

THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF CHRISTIAN PRAYER MINISTRIES IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

This work focused on the positive effects of Christian prayer ministries in the Nigerian contemporary society. It is not an over statement for one to state clearly that Christian prayer ministries has helped many Christians to solve their problems like illness, bareness, misfortune, trauma, Witch-Craft, Lack of employment, delayed marriage, Lack of progress in one's profession and they like. The researchers made use of secondary sources of data Collection as their methodology. The work found out that Christian, prayer ministries are solution centers. It solve people's problems speedily. The work recommended strict rules and regulations Christian prayer ministries by the churches to avoid abuse their activities.

Keywords: Positive, Effects, Prayer, Ministries, Societies.

Introduction

Prayer is an integral part of most religions of the world. It is the major phenomenon in religion through which the adherents relate with their God or gods. The entire world religions have some ways in which they relate to God or gods; In Islam, prayer is offered five times a day.

During worship, Muslims perform some round of prayers known as "raka". The adherents of the African Traditional Religion know the importance of prayer in worship. They pray to God anywhere at all times because of his omnipresent attributes and in view of the fact that He is too majestic to be confined (Onyeidu, 1999).

In Christianity, prayer takes the form of praise worship, supplication and thanksgiving. Here, prayer is expected to be without ceasing. It should be always, individually and as a congregation, at home or in the church building etc.

In Christian religion there is sustainability in prayer and there is strong assurance from Jesus himself when he said "whatever you ask in my name I will do so as to glorify the father in the son (Jn 14:13) In the call of the twelve to their first mission, according to the account of Matthew and Luke, the lord gave power out the unclean spirits and to cure every disease and illness (Matt. 10:1 Cf Lk 9:1) and commanded them "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons'. (Matt. 10:8).

In the Old Testament Isaiah announced that in the future there will be no more diseases and infirmities and the course of life will no longer be broken by death (cf Is. 35:56;65:19-20).

Elisha healed Naaman (2 King 5:8-14) and the sons of the prophets who were poisoned by the pottage cooked with wiled wine (II kgs 4:38-41) pressuring the acceptance of God's will, the sick persons' desire for healing is both good and deeply human, especially when it takes the form of trusting in prayer addressed to God. Sirach exhorts his disciples: "my son, when you are ill, delay not, but pray to God, who will heal you (sir 38:9). A number of psalms also ask for healing (c fps 6:37: 40;87).

Prayer for the restoration of health and other forms of human suffering is therefore part of the church's experience in every age, including our own. What in some ways is new is the proliferation of prayer meetings (the Vatican 2000)? Today, in a small village there are three or four prayers ministries. Men or women, young or old establish prayer ministries as they like. Osuagu (2006:9) opines that "every nooks and crannies of this country have been converted into the so called miraculous centres". Pawling in Lori (1996) observed that praying for others has become almost a cottage industry, with thousands of "prayer warriors" handling requests across the nation. Dawson also in Lori (1996) stated that around the nation, praying for others has become one of the hottest forms of religious outreach in the 90s. The trend encompasses individuals, churches entire denominations, non-denominational ministries and even radio stations. Peal (1969) also remarks that Africans are slow in almost everything, but by prayer Africans may win everlasting power of Gods kingdom. Barret (1971) opines that in Africa there has been over the last hundred years, a remarkable series of corporate religious initiatives that for number, size, influence, creativity and originality have been unparalleled anywhere else in the history of Christian missions. Today, people think that any new introduction within Christianity is accepted without finding out whether the force or spirit behind it is genuine or not.

This work will therefore examine the meaning, characteristics, and reasons for the growth of prayer ministries in Nigeria and the effects with a view to help make adherents of different

religions in Nigeria cling more tenaciously to prayer as a tool for putting her citizens on the path of moral consciousness.

Definition of Terms

There are some keywords here that need clarification. These are effect, proliferation, prayer and prayer ministry. According to Hornby (2001) Effect means producing a good, successful and dramatic result or impression.

Proliferation: this is the sudden increase in the number or amount (Hornby 2006). Prayer comes from the Latin verb *precari* which means to entreat or beg (Gonzaga in Downery 1993). The English word prayer implies a petition or request. According to Ifesieh, (1989: 101) prayer means "speaking to God" or "raising of the soul to God". It also means an act of putting up with your God, telling Him of what you need and thanking Him for what he had done for you. According to Ekwunife (2007). Prayer is a spiritual means through which the religious man interiorly and externally communicates with God and all supra-sensible beings of His invisible world. It can be described as a religious spiritual outreach of the temporal religious man to the transcendent being and His agents.

Prayer Ministry: This refers to a place or institutions where people go for the solution to their problems through prayer offered by prophets / prophetesses who own the ministry. Prayer ministry constitutes the facilities and services rendered by the prophets / prophetesses.

Characteristics of Prayer Ministries

The characteristics of prayer ministries vary in nature but are shared among some prayer ministries.

- i. Some prophets / prophetesses claim that they do not see corpse and that if they see it, Baba (God) will beat them. In such prayer ministries when their client is about to die, they will go and hide until the corpse is taken away.
- ii. Some of the prayer ministries have special rooms, only the prophets/prophetesses enter such rooms.
- iii. Some prophets/prophetesses use handkerchief (especially white one) during prayer, claiming that as the client continues to see it his/her problem will be solved.
- iv. Some prophets/ prophetesses pray inside water and direct their clients to take it for bathing at a particular junction at night.
- v. The Charisma of healing is attributed to specific class of faithful especially the owner or the director of the ministry
- vi. Some of the prayer ministries do claim that some of their clients defile their ministry and to purify the ministry they go to a certain river with the client and some materials they direct the client to buy in order to perform the purification rituals.
- vii. Usually, all the prayer ministries make provision for thanksgiving which are accompanied with presentation of gifts and donations
- viii. Majorities of the prayer ministries close their prayer ministries in November or early December and re-open in January. This is because on the day their clients make donations and present gifts as thanksgiving to the prophets/ prophetesses
- ix. They also use the idea of "sowing seed" which is seen as part of giving God in order to get more from him.

- x. Some clients are usually admitted in prayer houses making them spend weeks or months in prayer houses.
- xi. Water, candle, herbs, holy oil, holy soap, incense etc are usually blessed by the prophets/ prophetesses for the client's use especially those bought from the ministry (Ugwu, 2002:29).
- xii. The prophets/ prophetesses usually offer prayers with persuasive, evocative and emotional language (Ugwu, 2002,29). These powerful prayers that are used to solve all human problem are often accompanied with ringing of bells and Halleluiah
- xiii. Majority of the prayer ministries organize night vigils.
- xiv. Some of the prophets/prophetesses claim to see visions and interpret dreams (Ugwu, 2002:92).
- xv. Some healing centres pray for their client through internet and phones (Lori, 1996).
- xvi. In all their activities are shrouded in secrecy.

From the above characteristics, it is obvious that in the prayer ministries number i-ix of the above are manmade and not of God. To buttress this fact, the Vatican (2001) in her instruction on prayers for healing stated that "anything resembling hysteria, artificiality, theatricality or sensationalism, above all on the part of those who are in-charge of such gatherings must not take place". The Vatican (2000) using Biblical passages also remarked thus: "the charism of healing is not attributable to a specific class of faithful. It is quite clear that St. Paul when referring to various charisms in 1 Cor. 12, does not attribute the gift of whether apostles, charism of healing' to a particular group, prophets, teachers those who govern, or any other. The logic which governs the distribution of such gifts is quite different: All these are activated by one and the same spirit, who distributes to each one individually just as the spirit chooses (1 Cor. 12:11.). Consequently, in prayer meetings organized for asking for healing, it would be completely arbitrary to attribute charism of healing' to any category of participants, for example, to the directors of the group; the only thing to do is to entrust oneself to the free decision of the Holy Spirit, who grants to some a special charism of healing in order to show the power of the grace of the Risen Christ. Yet not even the most intense prayer obtains the healing of all sicknesses. So it is that St. Paul had to learn from the lord that 'my grace is enough for you; my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9), and that the meaning of the experience of suffering can be that in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church; (Col. 1:24)".

Reasons for the multiplicity of prayer ministry

Many factors have contributed to the rise of prayer ministries in our present society, some of the prophets/prophetesses are called by God to help people out of their problems such as illness, bareness, misfortune, trauma, witch - craft, lack of employment and lack of progress in one's profession. This was why Onyishi (2009:1) stated that "in our contemporary time, the positive result of healing practice in some prayer ministries is undisputable. Many people have been cured of various diseases of both the body and the mind in the prayer ministries". Idam (2008:5) also observed that a woman who was initiated into a demonic cycle by her lesbian lover was delivered through laying of hand in prayer. This has been the promise of the risen Jesus, and the first Christian communities witnessed its in full in their midst. In the Bible, Christ promised that these signs will accompany those who believe... They will lay hand on the sick, and they will recover" (Mk 16:17-18). In fulfillment of this promise the preaching of Philip in Samaria was accompanied by miraculous healings: Philip went down to the city

of Samaria and proclaimed Christ to them. With one accord, the crowd, paid attention to what was said by Philip when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing. For unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice, came out of many possessed people and many paralytic and crippled people were cured (Acts 8:5-7)

Commercialization is another reason for the proliferation of prayer ministries. As a result of high cost of living and lack of means of survival and knowing full well that people are attracted to any place where the name of God is mentioned many false prophets / prophetesses open up prayer houses to enable them make quick money. They use this as their means of livelihood. To prove this, immediately they start, they set the amount that can be used for thanksgiving, anything less than that amount will not be accepted. More so the patronizers buy cards before going inside to meet the prophet/prophetesses for counseling. Some even commercialize fasting by offering to do it for their clients for payment within a very short period, through this those who have one square meal a day Some of the will start boasting of three special square meal. founders of these prayer ministries according to Onah (1996) "erect luxurious mansions for their dwelling places", they also start driving expensive and flashy cars. For Onyeidu (1995) accepting money and materials for healing prayer is a way of abusing religion. Osuagu (2006:10) also remarked that "it should be clear that any person or persons that uses the name of God to make money is not worthy to live and he or she must be suffering from incurable madness". Onyishi (2009:20) also observed that "the gift of healing is a free gift from God and as such should be freely given". Conflict is another cause of increase in the number of prayer ministries. Some strong members of the prayer ministry may not be satisfied with the administration of funds or may not be allowed to exercise their own gift effectively in their ministries In support of this Obiefuna (2002:119) observed that

"This last category of the authority conscious people in the group often uses their natural charisma, education or class intimidation to push themselves into the leadership position. To push themselves into the leadership positions which they confess the very "humbly" accept to the greater glory of God. Expectedly they lead in teaching and manifestation of the spiritual gifts especially visions, prophecy and healing. When other members appear to equally manifest such gifts the "Traders" who equally claimed personal monopoly of the gifts of discernment clamp down on such members as fake".

When they see that their leaders are not ready to compromise with them they decide to split into two or more ministries. Some people naturally may not want to be ruled by others. Such people may decide to open their own ministry in order to be independent.

Effects of the Proliferation of Prayer Ministries in the Nigerian Society

Many souls have been saved and many people have been healed of their different psychological problems in the prayer ministries as the founders are really perceived to be called by God. The activities of such prayer homes are guided and directed by God. For example, a man who had been plagued by a fit of insanity for several years regained his senses after laying his hand on him in prayer (Adekunle, 2006).

In the past, Christians practiced their faith in the day and at night some go to the traditional homes for protection, but the emergence of prayer ministries in the Christendom has reduced this practice among Christians.

Prayer ministry has strengthened the faith of the Christians. It makes Christians have absolute confidence that what God promised is already in their hands. With faith, Christians are fully persuaded beyond doubt that God will fulfill His promises.

"Prayer is life and life is prayer; and without prayer, life has no meaning" (Ifesieh 1989, 122). In line with this Obieze (1998:52) stated that "some prayer ministries restore hope to the hopeless, and give strength to the infirm".

Divisions are created among families and villages as a result of false prophecy and unnecessary condemnations. The prophets /prophetesses falsely accuse innocent people of being responsible for their brothers or sisters' problems. Hence Osuagwu (2006:9) stated that "Some miraculous centres have done more harm than good; it has brought divisions and hatred in some families. In some families where peace and unity reigned before marriage, some women who engaged in multi abortions before marriage have ended up accusing every other person in the family for being responsible for their barrenness. When they go to this so called prophets who normally prophesy doom and they accuse members of the same family being responsible for barrenness and other misfortunes; thereby creating division, hatred, murder, and enmity e.t.c in the family".

Under the cover of prayer ministries people involve themselves in different forms of immorality. Some ladies claim to go for night vigils but spend the night with their boyfriends; the end result is unwanted pregnancy and consequently abortions. Onah (1996) stated that girls have been raped, women have been assaulted, people have been duped of their money, cars have been snatched, lives have been lost all in the name of prayer houses or prophetic healing centres".

In some prayer houses, some people are deceived into performing an act that they do not fully understand. They are easily led by the prophets /prophetesses, and not according to the belief of the holy book of their religions. When their aspirations and expectations fail, they become disillusioned or dissatisfied. (NTI 2000:186). This state of dissatisfaction can affect the faith of many people especially new converts. It can also breed religious intolerance and conflict.

Some prayer healing centres have developed into African independent churches with the founders becoming general superintendents or overseers. While according to Onyekachi as reported by Osiji (2008:17) "people claim that they are founder and general overseer, it is Christ who found the church, he gave his life for the church and established the church".

Some prophets /prophetess arrange with some of their clients to give testimonies that are not true so that their centres get popularity. This was why Obiefuna (2002:133) observed:

"Charismatism enjoys giving testimonies though some of them are definitely not true. They are given simply because such are said to enjoy popular acceptance. For instance most of the testimonies on evil spirits and demons possessions are not real. They are given simply to attract some aura and more licence to behave as much as the clients want, especially as they are not so much self-controlled".

Some of the healing centres interpret dreams and visions without considering the psychology of the dreamers or the person that sees the vision. While psychology helps in a better understanding of dreams and vision at times their prophecies are not true. Obiefuna (2002: 133) further observed

“Charismatism lays emphasis on prophecies dreams and visions. At times the prophecies are not discerned. When given they invariably become the sources of social conflict. It differentiates between good dreams and bad dreams. Bad dreams centre more on snake and masquerade pursuit, sexual intercourse, marriages, eating, swimming etc of course no consideration is given to the mental setting of the dreamer. Experience has however shown that proper feeding and / or full malaria treatment saw the end to such believed bad dreams. One is yet to be convinced however on how a single girl of about 35 or 40 would not dream of marriage, sexual intercourse, pregnancy and baptizing a child”.

One differentiates the activities of some of the healing centres from that of the traditional healing homes. Some healing centres demand some materials for ritual sacrifice and ritual purification and purification baths from their clients. According to Ejizu (2002) Nkechi was taken to a charismatic healing centre in Ebonyi state in 2001 and the owner of the centre who claimed to possess special powers for working miracles and healing of all sorts demanded from Nkechi some items: “The items included candles, incense, rams, white and black pigeons, four-day old chick, coconut, biscuits and bottles of groundnut. She made a total of four ritual sacrifices during the week. She deposited certain sacrificial items at the stream where she had ritual baths. Similarly items from the other sacrifices were laid at the road crossing, as she was directed. (Ejizu 2002:196) “

Healing centres have made some people poor and also made them not to take decision by themselves. They only abide by what they are told by the prophets / prophetesses who will claim that it is revealed to him or her by God. Some items the prophets / prophetesses prescribe for the clients to buy are very expensive and because of the vision they claim to have seen about the client whether he/she have money or not, he/she will borrow money to buy them. According to Ejizu (2002) Nkechi confessed spending about one thousand US Dollars to purchase materials for ritual offering and sacrifices during the week she spent at the centre in Ebonyi. On the above, Obiefuna (2002:133) also remarked that Charismatism instead of liberating people from poverty, mental and material things enslaves them because they would not act to better their lot unless the "spirit" says so. That explains why time without number you hear people caught in charismatism say: the spirit of God told me to, not to give this message or do this or that:

The way forward

Churches like World Council of Churches (WCC) should check the spread of the prayer ministries and set guidelines for members who want to have prayer ministries. Members should pray within the church premises for years so as to ascertain the spirit they claim to have before allowing them to stand on their own. If the spirit is found not to be of God, such prayer ministries should be bound from operating. On the other hand, if the spirit could be found to be of God through prayer and the character of the prophets / prophetesses then the ministry should continue.

The Christian Council of Nigeria (C.C.N) and Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should establish a registration center for all the prayer ministries and guideline issued to them on the *modus operandi*. The church authorities are to watch over and give appropriate norms for the proper functioning of liturgical celebrations.

Churches should always organize Bible classes for their members in order not to make them ignorant of the true teaching of Christian religion, for this makes one believe implicitly in whatever one is taught by leaders of any group within the Christian fold.

Those who patronize prayer ministry are advised not to give their full name to any ministry because some of the ministries use the names for dubious purpose. In line with this Ole, president of Trinity Foundation, a religious watchdog group in Lori (1996) observed "if you call into a ministry and they require anything other than your first name, hang up".

Conclusion

It is obvious that prayer ministries help in solving problem of people ranging from sicknesses to other forms of human sufferings but majority of the ministry are being commercialized by the prophets / prophetesses. All forms of evils are found in the prayer ministries, ranging from raping, duping, false prophecy, adultery and so on. Prayer ministry should be properly guided by churches. Churches should issue guidelines for their members who want to establish prayer ministry to avoid the abuse of religion.

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