

## **SURVEY ON CAUSES AND CHALLENGES OF INTER-DENOMINATIONAL MIGRATION AMONG CHRISTIANS IN SOUTH-EASTERN NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The perennial and endemic problems occasioned by the high rate of Christian inter-denominational migration in Igboland have almost destabilized a supposed peaceful coexistence that should have existed amongst the various church denominations in the area. It has adversely affected the spiritual and moral life of the Igbo church. The church has been reduced to a mere miracle centers by these miracle seekers. Above all, desperation has caused many Christians in the south-east Nigeria to resort to jumping from one church to the other in search for signs and wonders. This is the reason why this study that is calling for some lasting solutions to the problems that have arisen from the incessant inter-church movement. However, for an empirical and analytical study, this research work employed the use of primary and secondary sources of data collection to elicit correct and proper information. While the primary sources include interviews and participant observation, the secondary sources include library data, literature review, conference materials, journal articles and other literary texts. Standard design was also employed for statistical survey to ensure that the sample generated from the survey is random and representative of the underlying population. Above all, goal-striving stress theory of migration was adopted as a working theory for the study. The principal findings of this study revealed that many Christians in Igboland have continued to migrate from one church to the other in search of miracles. It was also observed that 30% of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Igbo Christians have changed to the New Generation Churches. Consequently, it was discovered that there is much division and distrust amongst the various Christian denominations in Igboland. To address these problems, this study recommends the following: there should be a renewal of the church's mission mandate (The Christ Great Commission; Mathew 28:19-20), an enhanced pastoral care, less dogmatic attitude to church ministry, an expanded employment opportunities, and above all, promotion of ecumenism in Igbo region. This study is however, optimistic that when the above recommendations are duly considered and applied, it is believed that it help reduce the inter-denominational migration among Christians in the south east Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

The concept of "Inter-denominational migration of Christians" as presented in this study denotes the movement of Christians from one church to another. The import of this research work is that the rate at which Christians in Nigeria especially the Igbo Christians move from one church to the other is very alarming and disturbing. This has gotten to the point that church leadership in Igboland appears to be more concerned in retaining their migrant members from migrating to other churches. An attempt to discover the genesis of the practice in Igboland would lead one to trace the history of Christianity in Igboland from the prism of rivalry and competitions amongst the early missionaries. A situation where the early missionary groups that evangelized Igboland employed envy, hatred, jealousy, wickedness and covetousness as mechanism for winning the Igbo converts. Ozigbo(1999) reported that some basic amenities like schools, hospitals and job opportunities were given to the people on the ground that a beneficiary must accept a membership of a given church even if the said beneficiary is already a Christian. It was further reported by Dike(2012) that some Christians were denied health care and school admissions for the reason that they refused to leave their church of baptism. It then appeared that being a member of a well to do church is the only way to enjoy a good life. In that case some churches that

did not have what it takes to care for the material needs of their members would be disadvantaged to lose them to other well to do churches.

Moreover, with the multiplication of churches in Igboland, the problem has worsened in that the new founded churches have claimed divine origin and being more preferable to the Mission founded churches. This is more pronounced amongst the group known as the “Pentecostals” who are so called due to their eloquent belief and testimony to the second experience of the spirit accompanied and characterized by speaking in tongues (Milne, 1993). With this charismatic strategy they have attracted a huge number of worshippers from the mainstream churches. However, the rate at which some Igbo Christians are found migrating from one church to the other has promoted a sense of competitiveness, confusion and dissatisfaction within the Igbo Christology and that is why the researcher has taken up this study to find a lasting solution to the problem.

Consequent to the above, the researcher through oral sources and personal interviews identified some persons who have at one time or the other changed their churches. One of them P. Okoye (personal communication February 14, 2020) itemized his reasons as follows: lack of satisfaction with the method of worship in his former church, search for spiritual enlightenment through hearing the word of God, insufficient pastoral care and above all, he revealed that it was a friend that introduced him to his new church. Further inquiry with M. Okeke (personal communication February 20, 2020) maintained that it was because of too much levy or contributions in his former Anglican church that made him to change to the Redeemed Church of God. Thus, based on these varied responses, the researcher deduced that lack of satisfaction is a strong indication for potential move from one church to another.

Further findings however proved that prophecy notwithstanding has also inadvertently played a very significant role in promoting this practice. Because an average Igboman believes that everything happens for a reason, prophecy is vigorously pursued that it has become a major propelling factor for the inter-church migration. More or less spiritual factors are the major propelling factor for this practice. Apparently, this has provided opportunities for the fake pastors to resort to commercializing the church as a business enterprise. In that way also, some desperate Christians would turn to them in order for their problems to be solved and from there get duped and extorted by these fake pastors following their desperation for miracles and spiritual signs and wonders.

Moreover, the major problem of this study is that the church in Igboland is fast becoming political parties or miracle centers where one joins and leaves at will. This is considered a very big challenge to the existence of Christianity in Igboland because some of the church leaders in a bid to retain the migrant Christians have watered and lowered the standard of the church in order to satisfy and accommodate the curiosity, insatiability, and wanton quest for signs and wonders of the church migrants which is the main propelling factor for their inter-church movement. The most annoying part is that this practice has promoted material possession over the undiluted word of God being that the fake pastors have ceased the opportunity to advance their business enterprise through fake miracles and prophecies.

This is very worrisome because the more these desperate Christians seek after miracle and prosperity, the more tendency they keep moving from church to church in search of it. However, following these under listed challenges created by the high rate of the inter-church migration especially within the mainline churches (Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches in particular), the leadership of the main line churches has adopted some measures to curtail the practice and retain the church members. One of the measures was to adopt the new method of charismatic and evangelical form of worship and relaxing their orthodox and rigid traditions so as to retain their members who are no longer comfortable with the said rigid traditions. Apparently, the idea of embracing the new way of worship with a new theology of where everything is about miracle and luck instead of hard work and honesty has instead of solving the problem, created more confusions and mistrusts amongst the adherents of the main line churches and has instead facilitated more migrations.

Furthermore, some of the charismatic groups created by the parent churches to help curb this practice has ended up in either forming their distinct independent churches or ended up attacking the

ecclesiastical structures of their parent churches. For example, the Evangelical Fellowship in Anglican Communion (EFAC), created by the Anglican church to help curtail this practice have not really achieved the target but instead created more problems within the Anglican church. It has rather created room for more migrations following their constant disagreements with some of the church's theological and liturgical beliefs. In a similar vein, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which was also created by the Catholic church for the same purpose of retaining the dissatisfied Catholics from migrating to other churches has equally not achieved the purpose. This is because the main reason for the migration has not been identified. It is when the cause of a problem is identified that lasting solutions would be proffered. This is why the researcher has taken up the task of involving a historical and phenomenological approach in ascertaining the actual reasons for the inter-church migrations. This will enable the researcher to arrive at some logical solutions and way forward to the problem.

Consequently, the key purpose of this study is to trace the causes, challenges and the possible way forward to the rising rate of Christian inter-denominational migration in the south-east of Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to trace the origin of the practice in the south-east of Nigeria from its very beginning to the present day and some likely damages it has caused the church since then; identify the extent it has destabilized the church as well as its adverse effects to the peaceful coexistence among the Christians in Igboland; seek the best ways to retaining the dissatisfied church members from leaving their original church of baptism in search of salvation elsewhere; and seek ways of restoring the lost communal heritage of the Igbo society that were lost following the practice of inter-church migration and the wanton scrambling for membership and domination of one church against the other.

The scope of this study is the Igbo of the south-eastern Nigeria. The choice of the Igboland as the scope is based on the fact that the practice of Christians inter-denominational migration is observed to be more prevalent in the area. This may be possibly be the case following the Igboman's high quest for power, money and protection. Moreover, the Igbo region which is regarded as the third most populous ethnic group in Nigeria may not be extensively covered within the time frame of this study. That is why this study is to be delineated to Anambra State. The choice of Anambra state is because of its position as the cradle of Christianity in Igboland. Anambra State is the cradle of Christianity in Igboland because Christianity was first established at Onitsha in 1857. Nevertheless, relevant references shall be taken from other neighbouring States so as to produce a holistic and an in-depth study.

Furthermore, the depth of the study will cover the issues that surrounds inter-church migration as in the factors that occasioned the religious practice in Igboland. Specifically, the study will be delineated to the incidences of inter-denominational migration in the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Assemblies and Grace of God Churches within the three selected states. This is to ensure a detailed and a straight forward research devoid of over generalizations. The choice of these churches is because the practice of inter-denominational migrations is mostly observed in those churches.

### **Brief History of Christianity in Igboland**

An attempt to discover the genesis of the practice of Christian interdenominational Migration in Igboland would lead one to trace the history of the church in Igboland. In that way some of the issues that gave rise to the practice would be brought to bear. Moreover, Christianity is one of the intrusive religions in Nigeria, particularly Igboland. Historically, Christianity reached Igboland in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ozigbo(1999) writes that Christianity was first preached in Igboland in 1841 during the Niger expedition. The religion was however established for the first time at Onitsha, in 1857. It was Rev. Ajayi Crowther who led the C.M.S. mission to Onitsha which became the bridge-head and window through which Christianity gained entry into vast recess of Igboland. The complementary efforts of Christianizing Igboland came from the Roman Catholic Holy Ghost Fathers from France in 1885(Anyanwu,2005). The Methodist Mission came into Oron part of Nigeria in 1893 and had spread to Igboland in 1910 through Ibibioland. The Qua Iboe Mission also came into Igboland in 1917 to help in the Christianization of the area(Ozigbo, 1999). Furthermore, from the 1920's and 1930's, a number of Christian sects, mostly from U.SA and Britain, invaded Igboland. Some of these sects were; The Salvation Army, Christ Apostolic Church, Faith Tabernacle, Seventh Day Adventist and Jehovah Witness; from 1930's to 1960's many of the New Religious Movements also came into existence

(Ozigbo,2005). The new religious movements are otherwise known as Indigenous churches. Amongst the indigenous churches were a group known as the “Pentecostals”. They were so called due to their eloquent belief and testimony to the second experience of the spirit accompanied and characterized by speaking in tongues(Milne,1993). Its adherents share a common belief in the possibility of receiving the same experience and gifts as did the first Christians on the day of Pentecost.

However, this multiplicity of Christian religious groups and traditions is regarded as one of the major reasons that gave rise to the practice of moving from church to church in the Igbo region. This is so because each of these churches and their founders are claiming divine origin and being more preferable over another. This seem to have promoted a sense of competitiveness, confusion and dissatisfaction among the Christian adherents that many have preferred one church over another. The dissatisfaction thereby considered as the major reason for the continued inter-church migration. As a matter of fact, confusion and dissatisfaction amongst the Igbo Christians have heightened the rate at which Christians move from church to church.

### **The Factors that led to the Emergence of Christian Interdenominational Migration in Igboland**

The factors are classified into two main categories: the early and modern causes.

The early causes of this religious practice is discovered to be as follows:

1. **The sense of competitiveness, confusion and antagonism that characterized the era of the European missionary enterprise in Igboland.** This consists of certain inducements that were used as strategies for winning converts which later created dissatisfaction amongst the early converts and as a result led them into migrating from one church to the other. Some of them which include:School Approach, Health Care Strategy, and Skill acquisition programmes.
2. **The clash between two opposing cultures-African and European.** Christianity since its introduction is perceived as an embodiment of Western culture, civilization and Education(Nwachukwu and Obiakor,2015). This however informed their various attempts to overshadow the indigenous religion traditions of the people by interchanging them with that of the Western people. However, as a reprisal attack and response to this mutual quest for dominance over the Africans traditional and belief system,led the Africans/Igbo people into developing and proliferating their own brand of Christianity devoid of Western influence and control. This as a matter of fact led to the first mass exodus of Christians from the mission churches to the African Independent Churches. Following this development however, the practice of inter-denominational migration of Christians came into fore.
3. **The aesthetic and psychological appeals employed by the early missionaries to win converts:** This has to do with how the early missionaries played on the intelligence of the Igbo people so as to win or retain them in a given church. Many coverts were recorded in the past based on the church’s rich and sophisticated style of liturgy and worship not because they really understood the meaning of Christianity and the person of Christ. For example, the Latin texts were unintelligible to the converts, but its heart-throbbing refrains and rhythms of the Gregorian plain chant transmitted a compelling aesthetic pleasure. The C.M.S. on their part played down on the sacramentals and promoted the authority of the scripture which brought about a huge decline in the church’s attendance as many of the C.M.S. converts reportedly migrated to the Catholic church because of their rich sacramental traditions. The people’s great admiration for the Catholic symbols and practices earned them crowds of converts (Isichei,1973).

In the modern causes, the factors are attributed to the following:

1. **The multiplicity of Christian religious groups and movements.** Many prayer houses and fellowship centres are springing up on daily basis across the various communities of Igboland and this has also heightened the rate of Christians’ inter-denominational migration in Igboland. Some of these prayer centres have maintained a non-denominational status, a situation where some religious groups would maintain a membership of the mainstream church yet has an established and distinctive autonomy.
2. **Religio-political Factors.** Other causes for the migration in recent times have been attributed to socio-political factors. There are some socio-political issues that have contributed to the

rising rate of Christian inter-denominational migration in Igboland. In recent years, there have existed a tussle for political leadership among the various denominations in Igboland especially in Anambra State. The tussle is usually amongst the Catholics, Anglicans, and Pentecostals. In Anambra State where it is more pronounced, the battle is usually between the Catholics and the Anglicans on who gets what. Though, the Pentecostals, who obviously are outnumbered and who hardly comes together to speak with one voice have since accepted their fate as regards to power sharing in the State. The Anglicans who are yet to give up in their quest to topple the Catholics, have continued in the struggle.

3. **Insecurity and Poverty Crises.** One other major factor to the issue of Christian inter-denominational migration in the modern Igbo society is the insecurity and poverty crises prevalent in the region. In the recently released report by the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics(NBS,2019), the south-east States performed badly and below expectation. While Ebonyi was the worst in the south-east with 80% of her citizens being described as poor, Enugu took the second position with about 60% poverty level. Following was Abiastate that recorded 31%, then Imo 29% while Anambra scored 15%. On the average, the poverty level in the south-east is about 43% which means that about 43 percent of south eastern citizens of Nigeria are classified as poor. With a below per capital annual expenditure of about #137,430 as the baseline for being poor using a population estimate of 50 million means that about 21.5 million south-easterners are unable to afford and spend about #11,000 per person every month. Of the ten States in Nigeria with the least poverty level, only Anambra made it at 8<sup>th</sup> position. Where is the branded entrepreneurship skills of the Igbo people? Unfortunately, this precious attribute of the Igbo people seems to have been replaced with church business which has not favoured the people. Again, intensifying the poverty crisis with the unprecedented level of insecurity which the governors of the south-east have through their clumsy actions and inactions allowed have escalated the practice of inter-denominational migration across the region.
4. **Marital Factors.** Another strong factor that has given rise to Christian inter-denominational migration in Igboland is the issue of marriage. The practice of Catholics marrying Catholics have ensured the growth of the church numerically against the others. Any young man planning to marry a Catholic lady must be ready to convert to Catholicism or otherwise forget the marriage. This has been the statusquo for many years and there is no sign of it ending. However, in response, the Anglicans have equally adopted a similar approach, though not as stringent as what obtains in the Catholic church. While the Anglicans were a bit lenient with the marriage rule, the Catholic church applied the law diligently, with offenders getting different levels of punishments. For instance, parents that gave their daughters in marriage to non-Catholics stands the risk of being banned from receiving the Holy Communion, same also applies to the men that married a Catholic lady without being fully converted a Catholic. A visit to some communities and villages in Anambra State made the researcher to understand that the policy is still very much in place.

### **Recommendations**

The following are the recommendations to the problem of Christian inter-denominational migration in the south-eastern Nigeria.

1. **Renewing the Church's Mission Mandate (The Great Commission of Mathew 28:19-20).** Having analyzed some of the factors to the practice of Christian inter-denominational migration in the south-eastern Nigeria, the first step forward should be to refer to the mission requirement of the church; the missionary mandate given by Christ Himself. When he finished His earthly ministry, Jesus sent out His Apostles to continue from where He stopped. He gave them charge to go to the nations and make them His disciples and baptize them in the name of the Holy Trinity. The apostles in obedience to the command of their master, strived and preached the Gospel to all men. The mission mandate of the church is ultimately grounded in the eternal love of the Most Holy Trinity. This implies that the church on earth is by her nature one, since according to the plan of the Father, is collaborating with the Son and the Holy Spirit. The ultimate purpose of the church therefore is none other than to make men share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of Love. It is from God's love for all men that the church in every age receives both the obligation and vigour of her missionary dynamism.

## **2. Maintaining an Enhanced Pastoral Care**

A good pastoral relationship with the church members can go a long way in reducing the rate of Christian inter-denominational migration in Igboland. There should be a high degree of openness and approachability between the pastor and his church members. The pastors should be approachable for his members to talk about their problems and vulnerabilities. Part of the shepherd's responsibility over his sheep is to make sure they stay together. In Ezekiel 34:4, God rebukes the leaders of Israel for neglecting their role as shepherds of the people. He stipulated that the task of the shepherds is nothing more than: strengthening the weak, healing the sick, binding the injured, bringing back the strays and searching for the lost. These are the main task of pastors as caregivers and shepherds of God's flock.

In the parable of the good shepherd, Jesus teaches that pastoral care is an indispensable part of Christian leadership. Therefore, just like Jesus, it is the prerogative of a pastor to go to every lengths in providing comfort, encouragement and support to the people entrusted to his pastoral care. Pastoral care means not letting go of any person who needs a spiritual care and direction. Furthermore, in 1Corinthians 4:2, Paul says that those serving the church on behalf of God must be faithful. They have to be dependable and keep their promises. In pastoral care, people do not just share their deepest secrets with the pastor, they put their very soul in his care. He is allowed to care for their soul and touch their inward being. The relationship goes further than a doctor-patient relationship. A doctor touches his patient's body while a pastor touches the soul. It takes a lot of trust in the pastor for a person to receive pastoral care. He or she must feel confident that the pastor will not just keep to himself but help proffer solutions to the problems. This is a proper pastoral relationship that is necessary to contain the continued Christians inter-denominational migration prevalent in the south-east of Nigeria.

## **3. Developing a Strong Prayer Life.**

Prayer and astute faith in God is unquestionably the best form of response to all life situations, even if it has gotten beyond human control. It needs no argument to prove that prayer is the universal human reaction to any crises or desperate situations. Prayer helps to sharpen ones faith in God and living faith largely depends on what is called a life of prayer. If a person does not open up to God in prayer, he/she will not be able to develop a strong and vigorous faith. Prayer in the time of trouble is the best approach to difficult and hard times. Resorting to inter-church migration will rather result to more problems and confusions. Prayer, other than inter-church migration brings comfort, help, hope and blessings(Bounds,1984). In a nutshell, it could be said that the Christian God is not the Greek type of god who moves about, Christian God is never moved. He responds to needs and aspirations of His creatures who trusts in Him.

Everybody goes through stress and anxiety (worry) at one time or the other, even Jesus did. On one occasion, he had to pray for hours to enable him overcome his challenges(Mathew 14:23, Luke6:12). That means that prayer is the best solution to all manner of problems. On the night before Jesus' death, His distress grew beyond human explanations that he had to pray earnestly to God for succor. Jesus' reaction to His personal challenges is what this study adopts as the best form of approach to life uncertainties. Crying, taking drugs/alcohol or running from church to church in times of distress cannever guarantee safety or reliable solutions to the problem. Luke 22 :44 says: "and being in agony, He prayed more earnestly". He did not run around Rabbis and religious leaders or move from one synagogue to the other rather He prayed more earnestly. He did not worry or regret being subjected to such an intense hardship. Psalm 55:22 says, "cast your burden upon the Lord and He shall sustain you". Persevering in prayer however, is considered the best form of approach to existential issues rather than running helter skater from one church to the other.

This study is however optimistic that when the above recommendations are dully considered and applied, the idea of moving from one church to another for whatever reason would be drastically reduced in Igbo region.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of Christian inter-denominational migration in the south-east of Nigeria is a multi-dimensional one. The most worrisome part of the problem is that the practice is aggressively affecting

the faith and spirituality of the church. It is also in defiance to the recorded and stipulated pattern of the church as recorded and transmitted in both the scriptures and the early Christian traditions. Christianity as a religion is a belief in Christ. It is not solely for the satisfaction and attainment of man's expressive and adaptive needs. Specifically, the church is not meant to be a personal property. It is neither a platform for religious competitions. Signs and wonders on the other hand is not supposed to be a medium by which members are attracted from other church denominations. In fact every spiritual assistance should be rendered to all and sundry, irrespective of one's religious affiliations. Jesus never performed his miracles under religious considerations, rather he extended to all that sought for Him. He therefore commanded his disciples to render their spiritual services free of charge/without conditions, because they were given the power free.

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