
THE FORGOTTEN TREASURES OF THE CHURCH IN THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE: A RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In our understanding of the history of the church as it has been severally recorded and recounted, prominence and preference has been given to men more than the women in the order of events within the church as witnessed in the Nigerian situation. Women's issue and involvement are often treated as irrelevant and where they are mentioned, they are always in the shadow of the men who have the dominating capability within the existing structure. Against this background, the paper aims at reviewing the church's dominant posture thus bringing to light the women's relative involvement in her developmental struggles. By this, we shall be bringing to light the various involvements of women as in evangelism, teaching, nursing which were the inherent contributions that early women gave in the history and development of the church when it began in the Nigerian experience. Sequel in this respect too, we shall also bring to bear the distinctive features in women's remarkable act in guiding and directing church development as they have done severally in the past and subsequently we shall draw our conclusion which will inculcate a charge for women to walk in the light of the new demands. We shall attempt an evaluative approach in the course of the research thus assessing proceeding from the perspective that the 21st century event has afforded us evidence in assessing the recent development of women in the society as a whole.

Key Words: Forgotten Treasures, Women's Involvement, and Church Development.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the church has been recorded from male controlled perspectives with invective languages thereby portraying women as weak beings who are not capable of rational disposition. Such gesture in history has been invidious and the best that women have offered have not been favourably portrayed. Taking a look at the recorded histories of the various churches in the Nigerian situation, women's noble and worthy contributions are often played down and only passing references are made to their involvement. It is against this culture that the paper intent to reaffirm faith and trust in all that women stood for and is still standing for in the course of helping the church. Their remarkable stands have been beleaguered and men's apt opposition has also been expressed in a belligerent manner. The good that women have offered has been construed as trifling because, owing to the recorded account of the fall of man in the garden, the progenitors of male dominance have always argued that women could be perfidious. Men have consistently in that order expressed their trepidation because as the saying goes, once beaten twice shy. But for how long will the peregrinating journey back into having confidence in women take when and where it is obvious that they are earnestly and sincerely giving their best in developing the churches?

The past has been prevalent in dictating the position of action that is taken against women. But we need ask, for how long will the men continue to have the expressed reservation against women within the church set up? To have consistently been expressing doubt with regards to women in respect of their involvement and importance is like having to doubt God who called them into the ministry. Contrary to the expressed doubt, Akintunde (2005) said: That does not mean that women have not been great thinkers and leaders. Yet their thought and deeds have not been transmitted and become part of the history of the church. The fact that women have been evident in church's structure should give us the clue that women like their male counterparts have also been useful in the ordering and control of the church. The inhibiting posture of the male culture and its disposition should be seen as the militating factor that must be rejected if women's true worth must be projected in a favourable light. In the affirmation of Paulo Everest as quoted by Boff (1985) he said: It would be very myopic to limit ourselves to the days and customs of the past without opening new horizon to such a decision as the development of humanity.

The world at large is making appreciable impact in all facet of her structure and if women in that order have come out clearly by declaring that they have been called to serve, why will the inhibiting posture of patriarchy still be willing to keep them at the subservient end? Women we need affirm are not an accident in creation, God thought about them just like He thought about the man at creation. Since women did not belong to the wasted generation of persons and as an articulate beings, women will contend with this structure (masculine) to affirm in an unequivocal term their place of relevance and importance in the overall development of the church. It is on the basis of this fact that we are set to examine in a critical term the enviable roles of women within our age in having to help in church's development as earlier indicated in the body of this work.

The Male Dominance in Our Church Structure

The church leadership position has exclusively been reserved for men and women within such structure are not allowed to play any important role that would draw them to the leadership position. The best that was and is still being allowed them in a patriarchal setting is that of being supportive members. Abogunrin (1999) was apt in expressing this inherent posture of the church in the following words; "Our churches just like our society have patriarchal structures which marginalized women." The plaguing posture of men's excessive dominance has been relative in our experience as in other societies that, men's outstanding dominance and repulsive habits against women have been the same. While commenting on the situation of event, in South Carolina Helwig (1977) said: Here the church is all a man's domain and the women really do not have much to say. They do a lot of work, they cook for picnic and socials and they raise the most money...but when you get to policy, the men have it all tied up. They do not want a woman in any kind of power. The African culture is in tune with this expression. Men and men alone are in charge. Women have been exclusively reserved for home duties without having to challenge men for actions and decisions taken.

In I Corinthians 14: 34-40, Paul expressed that women should keep silent in the church. Men over the years have aligned much more with this statement and they have been apt in the

bid to keep women as subservient members, but while we reconsider the demand of the passage and other allusions of Paul that are prohibitive of women's effective participation in church development, Lian (1992) said; "These restrictions are an exceptional situation and not a norm prohibiting the participation of women in worship." In this wise therefore, the subjective interpretation should be re-examined in view of the new trend in women's awareness and participation. As events begins to unfold, the church in Nigerian experience is witnessing considerable changes in place and function assigned to women. Many more women are into the church as effective officers with due designations. Today, we have women as church founders and leaders as well and they are effectively leading the church under their control without any problem. This is one of the salient reasons why we need to re-consider issues more objectively in our current dispensation as we cannot rule effectively against women's active participation in church of the Lord any longer. Abogunrin (1986) while viewing issues from the submission of Paul, he was apt to state accordingly that: For the fact that Paul says that the church should silence such women should not be the reason for treating woman as inferior beings or barring them from church offices.

It has been the saying that women are inferior, but from a rational perspective, we need ask, where and when does the said inferiority came about owing to the fact that Genesis 1:31 said "...and God saw that all was good." Did the woman became bad after the affirmation of fitness and goodness has been bestowed upon her? If she was inferior and she derived her essence from God just like the man, does it imply that the woman actually inherit a weak nature at creation and then who must have created the weak nature that is now found in the woman? Could it have been the perfect God whose authority was and has been absolute? Since imperfection cannot be ascribed to God then, we must have to look at something else as being responsible for the defective nature that has been ascribed to women. If that is the thinking of the men then, such stand can relatively not be validated. Its posture cannot also stand as a logical submission in our understanding given the developments that are coming to light in our age today. The cultural pattern as exhibited in Africa has significantly played a role in delimiting functions and duties that under such sphere, women are basically required to operate at the domestic level. Winterbottom (1964) has vividly expressed this conviction in the following words: In Africa, women are regarded as beings of inferior nature...born to be slave of man, they are not admitted to eat at the same table, but must wait until their Lord has finished his repast when they are allowed the scraps which he may have left.

This posture in the mentality of an African man has to be questioned by raising a hypothetical question. Culture is way of life, but what exactly is the rational in accepting a posture that is backward in orientation within a civilized context as the 21st century experience is witnessing? If the foods that we eat at home are prepared by women, what should forbid them from eating along with their male partners? It is the same woman who prepared and laboured for the needs of the family that has in the process been rubbished and subsequently reduced to the lowest ebb in the society today. It is interesting to note that the woman that has no say in the day time is the same woman that will have a place on the bed at night on equal footing with the man that degraded her earlier in the day what an irony of life. The situation must necessarily be re-examined so as to give preference to

women by according them respect that befits them as rational beings and not as mere subordinates in our society any longer. We now need to call a spade a spade and not a mere implement for farming. The women's lost glory must be restored and must as well be recognized and respected by the culture that debilitates on them. More importantly as Ann Oakeley (1985) pointed out that "There is no scientific evidence to back the claim of the male natural superiority over women. Either intellectually or physically" In intellectual match, Deborah displayed a wide knowledge of wisdom as a prophetess. While in battle, Jael was an outstanding figure. In view of these, in what light will men construe superiority and intellectual capability that they can say that women are not their match? More importantly, at creation, there was no discrimination as God created them both in His image.

Women in Development

Women have long been involved in the development of the church. Evidences of their involvement are widely spread in the biblical history. Going by what women contributed, the church has been a tremendous recipient of favour in view of the outstanding support and contributions they gave as inherent in the Nigerian experience. In having to consider the women's involvement, we shall be looking at issues from two main perspectives i.e. the old and the new era, by the old, we shall not be elucidating on the old political settings before the era Christianity gained a foot hold on the Nigerian soil. Rather, we shall concern ourselves with the period when the church came much more into lime light. From that period, many distinguished ladies and women of repute were involved in nurturing the church at its inception in a number of ways. It is these individuals of old that we shall be elucidating on their involvement and performances in helping to push the church to her attained height as evident then in our church history.

In this category we shall be looking at women like Mary Slessor whom Morrison (1969) has described as an active evangelist. In his words: She went about with bare feet and bare head, subsisted on native food, drink unfiltered water slept on the ground, got drenched with rain, and in short did every thing that would have killed any ordinary person. She had a wonderful way with the natives. Her perfect mastery of the language, her fearlessness and good humour made her preaching irresistible.

Here was a woman who gave her best in nurturing the church at her teething stage. However, as developments are taking place, the once upon a time female controlled church has given way for the male dominated structure that the active services rendered by women are presently not been referred to or considered. To many, such had better been reserved for the archives. With the outstanding acts of Mary Slessor, this is one of the many treasures of the church that has become an unsung heroine of the church in our age. Apart from her having to found churches, Basil Miller (1929) rightly pointed out that Mary Slessor equally conducted services. In his words; "Mary Slessor conducted services, taught in the church, in the schools and equally visited people in their houses." As Mary Slessor was carrying out her pre-assigned commission, Miller further observed that she was supported by two other women and these were Misses Annes and Ramsay. The two became prominent in their evangelical assignment in Akpap where they taught the people the word of God and also

assisted in building and supervising church building. As the church keeps growing, the likes of Annes and Ramsay are hardly remembered in today's history and where they are remembered, passing references are made to them without actually bringing to bear that which they have effectively contributed in moving the church forward at a time when it was so difficult to do so in an unsaved regions of 'black and dark Africa'.

The church in the olden days combines establishment of schools as part of her maiden assignment and as such, schools were established and women and men were employed to help train the young Africans. Such schools were an extension of the church and in its curriculum; they taught moral studies among other things which were reflective of the needs of the church in the effort to develop a loyal society to their course. In the light this fact, we should take into consideration the fact that women were equally a part of such effort. While affirming on the good that the church must have offered in the development of the society, this enviable role of women has often not been considered seriously as important. Though such was and is still a paying job but, if the service had not been rendered, the society would have had some serious moments. Travis Collins (1993) equally identified Mrs. Carie Green Lumbley of the Baptist Mission who had served with her distinguished missionary husband until his death. A few years earlier, she opened the Baptist Girls High School in Abeokuta in 1910. In Shaki in Oyo State, The Elam Memorial School was opened in 1934 and Mrs. Elam Elam was the Principal of the school. In Lagos, Regan Memorial School was opened in 1941 and Mrs. Desser Adlair was the Principal. Agbor Girls Secondary School was opened in 1946 and Mrs. Mildred Crabtree was the Principal. In Oyo Town, The Olivet Baptist High School was opened in 1945 and Mrs. Rose Powell was the Principal. It is imperative to note that Baptist Missionaries like other missionaries established more schools which aimed at helping the natives in attaining the required education at that time. In equal vein, the Anglicans also established schools in Ibadan and Oyo towns respectively just to mention a host of other schools that were opened by the other denominations.

Miss Pridham worked with the United Missionary Church of Africa. She began an effective work of teaching the young ones as early as 1965 particularly around Ilorin and environs. Miss Kathryn Martha Dick was born in Munich, North Dakota in United States of America on 23rd March 1908. She came into Nigeria in 1932 under Sudan Interior Mission. She also established SIM/ECWA Grade II Teachers College in Oko near Omu-Aran in the present day Kwara State where young Girls were trained. The link between the church and schools was impressive in that, though schools were granted aided, the churches as proprietors have influence in running those schools. Children from such schools during annual harvest were asked to contribute toward the development of the churches. As an example, St. Barnabas Anglican Church which was established in 1917 operates this system very much until the school was taken over by the Government.

In having to asses the exploit of women in church development, this is an angle that has not been considered very seriously. The history of church's development cannot be complete if these enviable roles are not reckoned with. What is amazing today is that, the histories of the churches are often told without clear acknowledgement of these distinctive contributions.

The past had worked so much in ensuring a firm root for our present and in fairness to records of events, these noble efforts of women should not be glossed over as one of such events but they ought to be weighed for the merits of their contributions.

Women as Evangelist

Sarah Marsh was born in Sierra Leone and was an active evangelist in Nigeria. While the American civil War was going on, its effect disrupted the programme of the Baptist Mission within the country. The scenario soon became an event which decided and inflamed the Nation which was sending the Missionaries into Nigeria and that considerably affected the scope of work around 1860-70 that should have been done within this area in terms of evangelism as planned. During this significant period in the history of the Nigerian Baptist, Travis Collins (1993) wrote accordingly: The absence of Baptist Missionaries from the USA was certainly not a total disaster. The Lagos group nurtured by Sarah Marsh Harden and Moses Ladejo Stone came to be an important group in Nigerian Baptist history.

Sarah Marsh Harden who through grace held the church that was nascent at the period together. She gave the church the required sense of direction. If not, the church would have died a natural death. This and many women of outstanding characters in the early days of the church are today not reckoned with. Rather than allowing the momentum that had been generated to guide and still continue in our dispensation, it is like the church suddenly woke up for her deep slumber and began undoing all that women had stood for in her early days. Sarah Marsh Harden married a young black American in 1857 and they worked together directing the church that had existed on present site of the First Baptist Church in Lagos. In 1864, Harden died, despite this, Mrs. Harden strived to keep the church going. In Atanda's (1985) words: Following the death of her husband, Mrs. Harden was determined to hold together the Baptist in Lagos in the absence of the American Missionaries. Her evangelistic Ministry in Lagos resulted in people committing their lives to Jesus Christ. She also aided Christian refugees who were fleeing persecution up country.

Today, her exploit is hardly remembered and where at all she is remembered, it is usually in that passive mood. One can but wonder if an outstanding woman like Mrs. Harden had given so much, why will the Baptist like other male dominated churches still be preventing women from been effectively integrated within her main stream? The memories of her like other women are tales told and are now reserved for the archives. Women must promptly react to reclaim their past otherwise; patriarchy will continue to exploit them consistently. Also of importance was Josephine Scaggs who began her ministry in Joinkrana a cluster of four small villages on the Orishi River in the south eastern part of the country in 1942. Her exploit received the attention of Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth of England who made her a Honourary officer of the Order of British Empire. Ferguson (1971) recorded her extra ordinary performance in the following words: South Baptist around the world beamed with pride when the memorable Josephine Scaggs became "Honorary Officer" of the Order of British Empire. Queen Elizabeth personally bestowed the accolade upon this "River Rat" as some affectionately called Jo on 7th February 1956 in Enugu, Nigeria.

This uncommon Ambassador of Jesus Christ was also described by a British Historian in 1951 which was aptly quoted by Ferguson (1971) in the following words: Mrs. Jo Scaggs, the Evangelist presses tirelessly into the remotest villages by cycle and canoe to spread the word of God. She has under her care no less than forty two churches, each in charge of an African Pastor, and every Sunday she is off along the creeks to hold prayer meetings in as many of them as she can reach assisted by one of a small band of devoted women. The contributions of Mrs. Scaggs were impressive in view of her skill coupled with her organizational ability in controlling effectively the number of churches under her care. We need ask at this juncture, must the men take over everything in spite of the outstanding acts of women in planting churches as evident in the cases that we have rightly mentioned.

Women in Grass Root Functions

John Ferguson (1971) brought to light the activities of David Hinderer of the Church Missionary Society who worked in Ibadan the present capital of Oyo State. His wife was apt in supporting the husband just like Ferguson pointed out on Anna's role in the following words; "Anna had always loved children and it is for her work among children that she is justly remembered" Taking care of the children within the church is descriptive of a supportive or a complimentary role. Further in his description, Ferguson had described her more vividly as playing the supportive role. In his description of 1854, he said: On January 20th 1854, Anna wrote in her diary "you come with a desire to do something, you see your work before you, see thousands of children, hundred of people and you are utterly helpless in mind and body; it is hard work and only God can give strength to bear it. Her love for children was quite outstanding thereby indicating her supportive role in the church as well as in the ministry of the husband. This role has been viewed by the prevailing culture that is guiding the church structure as being supportive. In other supportive capacity was Mrs. Edgerley of the Presbyterian Mission who was described as being hospitable and supportive in the ministry by Ferguson (1971) in the following words: ...They anchored off Duke Town in April 19th 1846. Here they were welcomed by King Eyamba. All four men spoke. Mrs. Edgerley reserved her words for the women later and they presented Eyamba with a Bible.

Many of the missionaries who came into the region gained tremendously because their wives served as a complimentary force as they (men) are busy working among the men, their wives were equally busy directing women/ ladies accordingly in the way of the Lord. These outstanding women gave as much as possible as their respective husbands in the course of spreading the Gospel. Without their complimentary roles, the work of missions would hardly have been easy for the men alone. In this light therefore, this fact in women's active contributions must be aptly commended for the good they have offered these churches at its inception.

Women as Nurses

In our consideration under this heading, the like of Nurse Kathleen Menley who worked in Joinkrama was a remarkable figure who gave to helping the people within the local areas. While describing her, Travis Collins (1993) said accordingly that: Nurse Kathleen Menley began healing ministry of which Miss Scaggs had dreamt about in 1946 in Joinkrama and was

later joined by Dr. Robert Cox. Their ministry resulted in the establishment of the Baptist Hospital in Joinkrama. Having established the hospital, many that would have died unattended to have the privilege of receiving due medical treatment thus helping to prolong the life span of such people. Apart from Menley, other distinguishing characters offered themselves for service in the church as missionaries. Among such was Mrs. Eleanor, a nurse with the First Baptist Mission. Her place of assignment was in Eku. Nurse Mary Evelyn Freedenberg also joined the Howells in 1949. These women would ordinarily not have been considered as important agents that the church could depend upon in terms of missionary assignment in areas where the Gospel had not been preached. But by the virtue of their training, they turned themselves into viable and enviable instruments in opening a new world where Christ's ideal have been effectively entrenched.

Women as Protectors of Orphans

Ruth Kersey in 1926 accepted and took care of a motherless baby girl in Ogbomoso. Her awareness of the need for a ministry to the motherless and abandoned children led Miss Kersey into establishing a programme of care for those babies in the women's ward of the Baptist Hospital in Ogbomoso. Miss Kersey's ministry and vision grew into what is now known as the Ruth Kersey Children's Home in Ogbomoso today. This is a commendable effort within the structure of the church at the period. The church in her early days was more than an avenue for the preaching and teaching the people the Gospel rather, the church equally got involved in building manpower as may be expedient. In doing this majorly, women contributed so much and if not more than the men.

Women as Church Founders/Leaders

Miss Neale Young was a Baptist missionary who worked with the missionary body in Nigeria. As a result of her enterprising role, she was made the President of the Nigerian Women's Missionary Union in 1922 and she served in that capacity for thirty nine years. For her distinguishing roles, the Women's Missionary Union of the Church named the Assembly Ground in Ede in Osun State after her in honour of her enviable role in Christian service. In her capacity, she was not a church founder, but an effective leader among women in the Baptist Mission. Still under consideration is Miss Ruth Elton of the Gospel Assembly in Agasa District of Okene in Kogi State. She established various preaching points in Ilesha, Agasa and Okene respectively. As a church founder, she gave much to developing the Africans in the bid to make them take over subsequent to her dwindling ability as age was tending on her.

CONCLUSION

The church of old received due patronage from women as discussed, it is equally interesting to note that as foreign women workers were prominent in the region, Nigerian women and children gave support by turning much earlier to Christ thus assisting and encouraging the intent of establishing the Christian mission in Nigeria. These women of ability are today not considered in the history of church development and growth. We must be sincere in our appreciation of history. These are treasures that sowed the seed and even watered and helped to nurture it to the point that she was able to stand subsequently. Why will the church be ignoring the prompt act of women in effectively assisting the church's growth? We

must earnestly work toward correcting records. Women were not just mere bystander rather; they worked actively guiding, establishing and directing activities within the church at all front. It is expedient to argue that women in our age must be effectively integrated in the scope of things so as to justify the past to which they gave so much to. In this regard, Martins Helwig (1977) said: Only when women became full participants in all domains of life and enter the important areas of decision-making will humanity be prepared to embark on the next stage of its collective development. The male's perception of women's involvement has viewed things from myopic sense hence; the need to re-evaluate events becomes apparent thus viewing things more objectively so as to give some credit to women's exploit as unsung heroines. We must again be on the path toward appreciating them for what they gave toward church growth and development as we have shown in the body of this work.

We cannot claim to be ignorant of that which distinguished those women as we have observed. This is a new generation that must relatively make advances and we cannot just blot away or gloss over what those women stood for in church development. If our claim in the 21st century is belonging to an advancing age then, such claim must honestly be tested. In the words of Young Allen (1903) he said; "The best single test of the civilization of any people is the degree to which their women are free and educated." The church in our age in the Nigerian experience should stop putting a cog on the wheel of progress. The appreciative impact of their involvement is noticeable in all churches, it is only best in the interest of the church to recognize honorably the women's effective role in our dispensation. The time to effectively ask for change is now and like Manus (1987) rightly pointed out: In fact African women are only recognized in so far as they are under the shadows of men. This second fiddle role is the bondage point from which Jesus emancipated the Samaritan Lady. Women must necessarily catch the vision for self deliverance from the oppressing claw of patriarchy. Our world has sufficiently witnessed a number of changes and women's quest for effective integration and not mere insertion must vigorously be pursued. Anything less than this aspiration will be short of the global demand in the 21st century expectation for women in all spheres of their relation in the interacting setting that we belong to.

The church right from its inception has functioned under cooperate act involving men and women. In fact, the exploit of women/ladies are outstanding. For the church to assume undermining posture against women will be self defeating. After all, women constitute more than half of the entire population that worships in the churches world over today. If such enormous force should be reduced to nothing that will smack crisis and it will be a disservice to the women and the obvious realities on the ground. Hazel Ayana E. A. (1999) in Mary N. Getu and E. A. Obeng said: The church needs and requires the services and participation of both men and women if it is to bear fruit that can be eaten and enjoyed by the people, to nourish them and to keep them strong and healthy for now and for the future.

While it is clear that we are in a complex world, yet such world has been administered cooperatively by men and women at various degrees. Men in process should not completely arrogate power to themselves at the expense of what women have given. The view of Hazel has equally been supported by Fusi Cagicavanus (1989) who said: Sexual segregation of activities does not permit the development of potential as it exists in an individual. It is in this

light that I will not hesitate to state that traditional concepts of role of women have prevented analytical examination of how women and men could develop to be effective messengers of God. The world will keep changing and women in the light of their present attainment should not keep that which they have realized but still press further for a lasting change as expected. The past was reflective of the effective roles of women, why should women fold their hands in our age and expect changes. Nothing in itself changes unless there is a pressure or an agitation. Let us work cooperatively and forge the desired change. The past stood as a bulk wall that the sincerity of the present cannot pull down. Women must again rise to the occasion as heroines of old and do God's bidden.

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