, op. cit., 154; MacArthur, op. cit., 115-116, and Sherwin, op. cit., 132.

³⁸³ Powerful native doctor.

For them, poverty arises because people have refused to comply with certain guidelines. It is therefore the fault of the poor for being poor. Wealth on the other is an authentication from God and is an indication that one has done well. The FGCs may try to distinguish between worldly and kingdom wealth, but the respect for earthly wealth is clear for all to see. This mindset is a carryover from African Traditional Religion (ATR) where the essence of religion is to placate the gods effectively to obtain and appropriate the power to achieve the aspirations of a good life. The *Babalawos* are the ATR “placaters”; the pastors in the FGCs are the new “placaters” – the Christian version.

Understandably, some of the FGCs started as prayer ministries like the RCCG,³⁸⁴ Oyedepo himself also had the same background. So, human need has been central to their theology. This is not to discountenance the necessity of meeting human needs but to say that it cannot be the center of the message if wholistic Christian transformation is the goal. A transactional understanding of Christianity will not allow for the full expression of the kingdom of God. Additionally, that type of understanding will enable people to disrespect the poor just as it is done in the Nigerian society today.

Jesus clearly says, “my kingdom is not of this world ...” (Jn. 18:36). His sayings were opposed to the Jewish context and belief (Mark 10:42-45.) Through spiritual formation, Jesus transformed the Jewish mindsets of His disciples. He would many times say to them, “you have heard that it was said ..., but I say to you ...,” indicating the shift that must take place if they are to achieve the goals of His kingdom.

³⁸⁴ Aladura background “Aladura” means “praying person” in Yoruba. Aladura is a classification of indigenous churches in south-western Nigeria that started in the early 20th century. These churches believe in the efficacy of prayers and practical guidance by God through the Holy Spirit in all its programs. Also check Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*.

Wesley's economic views, like all his social thought, were based on his ethics and theology.³⁸⁵ His high regard for the Imago Dei convinced him that all people were created equal, that economic status has no power to make anyone better than the other or of greater worth, a view that was radical and countercultural in his own times.

In summary, FGCs need to embrace a more countercultural stand that marks them out from the world as people from a different kingdom whose measures of success differ from the rest of the world and who are therefore not under any pressure to compete with the world. 1 Peter 2:9-17 offers a description. The church is called out from the world as a prophetic remnant, to remind people of what the kingdom of God should be. A church whose worldview is in consonance with mainstream culture and who only uses divine power to fulfill cultural aspirations has lost its calling and might even be said to have received an inoculation against the truth.

2. Making Disciples

FGCs need to make disciples of Jesus, not disciples of the men of God.

Discipleship is the process through which people who accept Jesus increasingly grow to become like Him in their values and in their actions. In the face of all the issues and His concern for the world at that time, Jesus concluded His earthly ministry by commanding His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. (Matt. 28:18-19). That the Christian mission has continued to expand is testimony to the obedience to that commission. John Wesley's passionate discipleship band model exemplifies that command and is still being used today.

What does God envisage in this strategy of making disciples? How does He look at the myriads of problems in this world and conclude that nurturing people who bear His image is the

³⁸⁵ Thomas William Madron, *Some Economic Aspects of John Wesley's Thought Revisited*. October 01. Accessed 12 06, 2021. <https://archives.gcah.org/handle/10516/1376>. 34.

answer? Volf explains it. He insists that gospel workers “should concentrate less on social arrangements and more on fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, and on shaping a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive.”³⁸⁶ Volf is encouraging believers to focus on making disciples through whatever means is available. He goes further to explain that to fashion healthy social arrangements, these social agents must be shaped by the cross at the center of their lives.³⁸⁷

In other words, the primary function of the church in any society is to activate the process by which such social agents are nurtured and presented to society. Disciples do not exist for the sole purpose of going to heaven, not even for just singing and fellowshiping with themselves or for displaying to unbelievers how great their God is. No! God is interested in the world too; He loves those unbelievers as well. Therefore, disciples exist as salt and light to society, as ambassadors into the world where people will see their good conduct and begin to ask questions which answers will be the gospel.

Disciples are people that God will be proud to post into all arenas of life, whether it be politics, academia, medical and financial institutions, security agencies etc. Wherever they go, they contribute their quota by performing their assigned duties responsibly as Jesus would do thereby joining God in the creation of shalom.

That is exactly Newbigin’s argument that the gospel should be allowed to “come alive” on its own terms and not be defined and constrained by the perceived need of the context. He insists that “when there is a community which lives faithfully by the gospel and in that same

³⁸⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 21.

³⁸⁷ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 21.

costly identification with people in their real situations as we see in the earthly ministry of Jesus...the sovereign Spirit of God does his own surprising work.”³⁸⁸

Nigerian FGCs are also making disciples, but more of them are disciples of the men of God. Yes, when Paul says to follow him as he follows Christ, he assumes that his followers have the discernment to figure if he is following Christ or not. For FGCs, it is a blind loyalty to the man of God and to his teachings. Most people in these FGCs will confidently tell you what their “daddy in the Lord” has said but they are not able to critically engage the message with the word of God. In fact, the word of the man of God is gospel to them. Many have substituted God with their General Overseers.³⁸⁹

The tragedy is that these men of God are comfortable with being idolized. They expect their teeming followership to believe their messages without critically analyzing these messages. As a result, the FGCs are producing people who lack the transformation it takes to engage society differently from the rest of society.

The expected evidence of church presence are disciples, image bearers who engage the world and bring about unimaginable impacts in their society and the world at large. This has not been the case for Nigeria where Christians are represented in every sphere of life but with limited impact. These “Christians” while so loyal to their man of God, easily compromise at the slightest chance of making money. At the just concluded election in Nigeria, the media was agog with a Christian woman Prof. Nnenna Oti³⁹⁰ who refused to budge to pressure and intimidation but

³⁸⁸ Newbigin, 153.

³⁸⁹ General Overseers as they call them.

³⁹⁰ “I Was Threatened, Pressurized to Manipulate Results – Abia INEC Returning Officer Oti –, Channels Television, March 29. accessed March 31, 2023. <https://www.channelstv.com/2023/03/29/i-was-threatened-pressurised-to-manipulate-results-abia-inec-returning-officer-otti/>.

went ahead to declare the results as they were, bringing immense joy to the citizens. She most likely was not the only “Christian” who had that responsibility. What happened to the rest?

One imagines what type of country Nigeria would be if the FGCs with their huge presence and influence produce disciples of Jesus. Unfortunately, that is not the case, Femi Adeleye calls such expressions of Christianity “phony Christianity” resulting from imbibing a “phony gospel.”³⁹¹

3. Spiritualizing Poverty

FGCs need to Identify and wholistically address the causes of poverty in the land.

God did not spiritualize poverty or expect the poor to miraculously get help by giving Him what they do not have. When His people were hungry in the desert, He rained down Manna from heaven because none of them had the capacity to provide what was needed to sustain life in such dire circumstances.³⁹² Ordinarily, His usual method of provision is by the generosity of His people. God knows that there is enough to go round but that the greed of a few who hoard wealth is the reason people were poor. That is why He constantly upbraided the rich and those in authority for oppressing the poor and refusing to grant them justice. God constantly advocated for the poor.

Wesley followed suit. Wesley saw poverty as human-made and therefore human-resolvable. But he also realized that it would take a different type of human to do what needs to be done to alleviate poverty. He modelled that type of life and strongly exhorted all who were called Methodists to emulate him.

For Wesley, poverty will be resolved if we gained all we could by being hardworking and not wasting our time meaninglessly, if we saved all we could by not spending it on frivolity and

³⁹¹ Adeleye, *Preachers of a Different Gospel*, 123.

³⁹² Exodus 16:1-27.

luxury and if we did all these just so that we can give to those who need it the most in complete simplicity. For Wesley, this mindset and lifestyle was the “litmus test” for genuine Christianity.³⁹³ This is a heart filled with love for God and neighbor, a heart that will not withhold from sharing with the less fortunate even when the one does not have excess.³⁹⁴

If, however, we gained all we could and saved all we could without giving all we could, the effect will invariably deepen poverty.

Wesley will say that “Poverty and unemployment are, in a sense, two sides of the same economic coin.”³⁹⁵ The one is often in the company of the other. This unique understanding of poverty was significantly different in his days. In the eighteenth-century poverty was regarded as a stigma, a view still held by some today. Some thought poverty was the will of God, or that it came to people because they were unworthy. It was rare in those days to see poverty and unemployment as results of social inequity. It is in this sense that Edwards concludes that “Wesley discovered the poor.”³⁹⁶

While Wesley did not perceive all the social sources of poverty, he at least saw beyond the superficial analyses of the causes of poverty and could recognize that unemployment was not necessarily because of indolence. He could identify some social sources of poverty that were not the responsibility of the poor. He therefore vehemently asserted that it was “wickedly, devilishly false”³⁹⁷ to say that people are poor only because they are lazy. Instead, he insisted that the glaring truth was that people were poor “through scarcity of business.”³⁹⁸ To which effect,

³⁹³ Thomas William Madron. 1965. *Some Economic Aspects of John Wesley's Thought Revisited*. October 01. Accessed 12 06, 2021. <https://archives.gcah.org/handle/10516/1376>. 66

³⁹⁴ It may be of interest to note that Wesley was a businessman who made 4-5 Million dollars in today's money! He did not die with that money though as he passed it on in his lifetime.

³⁹⁵ Madron, *Some Economic Aspects of John Wesley's*, 66.

³⁹⁶ Maldwyn Edwards, *John Wesley and the Eighteenth-Century* 3rd Edition: (London: The Epworth Press, 1955), 148.

³⁹⁷ Works of John Wesley, vol. ii, 269-270.

³⁹⁸ Works of John Wesley, vol. iii, 482.

Wesley went ahead to establish work projects of various sorts. In one instance, he trained several people in the processing of cotton and later employed them.³⁹⁹

Wesley also attempted to work out long range solutions to the economic predicaments of his people by establishing a lending stock in the year 1747. Credit union means people could borrow limited amounts of money without interest for those without work wanting to start their own businesses. Wesley also spoke to the authorities, advocating for the poor.⁴⁰⁰

I implore FGCs to follow these examples and get more proactive about poverty alleviation. The real causes of poverty must be identified and confronted. Any sincere efforts towards poverty alleviation will start from a proper understanding of the causes of poverty. Presently, there is a disconnect between the identified causes of poverty and the remedies offered in the FGCs. While it is true from the study that the FGC leaders link poverty to spiritual causes and so offer spiritual remedies, the greater percentage FGC pastors trace Nigerian poverty to poor governance and corruption, leading to unemployment, poor infrastructure, and inadequate services all of which increase the suffering of the poor.

While not neglecting the spiritual, the church might need to pay attention to actively fighting poor governance and corruption by speaking truth to power and especially by advocating for the poor – sixty-three percent of Nigerians. As already noted, the leaders of the FGCs are highly influential and respected people, who do sometimes criticize the government from the pulpit, but I discovered that there is no intentionality with political engagement; none of these FGCs has any structure dedicated to advocacy-related matters.

³⁹⁹ Works of John Wesley, vol. ii, 292.

⁴⁰⁰ Letters, vol. v, 351-353 (to the Editor of Lord's Evening Post, Dec. 8, 1772). See also, Mac Arthur, *op. cit.* 106-108.

In *Advocating for Justice*, Offutt et al posit that “Christians are called to political engagement on behalf of others,”⁴⁰¹ they argue that –

Structural issues lie at the root of reflective engagement with poverty. The prevalence of these issues shows how contexts in need of relief or development also need advocacy or policy work. Without the latter set of activities, the root causes of impoverishing situations remain unaddressed.⁴⁰²

If the FGCs sincerely desire to bring about the necessary changes that create pathways and level playing fields for people to escape from poverty, it should go beyond occasional handouts, they will need to employ advocacy as “an organized political process that involves the coordinated efforts of people to change policies, practices, ideas, and values that perpetuate inequality, prejudice and exclusion.” “... So that visions of ‘what should be’ in a just, decent society become a reality.”⁴⁰³ Since “he who comes to equity must come with clean hands”, involvement in advocacy will keep these leaders more accountable. In the present circumstances, one wonders if they are ready for such a commitment.

⁴⁰¹ Stephen Offutt et al., *Advocating for Justice: An Evangelical Vision for Transforming Systems and Structures*, (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), 4.

⁴⁰² Offutt et al., *Advocating for Justice*, 7.

⁴⁰³ Offutt et al., *Advocating for Justice*, 6.

Oyedepo vehemently claims that God has sent him to make people rich.⁴⁰⁴ Since, “the gospel message is an inseparable mix of life, deed, word, and sign”⁴⁰⁵, that task needs to be wholistically addressed. To help the poor get out of poverty and to subsequently create a sustainable chain on which they too can help others, their self-esteem must be restored. One of the ways is through gainful employment. Handouts do not make people rich, however creating avenues for honest work might be said to be one of the greatest tools God has given humanity to God and to other humans. Helping the poor or even any human to work is the surest way to freedom, fulfillment, and flourishing,⁴⁰⁶ which ultimately helps restore their self-esteem. Like Wesley, God can also ask FGCs to establish factories where people can work, instead of more of 100,000-seater churches. The positive effect of such a move will spiral down into society and it will be a witness to the thoughtfulness of the leaders of FGCs.

In addition, FGC leaders must also adjust their posture towards the poor as a symbol for society to imitate. How do you say poverty is a curse that is only broken spiritually and yet claim to be alleviating poverty physically? Those two stands are conflicting. There must be some genuine identification with the poor, evidenced by the recognition of and sensitivity to their plight and addressed in manners that dignify rather than villainize the poor as is presently done in the FGCs. Some research respondents have alluded that FGCs were never designed for poverty alleviation. I encourage FGCs to refute this claim by refusing to use poverty alleviation as a photo-op or a means of massaging their egos in a bid to defray public criticism.

⁴⁰⁴ As earlier stated, Bishop Oyedepo claims that God has sent him to make His people rich.

⁴⁰⁵ Bryant, *Walking with the Poor*, 201.

⁴⁰⁶ Institute for Faith, Work & Economics (tifwe.org).

4. Tokenizing Poverty Alleviation

FGC leaders should quit expensive lifestyles that Hinder effective Poverty Alleviation.

It is very well known that Jesus lived a simple life that was devoid of opulence or display and that He also charged His disciples to imitate Him.

Many times, he warned about the danger of possessions,

But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. In fact, he once told a rich man that it is by letting go of his riches that will get him into heaven. (Matt. 6. 20)

Jesus also warned against greed,

Then He said to them, “Watch out and guard yourselves against every form of greed; for not even when one has an overflowing abundance does his life consist of *nor* is it derived from his possessions.” (Luk.12. 15)

He further reminded us of how difficult it is for the rich to inherit the Kingdom.

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I tell you; it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matt 19:23).

Jesus never for once sought relevance through the things He owned. In fact, he once told a rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give it to the poor if he wanted to inherit eternal life (Matt.19.21).

Wesley imitated Jesus by intentionally adopting a simple lifestyle that made it possible for him to fully identify with the poor and meaningfully alleviate poverty. His biographer writes:

He records that one year his income was 30 pounds and his living expenses 28 pounds, so he had 2 pounds to give away. The next year his income doubled, but he still managed to

live on 28 pounds, so he had 32 pounds to give to the poor. In the third year, his income jumped to 90 pounds. Instead of letting his expenses rise with his income, he kept them to 28 pounds and gave away 62 pounds. In the fourth year, he received 120 pounds. As before, his expenses were 28 pounds, so his giving rose to 92 pounds... Even when his income rose into the thousands of pounds sterling, he lived simply, and he quickly gave away his surplus money. One year his income was a little over 1400 pounds. He lived on 30 pounds and gave away 1400 pounds.⁴⁰⁷

For Wesley, with increasing income, what should rise is not the Christian's standard of living but the standard of giving. He therefore limited his expenditures by not indulging in what others would consider as essential for a man of his status as captured by his popular mantra, "Get all you can, save all you can and give all you can."

It is therefore difficult to understand the opulent lives of FGC leaders and why they believe such displays authenticate the gospel. Their lavish lifestyles are of consequence in this discussion because they require enormous amounts of money to maintain. You can imagine how much it takes to maintain four private jets, and numerous luxury cars, mansions, and the many building projects. After all that is done, there will hardly be anything left for members who cannot afford food and accommodation. They end up dropping tokens in the guise of poverty alleviation.

All through the study, I tried to make sense of why there is no fixed budget for poverty alleviation until a respondent let me know that poverty alleviation gets the crumbs that fall off the tables when the "more serious things" have been taken care of. In other words, poverty alleviation will continue to be tokenized if leaders fail to curtail their expensive lifestyles. I will suggest that they follow the examples of Jesus and Wesley.

⁴⁰⁷ Charles Edward White, 1988 on Wesley quoted in *Four Lessons on Money from One of the World's Richest Preachers*.

Conclusion

For a long time, I have been intrigued with the highly celebrated church growth in my climes. In desiring to join the celebration, many disturbing loose ends incessantly pull me back, as I ask why the church is growing so much while poverty also is. I have wondered if there is no direct relationship between being Christian and taking care of the poor.

Then, my dear cousin called that day suggesting that he could help me start a church to help me raise money to help the poor. I did not remember to ask him who my congregants would be. If sixty-three percent of Nigerians live in multidimensional poverty, it is most likely that my church would also have a good percentage of poor people. So, how am I going to raise the money to enrich me to help them? What am I going to be telling them if my primary aim is to make money? He asked me not to worry about all that. In a few years, I would have made enough money to do whatever I wanted to do. It just did not make sense to me. Get money from poor people to help poor people? And so, I began to think about the dynamics of church growth and poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

All those questions came to my purview as I researched how the fastest growing churches are intersecting with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation. I found connections to the spiritual, social, and economic life of our country.

Indeed, FGCs have done a great work in planting churches in some of the most difficult places in Nigeria. Many people who would otherwise have chosen other ways are in church. There have been miracles, signs and wonders and the word of God has been preached, yet there remains a missing link.

I also looked at John Wesley's intersection with the poor which gave a new perspective in my quest. I see how Wesley was raised in poverty and how that may have influenced him to

help the poor after he rose in status. But then I clearly see how his theology was majorly instrumental to his intersection with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation. Putting him side by side with his Nigerian counterparts as represented by the FGCs helps solve most of my intrigue.

Although most of these Nigerian men of God were also raised in poverty, although they preach about poverty alleviation, their construction and understanding of the Bible, that is, their theology makes them pursue it in an unusual way that naturally produces a different result. One that enriches them while paying token homage to the poor. But that is not even all.

The focus of the message preached makes it ineffective for Christian transformation and so, not only is poverty growing, but other ills are also on the rise all together with the church growth. I understand from Wesley that the “acid test” of real Christianity is our intersection with “the least of these.” It therefore bothers me that people keep claiming that the church is growing in my continent when they do not bother to find out the dominant strain that is available and what the impacts thereof can mean for future generations.

I have tried to articulate what our Christian leaders can learn from Wesley, but I still wonder if it is as simple as making some adjustments or if it is that ours is another type of Christianity that is different from Wesley’s, or as Adeleye would say, “a different gospel” entirely.

APPENDIX A-Consent Forms

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER-Leaders-Interview

How are the Fastest Growing Churches (FGC) in Nigeria Intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty Alleviation

As a leader of what is generally considered one of the fastest growing churches in Nigeria, you are invited to be in a research study being done by **Chinyereugo Adeliyi, a doctoral student** from Asbury Theological Seminary.

Background of study

The church growth in our country has caught the attention of the whole world. Scholars and practitioners all over the world wonder at the massive influx of congregants into our churches. In fact our country has been said to now represent the face of Christianity – that is quite an achievement from a continent that was hitherto called “dark”. As a leader of one of the Fastest Growing Churches in Nigeria, you are a representative of the people who made this feat possible. This study therefore comes to you with both awe, humility and the desire to learn.

While we celebrate our phenomenal church growth, it is seen that due to several factors, poverty also is on the increase. The intriguing thing however, is that the growth of poverty has not negatively affected the church growth. We want to understand this dynamic.

For our continent, poverty has always been an issue that Christianity has had to deal with. **The aim of this study is to find out how the fastest growing Nigerian churches like yours are intersecting with the pervasive poverty in the society.** In an hour long interview, we want to know how you understand poverty, what your conversations with the poor are, what you believe your role is in poverty alleviation and some other related questions. Secondly, if at all possible, we will also like to visit some of your projects to observe firsthand what you are doing for the poor.

Conditions and Expectations

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to be interviewed at any location of your convenience either face to face or by Zoom. We will also agree on a time to visit what projects you have for the poor. While there is no remuneration for participation, we are willing to share the conclusions from this study with you at no cost. These interviews will be recorded electronically and will be safely stored in confidentiality where no other person but the researcher and the assistants will have access to your information. If anyone else is given information about you, they will not know your name. A number or initials will be used instead of your name.

I really do not see any potential risk of this study apart from the fact that it might make you vulnerable to others who disagree with your opinion, therefore if something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please let the interviewer know and you can also refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, or even decide to withdraw from the process at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact **chi.adeliyi@asburyseminary.edu**

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER (“Nigerian English”)

How churches wen dey grow fas fas for Nigeria dey waka with people wen poor, how dem dey see poverty and how to hep the poor?

As person wey get say for society, we dey ask make you put mouth for the matter wen your sister **Mrs. Chinyereugo Adeliyi**, dey do. She wan become doctor for book from Asbury Theological Seminary.

Wetin we dey talk

Everywhere for de whole world, people dey talk say church dey grow fas fas for Nigeria. In fact, people say Nigeria don even become the face of Christianity for the whole world. Pastors go open church today, tomorrow e don full, sotey dem don dey start another branch. But as the church dey grow, na so poverty dey grow for contri. We no say since church start for contri, different church people dey get as dem dey take do with poverty. Na im we wan know wetin una think for how these new churches wen dey grow fas fas dey take talk about the poverty matter. As person wey get say for matter for society, we wan sidon for wetin oyinbo dey call "focus group" talk this matter with others well well. We wan ask wetin una think for the way these churches dem dey operate with the poor. How una take see am? E get any of una wey church hep comot for poverty? Wetin be una own experience for the church matter? Plenty questions, but na the heart of the matter be dis.

As de matter dey

If you gree to join me for dis waka, we go arrange for how you and others go meet, either for Zoom or even for any joint wey all of us go gree together. I fit buy mineral, malt and small food for all of us to eat as we dey talk.

If you no wan make people say na you say, we sabi as we take use other names wey go represent you. We go record the talk put am for place where nobody but me and the people wen dey help me go fit see am.

Wahala no dey for dis matter, but, pipo fit no go like wetin you talk, so if you tink say you no fit say wetin you wan say, no be by force to talk, no body fit force you. You fit say you no wan follow talk again, wahala no dey.

If you get any ting wey you no understand a beg contact **chi.adeliyi@asburyseminary.edu**.

If you get any ting wey you no understand a beg contact **chi.adeliyi@asburyseminary.edu**.

A beg if you don understand me wella and you wan follow me talk, help me put hand for dis paper. That one go show me say you wan talk. No be by force to sign, no body go vex if you no do.

Signature of Person wey wan join

Date wey im sign

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Social Critics-Interview

How are the Fastest Growing Churches (FGC) in Nigeria Intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty Alleviation

As a major critic of most Nigerian fastest growing churches, you are invited to be in a research study being done by **Chinyereugo Adeliyi, a doctoral student** from Asbury Theological Seminary.

Background of study

The church growth in our country has caught the attention of the whole world. Scholars and practitioners all over the world are wondering at the massive influx of congregants into our churches. In fact our country has been said to now represent the face of Christianity. One can say that this is quite an achievement from a continent that was hitherto called “dark”. While we celebrate our phenomenal church growth, it is seen that due to several factors, poverty also is on the increase. The intriguing thing however, is that the growth of poverty has not negatively affected the church growth. For our continent, poverty has always been an issue that Christianity has had to deal with. The aim of this study is to find out how these fastest growing Nigerian churches are intersecting with the pervasive poverty in the society. As a major critic of these churches, we want to understand your point of deviation from the leaders of these churches especially as regarding their poverty alleviation strategies. How do you think they understand poverty and their role in poverty alleviation? These and other questions will be the heart of the matter in the hour-long interview with you.

Conditions and Expectations

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to be interviewed at any location of your convenience either face to face or by Zoom. While there is no remuneration for participation, we are willing to share the conclusions from this study with you at no cost.

These interviews will be recorded electronically and will be safely stored in confidentiality where no other person but the researcher and the assistants will have access to your information. If anyone else is given information about you, they will not know your name. A number or initials will be used instead of your name.

I really do not see any potential risk of this study apart from the fact that it might make you vulnerable to others who disagree with your opinion, therefore if something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please let the interviewer know and you can also refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, or even decide to withdraw from the process at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact chi.adeliyi@asburyseminary.edu

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Marketplace

How are the Fastest Growing Churches (FGC) in Nigeria Intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty Alleviation

As a key player in the marketplace, you are invited to be in a research study being done by **Chinyereugo Adeliyi, a doctoral student** from Asbury Theological Seminary.

Background of study

The church growth in our country has caught the attention of the whole world. Scholars and practitioners all over the world are wondering at the massive influx of congregants into our churches. In fact our country has been said to now represent the face of Christianity. One can say that this is quite an achievement from a continent that was hitherto called “dark”. While we celebrate our phenomenal church growth, it is seen that due to several factors, poverty also is on the increase. The intriguing thing however, is that the growth of poverty has not negatively affected the church growth. For our continent, poverty has always been an issue that Christianity has had to deal with. The aim of this study is to find out how these fastest growing Nigerian churches are intersecting with the pervasive poverty in the society. As a major critic of these churches, we want to understand your point of deviation from the leaders of these churches especially as regarding their poverty alleviation strategies. How do you think they understand poverty and their role in poverty alleviation? These and other questions will be the heart of the matter in the hour-long interview with you.

Conditions and Expectations

If you agree to be in the study, you will be joining others in a “focus group” meeting to discuss the above issues at any location of your joint convenience either face to face or by Zoom. While there is no remuneration for participation, we are willing to buy non-alcoholic drinks and snacks to eat as we discuss. The discussions will be recorded electronically and will be safely stored in confidentiality where no other person but the researcher and the assistants will have access to your information. If anyone else is given information about you, they will not know your name. A number or initials will be used instead of your name.

I really do not see any potential risk of this study apart from the fact that it might make you vulnerable to others who disagree with your opinion, therefore if something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please let the interviewer know and you can also refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, or even decide to withdraw from the process at any time without penalty.

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Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Prominent Leaders

How are the Fastest Growing Churches (FGC) in Nigeria Intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty Alleviation

As a prominent leader in the Nigerian Christian Community, you are invited to be in a research study being done by **Chinyereugo Adeliyi, a doctoral student** from Asbury Theological Seminary.

Background of study

The church growth in our country has caught the attention of the whole world. Scholars and practitioners all over the world stand in awe at the massive influx of congregants into our churches. In fact our country has been said to now represent the face of Christianity. While many applaud the church growth as an achievement from a continent that was hitherto called “dark”, others are not quite sure why the church is growing while poverty remains endemic. While poverty has always been an issue that Christianity has had to deal with especially in our continent, different traditions have had different strategies. The aim of this study is to find out how the fastest growing Nigerian churches are intersecting with the pervasive poverty in the society. We want to know your opinion as a Christian leader who is not a member of these fastest growing churches. How do you think the leaders of these churches understand poverty? What do you think is their conversations with the poor? What do you believe their role should be in poverty alleviation? These and other questions will be the focus of the hour-long interview with you.

Conditions and Expectations

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to be interviewed at any location of your convenience either face to face or by Zoom. While there is no remuneration for participation, we are willing to share the conclusions from this study with you at no cost.

These interviews will be recorded electronically and will be safely stored in confidentiality where no other person but the researcher and the assistants will have access to your information. If anyone else is given information about you, they will not know your name. A number or initials will be used instead of your name.

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Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study
Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed Signature of Person
Date Signed

APPENDIX B

Survey Questions

Topic: How are the Fastest Growing Churches in Nigeria intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty Alleviation?

Introduction: When it is said that the church is growing in Nigeria, it is predominantly the Pentecostal tradition that is. Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Living Faith Church aka Winners' Chapel are two of the most visible of these churches. As such, this study seeks to find out how these two big and popular churches (that can in many ways be said to be representative) are intersecting with the poor, with poverty and with poverty alleviation.

Section 1.

Personal Details

1. What is your Religion
 - Christian
 - Muslim
 - Other
2. If Christian, what is your church affiliation?
3. What is your age range?
 - 18-25
 - 26-35
 - 36-55
 - 56-70
 - 71 and above
4. What is your Educational level
 - F.S.L.C.
 - W.A.S.C
 - O.N.D.
 - H.N.D.
 - Bachelors
 - Masters
 - Ph.D
5. Do you presently consider yourself to be poor, middle-class, or rich?
6. If you have ever been poor, How did you get out of poverty /How do you hope to get out of poverty?
7. As a person, are you involved in helping the poor?
8. If yes, Please list some of the ways you help the poor.

Section 2

The Poor as People

1. Who do you consider are the poor
 - People who are on the streets begging without homes and sources of income
 - People who have houses (rented or owned) but with no means of livelihood
 - Anyone who lives within the poverty line - currently 137,430 naira per person per year.
 - Others....
2. What percentage of Nigerians will you consider poor?
 - 10-30%
 - 30-50%
 - 50-70%
 - More

3. Where are the poor in your city?
4. How do you think these churches perceive the poor –
 - As cursed, idle, unfortunate, lack faith
 - oppressed/down-trodden and neglected by government
 - far from God, without understanding of His principles.
 - Consider leaving this blank
5. Do you think these churches see the gospel as good news to the poor? Yes or No
 - a. If yes, how?
 - They teach them how to become rich and they actually become rich.
 - They help them get closer to God and draw contentment from Him.
 - They help them learn practical skills and how to cope with life.
 - They finance their business start-ups and support them along the way.
 - b. If No, why?
 - The poor do not have a sense of belonging, there is no place for the poor,
 - they get under pressure to become rich,
 - they become emotionally distressed and destabilized.
 - They do everything to become rich.
 - Others
6. What scripture verses are most popular in these churches in relation to the poor?
 - The poor you will always have ... Deut. 15.11
 - They who give to the poor lend to the Lord... prov. 19.17
 - A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and need like a bandit....Prov. 24: 33-34
 - Give, it shall be given unto you... Lk. 6.38
 - Other
7. Do you think how rich one is/is not plays any role in the selection for leadership of these churches?
 - YES/NO
 - a. If yes, how?
 - The poor are hardly in positions of authority,
 - the poor are specially recognized and appointed to lead,
 - the poor are only given menial tasks while the rich are always respected and given prominent roles.
 - Other
 - b. If No, how?
 - Only the gifts of the spirit are important,
 - Zeal and maturity are what is crucial.
 - Availability is the determining factor
 - Other
 - c. Do you have any personal experiences to support your answer?
 - Yes/No.
 - i. If yes,
 - Did it happen to you?

- Did it happen to someone you know?
 - ii. If no,
 - Please explain why you
8. Does social class play any role in interpersonal relationships in churches?
- Yes/No
 - a. If Yes,
 - The rich and the poor hardly have anything in common, even when they do, the poor do not like to be around the rich or vice versa,
 - The poor when they come around the rich, usually do so in hopes of enriching themselves.
 - The rich are suspicious of the poor and vice versa.
 - b. If No,
 - People relate across social class,
 - age is what determines how people relate,
 - proximity is the underlying factor.
9. Why do you think the poor attend these churches?
- To overcome poverty,
 - to encounter God be saved and to grow in faith, to be motivated,
 - to contact people who can help them, to learn how to make money
 - other
10. What do you think is the principal purpose of these churches?
- To alleviate poverty,
 - to prepare people for eternity,
 - to evangelize the world...
 - Others
11. What does Jesus say about the poor?
- Give to the poor
 - The poor should give to God
 - Other
12. Do you think these churches pay special attention to the rich? Yes /No

Section 3

Poverty: Poverty as a condition

1. What causes poverty?
2. What is bad about poverty?*
3. Is poverty always bad?
4. Do you believe that the rich are growing richer, and the poor are growing poorer in Nigeria?
5. Will you say that poverty is growing in Nigeria or even Africa at large?
6. Are there more important issues than poverty? If so, name them in order of importance.
7. Are there biblical precedents for your understanding of poverty?
8. Do you think that the FGCs adequately understand the concept of poverty inside the church? Yes / No
 - a. If Yes, what are they doing?
 - b. If No, what should they be doing?

9. Do you think RCCG/ Living Faith adequately understand the concept of poverty outside the church?
Yes/No
- a. If Yes, what do they do?
 - b. If No, what can they do?

Section 4

Poverty Alleviation: Poverty Alleviation as a task

1. Do you think Poverty Alleviation is a Christian responsibility?
2. Is Poverty Alleviation the responsibility of the individual, the church or the government?
3. Do you think RCCG/ Living Faith are actively involved in poverty alleviation?
4. Is there any connection between the poor giving to the church and the alleviation of their poverty?
5. How does your church talk about poverty alleviation?
6. Please tell me about your poverty alleviation programs.
7. Do you think Advocacy (Engaging government and all those that have the power to make a change) is necessary in poverty alleviation?
8. Do you think RCCG/ Living Faith are adequately engaged in advocating for the poor?

Section 5

This section to be filled ONLY by people who attend RCCG/ Living Faith

1. How long have you been in your church?
2. How long have you been a Christian?
3. Is this the first church you ever attended? Yes/No
4. If No, why did you leave the other church/es
5. Why did you decide to attend this church?
6. Has your attendance had any impact on your finances?
7. Do you have any concerns in general about your church?

Section 6

This section to be filled only by people who DO NOT attend RCCG/ Living Faith

1. How long have you been in your present church?
2. How long have you been a Christian?
3. Have you ever attended either RCCG or Living Faith? Yes/No
4. If Yes, why did you leave?
5. If No, why have you never been a member?
6. In general, what do you think of RCCG/ Living Faith?
7. When compared with RCCG/ Living Faith, how does your church fare in taking care of the poor?

Section 7

This section to be filled only by critics of RCCG/ Living Faith and similar churches

1. How long have you been a Christian?
2. Have you ever been a member of RCCG/ Living Faith or any similar one?
3. If yes, for how long?
4. What is your major concern about RCCG/ Living Faith and others like them?
5. How will you want these churches to intersect with the poor with poverty and with poverty alleviation?
6. Do you have any biblical or contemporary model?

Interview questions for RCCG / Living Faith church Leaders

Who are the poor? What do you think is the greatest need of the poor?

How do you contact the poor?

How is the gospel good news to the poor?

How do you intersect with the poor?

Do you have any key scriptures that help you articulate poverty as a human condition?

What causes poverty?

Where are the poor in your city?

Who do you think is responsible for poverty alleviation?

What is your strategy for the alleviation of poverty?

What do you think is your role as a man of God/church in poverty alleviation?

What are your guiding principles for poverty alleviation?

Tell me about some of your poverty alleviation programs - year, individuals helped out of poverty etc

What is your biblical model for the alleviation of poverty?

Interview Questions for Leaders of the wider Christian Community

How long have you been a Christian?

Can you draw comparisons between Christianity when you started and Christianity now? What are the major differences? Do you have any concerns?

In your own understanding and perception, how are Pentecostal churches in general as represented by RCCG / Living Faith intersecting with the poor, with poverty and poverty alleviation?

Why do you think these churches are growing as they are?

What are your recommendations?

Interview Questions for Critics of RCCG/ Living Faith Churches

What is your religious affiliation?

You have been public in your criticism of many Pentecostal churches as represented by RCCG / Living Faith, can you please outline some of your concerns about these churches.

What will you rather have them do for the poor, against poverty and for poverty alleviation?

Do you have any models for your expectation?

Any final words?

Questions for Focus Group

How are the fastest growing Pentecostal churches as represented by RCCG/ Living Faith intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty and with poverty Alleviation?



ASBURY
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SEMINARY

TOPIC: Focus Group:

How are the Fastest Growing Churches in Nigeria intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty Alleviation?

Friends, this is Chinyereugo Adeliyi, a PhD Candidate, of Asbury Theological Seminary Wilmore KY and I welcome you to the Focus Group Discussion of my doctoral research study.

Introduction

As you already know, I am trying to understand how the fastest growing Nigerian churches are intersecting with the poor with poverty and with poverty alleviation.

Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Living Faith Church aka Winners' Chapel are two of the most visible of these churches. Therefore, this study seeks to find out how these two churches (that can in many ways be said to be representative) are intersecting with the Poor, with Poverty and with Poverty alleviation.

In this Focus Group Meeting, we will be seeking to discuss the following questions -

Focus Group Questions

1. Are churches increasing in the country? Is poverty increasing also? RCCG and Winners - will you say that these churches are the most visible nationwide?
2. The Poor – Who are the poor? How do these churches look at the Poor? Interact, involve, relate etc. Is the gospel good news to the poor in these churches? Explain?
3. Why do you think the poor attend these churches?
4. Poverty – what do they see as the causes of poverty? What do you see as the causes of poverty
5. Do the poor give to the church and why?
6. Poverty Alleviation – what are they doing? Is it enough? Is poverty alleviation really the priority of these churches? What can be done?
7. Missional implication of the Intersection of these churches with the issue of poverty – How is the intersection with poverty affecting the perception of the gospel?

Kindly help me fill out your personal details in this form to aid my findings and analysis.

Thank you
Chi Adeliyi

chi.adeliyi@asburyseminary.edu [Switch accounts](#)



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