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Pentecostalism and the migration of the Redeemed Christian Church of God from Nigeria to Athens, USA

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Abstract

Pentecostalism in Nigeria has become a massive wave of Christianity became increasingly noticeable in the 1970s and beyond. Since then, due to the influence of Pentecostal churches on society, researchers such as Rotimi Williams and Adeniyi Oluwole in the fields of religion, history, sociology, and political science have concluded that, religions are not static. This is particularly true of the migration of Pentecostal Churches from Nigeria to Diaspora. The desire of Africans to worship in the African way instead of the formalistic worship in the orthodox Churches further encouraged African to embrace Pentecostalism in Diaspora. This paper therefore tries to look at the effects of migration on Pentecostalism with particular reference to the historical emergence of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Athens, USA. Addressing the problem of the study, it is germane to examine the extent to which the RCCG, Athens, has been able to cater for or meet the spiritual and other needs of fellow Nigerians who have not found any form of fulfilment or satisfaction in the orthodox or mainline Churches in their new home; which also form the basis of our findings in this study. The methods employed are basically historical and descriptive. The paper concludes that Pentecostalism and migration have proved to be two sides of the same coin furnishing African Diaspora with the needed supports of being a brother's keeper while providing a home away from home, despite the challenges encountered.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Migration, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Religions, Diaspora

Introduction

Migration and Pentecostalism are significant variables in Christianity today that cannot be separated from each other in the spread of the gospel. Without migration, the Christian Religion from early history would have been static, but for migration, in the words of Darrel, (2006:52), Christianity was brought to the Gentiles and enabled the faith "to survive the fall of Jeru-

salem and the destruction of the Jewish State." In contemporary history of the Church, migration has favourably affected the emergence and expansion of Pentecostalism in Nigeria and Diaspora, and especially Athens, USA, which is the focus of our study.

The emergence of Pentecostalism in Nigeria in the 1970s marked a significant point in the history of Christianity. In the words of Omotoye and Opoola, (2012);

The first phase was introduced in the 19th century by the Mainline churches such as the Methodist, Church Missionary Society (Anglican), Baptist and Catholic. Another phase was introduced in the second decade of the 20th century by the *Aladura* churches such as the Cherubim and Seraphim, Christ Apostolic Church, Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) and the Celestial Church of Christ. The third phase was the introduction of the Pentecostal or Charismatic Churches in the 1970's in Nigeria.

Since its establishment in Nigeria, Pentecostalism has brought remarkable developments to the nation, and as well introduced into Christianity modes of worship that is very vibrant. Notable among the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria as listed by Omotoye and Opoola are;

Church of God's Mission, founded by the late Benson A. Idahosa in Benin City, Edo state, Household of God's Church, being led by Chris Okotie in Oregun, Lagos, the Redeemed Christian Church of God founded by the late Josiah Akindayomi and presently under the leadership Enock Adejare Adeboye with International headquarters at Mowe, Ogun state. The Deeper Life Christian Church founded by Pastor Williams Folorunso Kumuyi and based in Lagos. Gabriel Oduyemi's Bethel Ministry at Wonder City, Lekki Peninsular, Lagos, Patrick Anwuzia's Zoe Ministries, and Tunde Bakare's Latter Rain Assembly in Lagos, Tunde Joda's Christ Chapel International, Lagos and Wale Oke's Sword of the Spirit Church based in Ibadan. Others are the Victory Life Church International established by Mike Bamidele at Ilesa, Osun state, New Testament Church based in Ilorin and established by M.R. Popoola, Mountain of Fire and Miracles, founded by Daniel Kolawole Olukoya with its headquarters in Lagos, the Synagogue of All Nations,

established by Temitope Balogun Joshua in Lagos, Rhema Chapel, Ilorin established by George Adegbeye, the Word Assembly being led by Rev Isaac Omolehin and of course the Living Faith Church (a.k.a Winners Chapel) founded by Bishop David Olaniyi Oyedepo.

Although other scholars like Deji Ayegboyin, Matthews Ojo, Hannah Ishola, Rotimi Omotoye and Lydia Akande have carried out impressive work on Pentecostal Churches, but our focus in this paper is to examine the emergence of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria, their migration to Athens, in Georgia State of America, and how the Church in Athens have been able to meet the spiritual, emotional and other life challenges of members in their new home. The Redeemed CCG, became the focus of study here because it was in this Church at Athens, that the writer worshiped for close to five months as a visiting scholar to the University of Georgia, Athens, USA. This afforded her the opportunity to study the history of the emergence of the Church in Athens, because her own Church, which was the Christ Apostolic Church, could not be sited at Athens as of the time of visit. Worshiping therefore at the RCCG, Athens, USA, was a pleasant experience, which has propelled this write-up. It is therefore germane to first look at the history of the emergence of the Church in Nigeria.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria

The history of the emergence of the Redeemed Christian Church of God as narrated here is an extract from the website of the mission on 16th June, 2018. The founder of the Church, Pa Josiah Akindayomi was born in July, 1909 to the family of idol worshippers. During the course of his development, he had spiritual yearning and hunger for God. This led him to join the Church Missionary Society, where he was baptized in 1927. Still not fulfilled spiritually, he went ahead to join the Cherubim and Seraphim church in 1931. Here, God continually called him to priesthood, which he refused to yield until after seven years when he began to have challenges.

He continued to worship with the Cherubim and Seraphim until 1952 when he felt totally persuaded to leave the church. He began a house fellowship called, the Glory of God Fellowship at Willoughby Street, Ebute-Metta, Lagos, with initial members who were nine in number. As God would have it, not long that the fellowship started, it grew rapidly because the news of the miracles that occurred in their midst spread like wild fire.

Consequently, during this period, Pa Akindayomi who could neither read nor write English received a vision of the name of the Church as "The

Redeemed Christian Church of God" As divinely ordained, Akindayomi was able to write these words down correctly. Further in his spiritual encounter with God, it was revealed to him that the Church would spread to the ends of the earth and that the Lord Jesus Christ would meet the RCCG at His glorious appearance. As long as the church remains faithful to God, God in turn would from time to time meet the needs of the church.

Based on this assurance from God, Akindayomi remained faithful and steadfast to his calling until he was called to glory to meet with the Lord in 1980. Prior to his demise or home call, God had revealed to him that his spiritual successor would be a young educated man, who as of then was not a member of the RCCG. This revelation came to pass in the life of the present General Overseer of the Church in person of Dr Enoch Adejare Adeboye, then, a young university lecturer in Mathematics. He became a member of the Church in 1973, very fervent and an interpreter to Akindayomi who already saw in him the spiritual successor God promised. He was ordained as a pastor in 1975.

As God had earlier revealed, E.A. Adeboye became the General Overseer of the RCCG in 1981. Since then, the church has witnessed and still witnessing tremendous growth as promised by God to Akindayomi before his death. The Lord has been faithful to His promise to the church. Adeboye too is a man of prayer and unwavering faith in God. No wonder, Miller, (2008) in *Newsweek*, the international newsmagazine, declared him thus;

You may never have heard of E. A. Adeboye, but the pastor of The Redeemed Christian Church of God is one of the most successful preachers in the world. He boasts that his church has outposts in 110 countries. He has 14,000 branches—claiming 5 million members—in his home country of Nigeria alone. There are 360 RCCG churches in Britain, and about the same number in U.S. cities like Chicago, Dallas, and Tallahassee, Fla. Adeboye says he has sent missionaries to China and such Islamic countries as Pakistan and Malaysia. His aspirations are outsize. He wants to save souls, and he wants to do so by planting churches the way Starbucks used to build coffee shops everywhere.

Today, compared to 2008, the RCCG, is growing with Parishes of the church in over 180 countries of the world, one of which is the Amazing Grace Parish in Athens, United State of America, the focus of our study.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God, Amazing Grace Parish, Athens, USA

Rooted in Athens, USA, since October 8, 2008, The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) Amazing Grace Parish began humbly as a house fellowship with just four individuals: two students and two professors. This initial gathering officially took shape on that very date due to unforeseen circumstances. By 2012, their Fellowship/Bible Study had flourished, drawing 35 to 40 attendees, primarily students from the University of Georgia in Athens.

On September 21, 2014, the parish was formally established with 15 members, comprising ten adults and five children. Their early focus centered on mentoring young students from Africa, particularly Nigeria, enrolled at the University of Georgia. The aim was to anchor them in their faith, recognizing the potential for drifting in the United States, a challenge even for adults. Despite dedicated efforts to support them through conversations, provisions, and regular contact, regrettably, few of these students remained active believers.

Interestingly, the church's core has shifted towards older members, primarily graduate students pursuing Masters and Doctoral degrees in diverse fields like MBAs and PhDs. These individuals now form the committed backbone of the congregation. Given that Athens is largely a university town with limited career prospects, many members tend to relocate after their studies, often around the ten-year mark. While the majority of the congregation is Nigerian, it also includes members from other African nations such as Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Togo, and Uganda, who integrate seamlessly and demonstrate strong dedication to the church's work.

Initially meeting in a rented space at the Presbyterian Student Center, the parish achieved a significant milestone by purchasing its own property in 2020, located conveniently near the University of Georgia campus at 1037 Baxter Street, Athens, GA 30606. Recognizing the transportation challenges faced by some students, the church acquired vehicles to provide rides to and from services, and even for errands like shopping or visiting courier services.

Throughout its journey, RCCG Amazing Grace has steadfastly adhered to the global RCCG mandate, beliefs, and mission: "the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). The parish is known as a welcoming "haven of bliss, where the ordinary becomes extraordinary." Since its inception, Pastor Moradeke Aderibigbe has capably led the church, overseeing its spiritual, social, and operational aspects, with the support of devoted men and women of God.

Impacts of RCCG, Amazing Grace Parish, Athens, USA

With the migration of RCCG, to Athens which is a further fulfilment of God's promise that the Church would be known all over the world, the impacts of the church on Africans in Athens cannot be over-emphasized. This is because in the words of Gerlof (2011:1510), "religions are on the move." Therefore the impact of the move of RCCG from Nigeria to Athens have been tremendous. The church has been able to meet the spiritual, emotional and other needs of Nigerians and other diaspora in Athens. The positive response of the church to the yearnings of her members, have assisted in improving the membership strength. Therefore, the impacts of the church could be felt as discussed in the following sub-headings:

- **Life Transforming Sunday Service:**

Services held on Sundays are very lively and enthusiastic, with life changing sermon, extemporaneous prayer and worship session, accompanied with instruments to support clapping and dancing. The situation can be favourably compared to what is obtainable back at home on Sundays. Sunday school which usually comes up before service is a good avenue to really dig into the Scripture, while the children department too are adequately catered for and not left out. With this development, Africans saw in the church, the expected fulfilment of their religious and emotional aspirations, as opined by (Oduyoye 1979:114), that "they have developed lively liturgies with music and prayer forms that are authentically African." Been a member of the choir of RCCG, Athens, between January and May, 2015, Akande confirmed that, songs usually rendered during worship sessions and the Pastor in charge's soothing words like; "with God, all things are possible. Cast your fears and burdens on Him," often remind her of same situation back in Nigeria.

- **Counseling Services**

Life generally and especially in Diaspora is full of challenges. Individuals are not left alone to face such situations. Aside prayer and fasting, these life issues are responded to through counseling sessions offered by the minister in charge of the church, Professor (Pastor) and Dr (Pastor Mrs) Aderibigbe. Such counseling has really helped to redirect many life that have lost focus. This view corresponds with what Fatokun(2013:101), said about people who had benefitted from similar counseling that; "they got direction to their directionless life and received focus to their focus-less life when they came to see the man of God for counseling, and ever since then, their lives had never

remained the same.”

- **Responding to the physical needs of members**

The welfare issues of members are paramount to the church. They do not close their eyes when occasions arise for physical or financial needs of members. Students are prayed for, before, during and after examinations. Arrangement of food items are made for members with any identified problems of feeding. To the best of their ability and within their reach, the church responds adequately to members' physical needs. In the opinion of Adewale (1998:125), “such step is a practical demonstration of love characteristic of African life.” Coupled with this, is the fact that on the last Sunday of every month, members who have their birthdays fall on that month are celebrated through dancing, cutting of birthday cake and other lively activities.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God as a Performing Ground

Olupona has described how African ethnic identities in the United States are connected to migrants creating quasi-communities of their homelands in the host land in connection to and remembrance of their homelands. He notes how the migrants' creation is accomplished by giving importance to the cultural values of the homeland where community members emphasize speaking and hearing their languages, having the opportunity to enjoy special food delicacies, instituting programs and events that include ethnic markers such as clothing styles, flags, and reference to cultural values or beliefs.

Olupona's observations show how the Nigerian Pentecostal tradition of RCCG in USA culturally, socially, and religiously provides a context for Nigerians to perform their cultural values and practices and to keep the memories of the homeland constantly on their minds. Though Pentecostal churches modify their traditions and practices to conform to their community contexts, Pentecostal practices in Nigeria usually fall within a structure. The unique Nigerian traditions and characteristics found in Nigerian Pentecostalism are; for instance, music and songs, often sung in indigenous Nigerian dialects, usually Igbo and Yoruba dialects, and less often Ikot dialects. The rituals and other instituted practices that offer the migrant worshippers the opportunity to perform their Nigerian ethnicities are:

- **The Prayer Warrior Tradition**

Describing the heightened spirituality typical of Nigerian Pentecostalism, Ayuk's assertion sheds some light on the rationale behind the prayer warrior tradition:

By nature, they are spiritual. It is not like other humans are not spiritual, but it is just that they are more attuned to the spiritual than the physical. A Nigerian by nature, looks at life from a spiritual dimension rather than from a rational point of view.

The spiritual warrior tradition is a typical example of a practice that enables worshippers of the RGCC to perform spiritual protection themselves rather than remain passive and expect the succor of divine agents to gracefully flow into their lives. The practice endows lay worshippers with agency and instills in them feelings of personal spiritual empowerment. The sense is that spiritual protection does not only come from God or Jesus but also from one's engagement in spiritual disciplines or exercises such as meditation, fasting, and persistent prayer. Personal spiritual fortification is a common indigenous Nigerian religious practice. Individuals consult with ritual specialists who fortify them spiritually by using a number of cultural techniques following specific ritual formulae, having powdery substances poured into incisions made on the body, wearing power-charged necklaces prepared by ritual specialists, etc.

• **The Sunday Service**

Overseas African Pentecostal churches are noted to follow the patterns of worship of the mother churches in the homeland. These include the coordinated expression of worship in dancing, singing, giving of testimonies, speaking in tongues, preaching, simultaneous prayers, and so on. In RCCG USA, Nigerian languages (mostly Igbo and Yoruba) are used alongside the English Language during worship. In this connection, Harvey Cox notes: "The great strength of Pentecostal worship is in its power to combine, the aptitude for adopting the language, the cultural artifacts, the music...of the settings in which it lives." The RCCG in USA Sunday service is a purely autogenously Nigerian affair that offers worshippers the opportunity to engage in a number of cultural performances.

The Sunday service starts immediately at the end of the Sunday school. The choristers mount the stage in their colorful dresses and encourage the congregation to "do something for Jesus." At this, the congregation bursts into a state of frenzy and, performing different actions, some making unusual noises, some cheering "Alleluia, Alleluia," others clapping their hands, and others jumping. At the corner of the stage area set of African drums, a collection of bands, a piano, and other musical instruments.

- **Healing and Deliverance Hour/ Service**

The healing and deliverance tradition of the RCCG in USA is another ritual context the allows for the performance of “Nigerianess” in USA. This event takes place on the second Thursday of every month at 8pm. The goal of the service is to provide deliverance and support to members with spiritual problems. Members are also encouraged to invite people who they think need spiritual help. The duration of this program is long as it begins at 8pm and ends at midnight. This allows time for the long prayer and deliverance activities that take place. The underlying rationale of this ritual form builds on indigenous Nigerian etiologies, which emphasize the supernatural causality of illnesses and social problems and recommend religious healing as a supplement to the mundane actions people take to resolve mishaps.

- **Praise and Worship Service**

Nigerian Pentecostal Churches are known for their distinctive styles of singing choruses during devotional sessions called “Praise and Worship.” Praise and worship sessions involve spontaneous singing, dancing, shouting, handclapping, speaking in tongues, and prophesying. Describing the nature of praise and worship in the Pentecostal traditions of Nigeria and explaining its appeal, Ayuk characterized Nigerians as people that adopt loud musical instruments, and their songs most times are formed according to situations at hand which are not witnessed in other churches in the host land.

There is the regular interruption of events with songs, spontaneous singing, and dancing accompanied by clapping of hands. Also, devotional and prayer sessions are extremely prolonged to let the Holy Spirit in for anointing and deliverance. Teachings on demons (*emiokukan*) witches (*aje, ajommuo*) wizards (*oso*), satan (*esu, ekwensu*), ancestral curses (*egunidile*) which could be assuaged through the infilling of the Holy Spirit and fervent prayers dominate the discourse. This gives Nigerian Pentecostalism a typical frame of reference even if there are slight contextual diversities. Attention to the rituals and other instituted practices that offer the migrant worshippers the opportunity to perform their Nigerian ethnicities.

- **Itinerant Preachers**

One of the ways that the African Pentecostal churches offer the context for fostering connections between the homeland and the Diasporas is through itinerant preachers. These are ritual agents or pastors from the home Church in Nigeria who visit extensions in the Diasporas to preach and preside over healing and deliverance sessions. Members and relatives living

in Nigeria come for visits to the church. Members in Diasporas also extend a hand through the visitors when they are returning to Nigeria. The exchange goes both ways. Members at home also contribute immensely to peoples' life here. They do so through prayers and sending remittances. For instance, they send local food through these visitors. They also contribute to the social well-being of members in the Diasporas.

Challenges of Redeemed Christian Church of God in Athens, USA

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) faces challenges in adapting to new environments, particularly in places like Athens, USA, where it's encountering diverse populations and cultural contexts. These challenges include integrating their distinct theological traditions with American evangelicalism, adapting their worship styles, and engaging with a broader, potentially skeptical audience. These are;

- Theological and Cultural Integration:**

While RCCG and American evangelicals share some common ground (like emphasis on faith, traditional family values, and a desire for social change), their theological nuances and interpretations of scripture can differ. RCCG's worship style, which may involve more expressive movements, may need to be adapted to resonate with a more reserved American audience. However, RCCG, rooted in Nigerian culture, needs to navigate the cultural landscape of Athens, USA, and its diverse population.

- Engaging a Diverse and Skeptical Audience:**

RCCG needs to build bridges with non-immigrants and individuals who may be skeptical of their theology or the church's role in politics. Also, RCCG's decision to become more involved in political mobilization faced criticism, highlighting the growing cynicism towards the church in some circles. Thus, RCCG needs to be transparent about its intentions and engage in open communication with its members and the broader community.

- Financial and Organizational Challenges:**

RCCG may face challenges in allocating resources, particularly in church planting and ministry initiatives. The requirement for pastors to send a portion of tithes and offerings to headquarters in Nigeria can be a point of contention for some local congregations. Thus, RCCG's hierarchical structure

and the authority of the General Overseer may need to be navigated in a different context than in Nigeria.

• **Maintaining Faithfulness to Core Doctrines:**

RCCG in Athens, USA are also faced with the challenges of finding ways to adapt to new environments while remaining faithful to its core theological beliefs. Also, its commitment to tradition with the need for innovation and flexibility in a rapidly changing world. The constant pressures of rapid change in the religious market require RCCG to be flexible and adaptable, which can lead to challenges in maintaining theological integrity.

Practical Solutions to RCCG's Challenges in Athens, USA

To effectively address challenges in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Athens, USA, focus on strengthening leadership, emphasizing community engagement, and fostering a culture of obedience to God's Word. This can be achieved through strategic leadership development, community outreach initiatives, and spiritual guidance that emphasizes the importance of following God's teachings. The practical solutions are:

- **Strengthen Leadership:** Implementing ongoing leadership training programs for church leaders, focusing on biblical principles of leadership, conflict resolution, and effective communication. Also, establishing a mentorship program where experienced leaders can guide and support emerging leaders, fostering a culture of succession planning. Conducting regular leadership meetings to foster open communication, discuss challenges, and develop strategic plans. This will help leaders better engage with non-African populations while still maintaining core Pentecostal values.
- **Enhance Community Engagement:** Developing and implementing outreach programs that connect with the local community, addressing their needs and demonstrating the church's commitment to social justice. Partnering with other community organizations and local businesses to provide resources and support to those in need. Also, organizing community events, such as festivals or charity drives, to build relationships and showcase the church's positive impact. Thus, building trust and relevance in the wider Athens community while showcasing Christian compassion.
- **Foster a Culture of Obedience:** Focusing on clear and consistent teaching of God's Word, emphasizing the importance of obedience and following God's principles. Providing spiritual guidance and

counseling to individuals and families, helping them navigate challenges and grow in their faith. Also, Encouraging members to discern and obey God's calling, ensuring that their actions align with His will.

- **Addressing Disunity:** Implementing effective conflict resolution strategies within the church, promoting open communication, empathy, and biblical principles of reconciliation. Organizing unity initiatives, such as prayer meetings or fellowship events, to foster a sense of community and shared purpose. Encouraging members to practice forgiveness, both towards others and themselves, as a key aspect of unity and spiritual growth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the aforementioned, we have seen the emergence of the RCCG, Nigeria, as divinely arranged a church that would spread to other parts of the world. This has found fulfilment in the migration of the church to Athens, in the United State of America, through God's ordained vessel in person of Pastor (Dr) Mrs. Moradeke Aderibigbe. Since then, the church has made germane impacts ranging from religious, social and economic progress to the diverse challenges Nigerians and other Africans are confronted with. The church through the efforts of the minister in charge and other committed members have succeeded in making life comfortable for African Christians in foreign land. The question of not finding a Pentecostal church to fellowship with does not arise as a problem to African migrants to Athens.

The migration of the RCCG is more than just the relocation of a religious institution—it reflects a broader phenomenon of African Christianity asserting its presence on the global stage. In Athens, USA, the RCCG has served as a spiritual home for Nigerian and African immigrants, helping them maintain cultural identity while navigating new social and spiritual terrains. It has also begun influencing the local religious landscape by introducing vibrant worship styles, charismatic leadership, and a strong sense of community among believers.

Despite the success of its migration, the church faces challenges in contextualization, cultural integration, and engagement with non-African communities. Nonetheless, its growth signals the rising influence of African Pentecostalism in redefining global Christianity. Thus, the study recommends the followings;

- **Contextual Adaptation of Ministry:** The RCCG should invest more in contextual theology and cultural training to ensure that its message resonates with diverse populations in the U.S., beyond the

African diaspora.

- **Intercultural Engagement:** To expand its influence, the church should intentionally reach out to local communities through social programs, interfaith dialogue, and multicultural worship experiences.
- **Leadership Development:** There is a need to develop local leaders within the American context who understand both Pentecostal theology and the cultural nuances of the U.S. This will aid in sustainability and effective communication of the church's mission.
- **Academic Partnerships and Research:** The RCCG and similar churches should partner with theological institutions to document their growth, migration patterns, and impact on host communities. This will help build scholarly understanding and offer frameworks for future missions.
- **Support Systems for Immigrants:** Given the role of the church as a social anchor, the RCCG should enhance its support services for migrants—offering assistance in areas like employment, legal aid, housing, and mental health support.

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