

## CHURCH-BASED MUSIC PROGRAMME AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA: LESSONS FROM MOUNTAIN OF FIRE AND MIRACLE MINISTRIES, LAGOS

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### Abstract

Over the years, many Christian religious institutions have been part of the interventions in combating unemployment among youths in the country by initiating several empowerment schemes through skill acquisition in diverse vocations. Despite the growing interest of young people in the creation and consumption of music in our contemporary society, the inclusion of music in the various skill acquisition programme has been neglected. Therefore, this paper seeks to highlight the remarkable contributions of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), Lagos, in the development of the human socio-economic capacity of the youths in the church through her various musical skill acquisition programme. The study adopts a qualitative research design and data will be content analyzed. This article recommends that other churches should invest in artistic skills acquisition programmes-specifically music, as a productive and sustainable form of empowerment among youths in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** faith-based music education, youth empowerment, religion and development, Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries

### Introduction

The effort of religious institutions in empowering people-socially, economically and spiritually is gaining attention among the league of

scholars in religion, social work and development studies. These scholars have explored the intersections between religion and empowerment in different historic and geographic settings.

Development is known to be holistic when it affects the various layers of society. That is when there is a remarkable improvement in the condition of living of people. The development brings about empowerment-socially, economically, psychologically and politically. Simply put: when people are empowered, there will be development. Even though the developmental efforts of religious institutions have welcomed mixed responses from within and outside academia, the place of religious organizations in engendering or stifling development cannot be overemphasized particularly in Africa. Olakunle et al. comment, "from the days of the missionaries to the present, the church in Africa has focused its development strategy in two areas: education and health care. On the contrary, the intolerant nature of religious actors and the destructive tendencies they exhibit during conflicts have been voiced by scholars as anti-development (cited in Ogbonnaya, 2012:9-10).

With reference and in addition to the two development strategies by the missionaries above, there are emerging developmental initiatives by several religious institutions in Africa. For instance, many Christian organizations are now involved in setting up and managing mega financial firms, state-of-the-art medical facilities and educational institutions of world-class status. All of these is in a bid to articulate the spiritual and social relevance of the Christian message in a society where the state socio-economic framework has collapsed (Sanneh, 2003; Obadare, 2016).

The role religion plays in empowering people especially the youths has been of growing interest in scholarship on youth development. Youth

empowerment for social and economic productivity is of urgent concern globally particularly in developing worlds. This concern is worth noting for various reasons. First, because of the increase in the youth population in the world. For instance, it is reported that are about 1.2 billion youths (12-24 years) make up 16 per cent of the world's population and 90 per cent of the youths live in developing countries (United Nations, 2019). Second, the rate of social deprivation evident through unemployment as well as social vices among the youths especially in developing nations are disturbing.

In Africa and Nigeria in particular, religious communities have continued to facilitate various empowerment and development intervention programmes that are aimed at improving the quality of life of their adherents. Such programmes include skill acquisition in soap making, shoemaking, fashion designing, computer training to mention a few have been established by religious communities including churches to productively engage their youths to make them be gainfully (self-) employed. In a study by Ogunyemi and Adenuga (2019), they identified and assessed youth empowerment programme in neo-Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria. They found that youth empowerment programmes by the church include leadership training, marriage and marital relationship, music, ICT and multimedia and medical welfare. They submit that these programmes contribute to the reduction of unemployment among youths in Nigeria. It should be pointed out here that the inclusion of socio-religious programmes such as leadership training, marital relationship and pastoral training as types of empowerment programmes appear to be problematic. How do we empirically prove that training in marital relation guarantees social and economic productivity?

However, the passing reference to music training as a framework for youth empowerment in the neo-Pentecostal context by Ogunyemi and

Adenuga (2019), and Offiong (2010) calls for deeper inquiries into the place of music in engendering and sustaining development among people. Therefore, this current study probes whether churches (mainline or Pentecostal) consider church-based music programmes as a tool for empowering their youths. In what specific ways have these programmes contributed to youth empowerment? What are the implications of faith-based creative interventions for sustainable development in growing economies like Nigeria?

In responding to these questions, this article highlights the contribution of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) music education programme to youth empowerment in Nigeria. Specifically, it discusses the organizational structure and goals of the MFM Music programme and highlights the ways by which youths have been empowered through the church's music programmes. Finally, the study presents lessons that can be drawn from faith-based empowerment interventions particularly through creative activities and how these interventions can be utilized as a viable model for sustaining developments among the teeming youth population in developing societies in Africa including Nigeria. Data for this were gathered through observation of the music activities—specifically training and performance of MFM and interviews and personal interactions with youths who have benefitted from the music programmes of the church.

This study offers new perspectives for rethinking the place of religious-based efforts concerning youth empowerment especially in the areas of creative arts. It calls the attention of religious actors to the entrepreneurial potentiality of church-based music education and how it contributes significantly to increased employment among youths. By presenting the Nigerian experience and MFM in particular, this

study contributes to the increasing literature on faith-based communities, youth empowerment and sustainable development.

In what follows, the article reviews relevant literature on music and youth engagements and then, though briefly, traces the origin and development of church music education in Nigeria. Afterwards, an overview of Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries within the neo-Pentecostal space in Nigeria was discussed. Furthermore, the activities of MFM music programmes and how they engender empowerment and development-religious, social and economic among the youths of the church were examined. Finally, implications of church-based youth empowerment interventions in the areas of creative arts for sustainable development in Nigeria were discussed.

### **Music and Youth Engagements**

Music permeates every aspect of human lives hence its utility by everyone. Both young and old engage with music almost daily. Music has been found to occupy a significant part of the lives of young people (Arnett, 1991; Ross, 1994; Brown, 2006), and it influences their thoughts, shapes their worldview and aspirations. Young people interact with music at different layers: listening, performing or composing; in formal or informal settings. For listening, several factors have been found to alter musical experiences and engagements among young people (Boal-Palheiros and Hargreaves, 2001). While listening to music is the most engaged form of music by young people, social, environmental and technological conditions affect how they listen to music. As Boal-Palheiros and Hargreaves (2001:103) submit, "even though many children do not engage in performance, either in informal or formal settings (playing with friends, singing in a choir, or attending instrumental lessons), the vast majority of them regularly listen to music". This implies that young people spend most of their time listening to music. According to Miranda (2013:5), young people,

especially, devote huge amounts of time and money to music listening. Studies have shown that on average, adolescents listen to music for up to three hours daily and accumulate more than 10,000 hours of active music listening throughout adolescence (Boal-Palheiros and Hargreaves, 2001; Roberts et al., 2009; Miranda, 2013). This submission is further reaffirmed by William et al (2018) that middle and high school students are active consumers and performers of music.

In terms of performance, young people get involved in music through singing or playing musical instruments whether in informal or formal settings. Within the educational context, performance opportunities are presented through concerts, music competitions, talent hunts and recordings to mention a few. Performance offers young people the platform to express their musicality and portray their social identity. Studies have associated engagement with religious music and the formation of social identity by young people. Colville Fletcher (2015), investigated the religious engagement of music and identity work among students in Catholic schools in Austria. The study highlights the importance of religious music to various aspects of adolescents' identity work. How religious settings contribute to the everyday musical engagements by young people especially in the non-western environment is yet to be explored in extant literature especially on faith-based music education programmes. This is a gap this article seeks to fill.

### **Church Music Education in Nigeria**

Church music education in Nigeria can be traced to the advent of European missionaries into Africa and Nigeria in particular. There is substantial scholarship on the efforts of the missionaries in entrenching European Christian musical tradition during their mission work in Nigeria (Edet, 1964; Okafor, 1988; Adegbite, 1992; Kwami,

1994; Owoaje, 2014; Udok and Odunuga, 2016). One of the methods used was the introduction of music training in mission schools. The training was facilitated by headteachers, mainly Europeans- who also doubled as priests in the Church. The training scheme included the singing of hymns, playing of the harmonium organ and reading of solfa notation.

With the emergence of Nigerian musicians who have had formal training in music, church music education witnessed significant change. Notable among these musicians were Robert A. Coker, T.K.E. Phillips, Fela Sowande, Akin Euba, Laz Ekwueme, Joshua Uzoigwe to mention a few. These musicians championed various musical revolutions in terms of music education both in secular and sacred settings. For example, many of these musicians started composing in idioms that challenged the known choral tradition which does not favour African stylistic expressions. Speaking of T.K.E Phillips, Owoaje (2014:39) remarks,

*Phillips, having studied music formally was able to theorise on Yorùbá music. He saw the pentatonic nature of Yorùbá traditional music, particularly the songs that J. J. Ransome-Kúti parodied. He then began go preach the message of pentatonism amongst Yorùbá church musicians through his augmented choir<sup>1</sup>. When he composed his versicles and responses in 1926, he based all of the melody on the pentatonic scale as a demonstration of the possibility of composing tunes that conform to the tonal pertern of the Yorùbá translation of the English vesicles and responses. This was later to be further extended by many of his protégées; Fela Sówándé being one of the most significant of his protegees. Even though the Christ Church Cathedral was an elite church, Phillips was sufficiently influential to introduce elements of Yorùbá music to the music of Christ Church cathedral.*

With the increase of trained musicians in the Nigerian space, some churches considered investing in church music education. Arguably, church music education started in Nigeria towards the end of the 80s. It was about this time churches started setting up music training programmes with a focus on instrumental pedagogy. Although not much is known about the efforts of mainline churches, however, the contributions of Evangelical and neo-Pentecostal churches to the growth and development of Church music education in Nigeria is replete. One leading example is the Apostolic Faith Church based in Anthony Village, Lagos. It was reported that one of her former General Overseer, Late Rev Soyinka went to the church's international headquarters in Portland Oregon, USA, where he learnt a few instruments in one week and later came back to Lagos to teach his church members. To date, the church has a sustained training framework in the musical training of its members. Members especially choristers are taught rudiment of music, sight-reading, voice training and instrument playing. Averagely, choristers spend between two to four years of intensive music training before joining the central choir and orchestra of the church. At a time in Nigeria, the Apostolic Faith choir and orchestra was a reference point to excellent church music. Their annual musical concerts - Easter and Camp meeting attracted guests both from within and outside the countries. The Church music education programme caters for children, youths and adults and it is exclusively reserved for church members.

Another example is the Deeper Life Christian Church (DLC), one of the mega-churches in Nigeria. As Falaye (2015:23) notes, 'the growth of such a ministry today as one of the largest churches in Nigeria, Africa and the world, a mega-church with branches in several countries of Africa, Europe, USA, Asia, Indian Ocean, to mention a few....' The church was founded by Pastor W.F. Kumuyi, a former academician with PhD degree in Mathematics. (See Falaye 2015 for details). The church



music education in DLC can be seen as a 'carryover' of the musical experience of Pastor Kumuyi from the Apostolic Faith Church where he had his early Christian experience and training before he ceded.

Music education in DLC is almost similar to what obtains in The Apostolic Faith Church as both churches cater for both the young and adult. The musical training which paid more attention to instrumental music initially started centrally at the church's headquarters in Gbagada, Lagos and later was decentralized owing to membership growth as well as the establishment of more branches of the churches. While Apostolic Faith Church organized regularly concerts open to the public, Deeper Life Church did not organize any publicized concerts. One event that appears like a concert, which this author witnessed, was in a week-long programme organized by the church during which an evening was devoted to musical performances by the Youth Choir and Orchestra of the church.

Music training in DLC were offered on different musical instruments except for percussion instruments. The exclusion of percussion instruments from the training scheme can be linked to the church's stance on worship and bodily expression in dance which the church believes can be influenced by the playing of percussion instruments like the trap drums and some Nigerian traditional instruments including the *gangan* (hour-glass drum). Like Apostolic Faith Church, DLC taught their members rudiments and theory of music and encouraged them to take professional music examinations such as Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON), ABRSM and Trinity Guildhall Music. The contributions of these church-based music programmes to music education in Nigeria has not been given substantial attention in the existing literature. While the music education programmes of the churches mentioned earlier seem to be witnessing a backward trend due to lack of interest by the younger generation and poor institutional

support systems, neo-Pentecostal churches like Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (MFM) appears to be making giant strides as far as church music education is concerned in contemporary Nigeria.

### **Youth Engagements in Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries**

The MFM church can be classified under the broad domain of Pentecostal notwithstanding other sub-categorizations including neo-Pentecostal. The church started with a group of about twenty-five people at the residence of the General Overseer, Dr D.K. Olukoya, in Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria in July 1989. The praying group grew into a full-blown church in 1994 when it started Sunday services. From Olukoya's home, the church later moved to No. 60, Old Yaba Road, Ebute-Metta, Lagos and was later offered and purchased an abandoned slum located at No. 13, Olasumbo Street, Onike, Yaba which currently serves as the International Headquarters of the church. The name of the church "Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries", was reported to be revealed to the founder in a prayer meeting, which according to Ayegboyin (2005) implies that the church is considered to be a mountain higher than any problem that one may have. 'Fire' in the name of the church is indicative of both the presence and power of God that can be invoked to consume, roast, and burn their stratagem to ashes.

As one of the fastest-growing churches of this generation the church boasts of spreading to the United States, Canada, the rest of Europe, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. On every continent, MFM is visible and greatly impactful ([www.mountainoffire.org/about](http://www.mountainoffire.org/about)). Part of the church mission and vision is to propagate the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to train believers in the art and science of spiritual warfare; thus, making them an aggressive and victorious army for the Lord. This explains why the church is renowned for spiritual warfare prayer styles.

The religious activities of MFM are a prototype of those of the African indigenous churches (AICs) especially in terms of worship and this can be traceable to the Christian upbringing of the founder in Christ Apostolic Church. Dr. Olukoya, a molecular genetics expert, started his Christian experience in the Christ Apostolic Church, acclaimed to be Nigeria's first indigenous Pentecostal church, as a young person where his father served as a pastor. Like other AICs, MFM believes in the power of prayer, the Holy Spirit, and spiritual warfare against the 'other' world. They believe that some malevolent entities are responsible for retrogression in human lives hence the need to "kill them before they kill you". Like many Christians, one phraseology that expresses the natural-supernatural connection by MFM members is the spiritual controls the physical.

The MFM fits into the classification of Ukah (2007) as newer Pentecostal churches because of its specific theological dispositions including prosperity gospel, faith healing and deliverance. The latter significantly characterizes the spiritual operation and vision of the church: "that is why we would always have a **deliverance** ministry wherever we are. If you do not believe in deliverance, you are not supposed to be in MFM" (Church's website) [Emphasis original]. In addition to doctrines as Ukah (2007) noted, business-like organizational structure, economic activities and ownership of religious camps are other features of neo-Pentecostal churches and MFM operates all of these activities.

With its international headquarters located near the University of Lagos-one of the country's famous tertiary institutions, the church attracts the followership of many young people. There is a discernable interest and investment-spiritual, social, economic, educational, personal and corporate by the church leadership in the young people and this, arguably, account for the visible presence of youths in the

church. For example, there are branches of the church exclusively designed for and attended by youths and young adults. The worship style including music allows for more flexible and dynamic practices which resonate with the worship preference of contemporary youths. The age-framed churches, built and equipped with the state-of-the-art facilities, are led by young pastors to attend to the spiritual cum social needs of its young worshippers.

Different programmes are organized by the church to cater for the spiritual growth, marital engagements and academic success as well as economic prosperity of the youths. Social events such as arts and crafts, technological activities including cartooning, video editing and sports are a regular feature by the church. The MFM leadership finds every opportunity to motivate its members particularly the youths and football is one of such opportunities. The church manages a football team and hosts several football tournaments among its youths in Nigeria. Besides using football as a means of engaging and empowering the youths, it is also utilized for evangelistic purposes by the church. As Ajani (2013) noted, "the use of football game as a way of reaching the youths in the society for Christ is indeed innovative" (p. 97). However, there is no empirical evidence to support the claim by MFM church that their football activities offer them the opportunity to win souls to Christ. Ajayi believes, the 'allegiance' of some of these youths to the MFM is only superficial, as long as that has the privilege of playing the game, which they believe could be a stepping stone to their dream football teams" (p. 98).

Although the church is known for aggressive and 'war-like' prayer activities, however, musical activities are visibly vibrant in the life of the church. Ayodeji (2020) reveals the place of music as one of the significant elements in Yoruba Pentecostal Christianity by focusing on rituals, rites and worship in MFM. His work investigates how music

intersects Christian rites from the opening to the closing activities of the church with members of the congregation playing various roles during worship. Similarly, Ajani (2013) notes that music particularly singing permeates the church services. He remarks, "one of the hallmarks of the MFM is the love for hymn singing" (p. 183). In our observation of MFM programmes, services are largely participatory during singing and praying. More often than not prayers are offered in a caller-response manner. In Ayodeji's observation, "their prayer formulae involve calling of 'prayer points' by the anchor Pastor and these are then fervently repeated by congregants. In other words, prayer among Yoruba Pentecostal churches often a take a call and response format" (2020:45). Like in many AICs, vigorous handclapping and dancing usually accompany boisterous singing in MFM. Except for drums-foreign or indigenous, musical instruments such as electronic keyboards, guitars, and other wind instruments offer accompaniment during worship. The exclusion of drums from worship in MFM demands some explanations. First, some of the holiness Pentecostal churches including MFM consider drums and by extension drums, as capable of distracting worshippers during service hence trap drums (jazz drums) were not allowed in their services. Second, these church leaders, just like the European missionaries, hold the view that African traditional instruments particularly drums are linked with cultic worship in traditional religion settings and should be banned in Christian worship.

While some holiness Pentecostal Churches, for example, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a leading Pentecostal Church in Nigeria, have permitted the use of Yoruba traditional instruments such as *bata*, *dundun*, *omele*, and *sekere*, others including Deeper Life Bible Church and Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries still prohibit the use of drums in their worship services. However, we noticed the use of virtual drums-as sequenced drum loop in MFM even when the church's stance on drumming is very clear. This practice demands some questions: Why

are 'live' drums replaced with virtual drums if drumming distracts worshippers? What is distractive and 'worldly' about the medium-drums or the expression-drumming? Since the medium and expression of drumming are humanly initiated, to what extent does the sound of drum remains a sacred one especially regarding Christian worship? These questions are not within the purview of this study however, they should demand responses from scholars in religion and ethnomusicologist.

Musical performance in MFM is favourably disposed to Western classical music tradition and this is traceable to the musical background of the General Overseer who himself plays the Organ and the trumpet and has once served as a chorister in one of the CAC churches in Lagos known for excellent musical performances. Large choir and orchestra are a striking feature in MFM with youths and children making up the larger percentage. The engagements of youth in the music ministry of the church is worthy of scholarly investigations. Furthermore, as earlier mentioned, MFM seeks various ways to motivate and empower the youth population of the church and two prominent activities have taken centre stage in this regard: football and music.

The MFM church has a very broad range of musical activities that its members especially the youths involve themselves in. Besides improving spirituality through creative-music activities, how music serves as a tool for empowerment-social, social and economic among youths in a faith-based context is the focus of this article. This article explores church-based music programmes and youth empowerment in Nigeria by focusing on MFM music programmes. It asks, how is church-based music training programme different from non-church-based music programmes? In what ways has MFM music programmes engendered empowerment-socially and economically among its youth and what

lessons can religious institutions learn in considering artistic activities such as music in their various empowerment programmes in contemporary Nigeria. The central goal of this study is to offer a clear argument for the inclusion of music training in youth empowerment programmes in a church-based context as it is capable of achieving sustainable development in contemporary Africa.

## **Methodology**

In exploring music programmes and youth empowerment in a church-based context, the study employed qualitative research methods. In-depth interviews were conducted with key officials as well as interviews with youths involved in the music programme of the church. Youths selected for the study were those who participated in various music training programmes of the church. To mitigate the challenge of physical distance and that of covid-19 protocols, virtual interviews were conducted with some respondents particularly those residents outside Nigeria, notwithstanding scheduled in-person interviews with key officials. Various visits were made to the church's headquarters where worship, music training and performance activities were observed. Archival materials including the church's website, print and electronic publications and other media sources also provided data for the study.

## **Profiling Mountain of Fire and Miracle Music Ministry**

Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries has a very broad range of music programme that is being run under the church's music ministry-MFM Music Ministry (hereafter referred to as MFMM). Over the years, the music ministry of the church has witnessed significant growth and development in terms of membership, administrative structure and musical programmes. The music ministry of the church has developed with the church in all ramifications. As church membership increased, so did the music of the church. The church that

started with about twenty-five members now boasts of hundreds of thousands of worshippers all over the globe. Similarly, the church's music ministry began with nine persons and has now grown to over 20,000 members; both singers and instrument players.

The membership demography of MFMM is a unique one. Unlike many churches especially (neo-)Pentecostal churches, MFMM is comprised of people of different ages, social, educational and economic backgrounds. In one of the services, we observed at the church's headquarters, we saw children as young as five years and adults as old as 70 years and above performing in various music ensembles of the church. The music ministry of the church is largely dominated by youths and young adults. The average age of members of the music ministry is about 30-40 years. Members of the MFMM can be said to be educated across various levels of education from primary to University and are working as professionals, traders, artisans, IT experts, school teachers, University lecturers and musicians.

The music unit attracts both the low, middle and upper class-though few-of the society. Some explanations need to be made here. The influx of young people particularly students can be traced to the proximity of the church to some notable institutions of learning in Lagos including the University of Lagos, Yaba College of Technology and Federal College of Education. Also, the location of the church's headquarters in Yaba-an area believed to be largely occupied by the middle-class of colonial and postcolonial Lagos, the church and its music unit by extension, attracts members of varied social status-low and middle class.

Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, in the opinion of the author, has a very elaborate structure for its music programme when compared to other churches-historic and Pentecostal in Nigeria. Corroborating



the author position, Adedeji (2020: 66) notes, "not all Yoruba Pentecostal operate such elaborate organizational structures MFMM". The MFMM is led by a Regional Overseer (Music) and assisted by ten departmental directors. See Adedeji (2020) for detailed information on MFMM structure and operations. Broadly, the MFMM can be categorized into two units: performing and educational groups. The performing units are those who are responsible for performing music-vocal or instrumental in the church. The vocal groups include the Senior Choir, Youth Choir, Male Choir and Gospel Choir while the Orchestra-Divine Symphony Orchestra, Guitar Choir and Saxophone Band, comprise the instrumental sections of MFMM.

The MFMM Music School is solely responsible for providing music education and coordinating music examinations in the church. As a department in MFMM, the music school serves as a capacity developing a centre for the church in the areas of music education. The school offers training in both vocal and instrumental to interested members of the church for almost free of charge except for a token paid for a qualifying examination organized by the church for those who wants to register for the external examination-ABRSM. This training serves as a form of empowerment especially for the young people who are a large part of the beneficiaries of the programme.



Fig. 1: MFMM choir & orchestra performing @ the church's headquarters  
Source: <https://web.facebook.com/mfmmusicministry/photo>

The establishment of MFM Music Conservatory is a testament to the fact the church places a premium on church music education in Nigeria. Both members and non-members of the church have immensely benefitted from the tuition the conservatory offers. Arguably, MFM is the only church that can boast of a full-grown faith-based music conservatory in Nigeria apart from the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) School of Music, Lagos. The MFM music conservatory offers music training of high standard as obtained in other music institutions across the globe. The conservatory plays host to some excellent musicians-home and abroad in concerts or master classes. Past students of the conservatory are pursuing higher degrees in various institutions and are known as excellent musicians in the US, Canada, UK and other parts of the world. Omo Bello, a French-Nigeria, who has been described as one of the world's most sought-after sopranos has a music training background from MFMM. One can submit that the church has been at the forefront of promoting and sustaining quality music education from colonial till postcolonial Nigeria.

### **Church-Based Music Programmes and Youth Empowerment in MFM**

The concept of empowerment has remained fluid because it means different things to different people and it has been used in a broad range of discipline and historic as well as geographic contexts. While it is an "attractive and powerful concept" (Zambrano, 2007: 75), its meaning is still unclear and the definition remains different and abstract (Pick et al., 2007). Some literature submit that empowerment is both a process and result, that is, it is a means and an end (Kampe, 2012; Xavier et al., 2016). In broader terms, youth, despite the complexity in the dimensionality of the notion of empowerment among scholars, there are three connecting threads that extant research has associated with empowerment: power, participation and education (Xavier et al., 2016). For the sake of scope and space, this section

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discusses how education, in this case, music education in MFM engenders empowerment-social, economic and spiritual among youths.

As earlier mentioned, MFM has over the years empowered its youths through a deliberate and conscious investment in the areas of music and sports. The church founder believes that "Music and sports are veritable tools for youths to channel their energies in order to contribute their quota to nation-building all over the world" (Olukoya, 2017). In a collegiate music festival organized in his honour at the University of Lagos in August 2017 where the author participated, Dr Olukoya remarked that he would do anything to take away youths from the street. For him, music education is not just a cliché but a process that is capable of improving individual lives and boosting the economy. Little wonder why the church invests heavily in music training programmes for the youths as a form of empowering them socially and spiritually. Studies have identified training on musical instruments as one of the forms of empowerment programmes among youths in faith-based organizations (Oghenekwho & Tonunarigha, 2019; Ogunyemi & Onanuga, 2019). Though these studies failed to discuss in-depth how music training provides empowerment for the youths, this article focuses on the extent to which music serves as a means of empowerment among youths in growing economies like Nigeria.

With reference to economic empowerment, youths in MFM through the music programme can be said to have been empowered. The youths have acquired skills in playing different musical instruments and deploy these skills for both religious and social engagements. These youths provide musical services for individuals, educational as religious organizations as instrument instructors and performers-singers-instrumentalists for a fee. Many of these youth are sought after in the city of Lagos and elsewhere in Nigeria. In an online conversation with

Miracle Agbor, a singer and violinist, trained in MFM, she recalled how MFM music programme has empowered her financially.

The kind of training you get from MFM for free... if you were to pay for such training outside, you will be paying a lot of money. And now after receiving that training for free, it's not only helping you become a musician you also have the platform because of what you've learnt, you teach other people and make income for yourself... And I remember that the first job that I got as a result of having just grade 3 certification in music theory and singing that was what I used in getting a teaching job in a primary school then. So, you are not only receiving you also have an income to start making a platform for yourself. (Interview, June 29, 2021).

The account of Mary above is similar to the experiences of many young musicians in contemporary Nigeria. These youths receive their music training from the church and use their musical skills to make a living both within and outside the church. It is insightful to offer the economic opportunities that the youths in deploying their musical skills. The cost of offering music instructions in Nigeria varies from one location to another. In Lagos, for example, private music instructors charge between N20,000 and N30,000 per month for an average of two lessons per week. In some highbrow settlements like Lekki, Victoria Island, Banana Island areas in Lagos, music instruction costs as high as N20,000 per hour/child. It means that a music instructor with five students will earn up to N100,000 per week which is way beyond what some blue-collar job workers earn per month. One of my respondents, Owolabi Oloruntoba, a pianist/keyboardist, trained in MFM narrated how he was enrolled, though unwillingly, by her mother into the music training of the church. He explained how the training has empowered him to be self-sustaining financially. In his words, "I no longer depend on my parents for money as I now make money for

myself. Before the covid-19 lockdown, I do private music lessons for twenty-five thousand (N25,000) per hour and I also teach in a school. MFM is empowering young people and I think other churches should learn from them" (personal communication, July 2021).

As performers, these youths feature at different events such as concerts, weddings, funerals, birthday anniversaries and book/product launches to mention a few. These performances are well remunerated. In the author's experience with some musicians who were trained in church-based music programme particularly MFM, these musicians- mostly string players charge a very high amount to perform even in church events. When asked why they charge an exorbitant fee for performance, they responded that it is from the performance earnings they pay their house rents and school fees, feed themselves and look good. Some of them even confirm sponsoring their siblings throughout their education and at the same time looking after the welfare of their parents. The preceding narratives further establish the fact that church-based music programmes offer viable means of economic empowerment among youths in Nigeria.

Socially, many of the youths have risen to stardom both at local and international music spaces. For instance, one Omo Bello, a French-Nigerian, who has been acclaimed as "one of the world's most sought-after soprano singer and as carved out a striking reputation on the operatic stage all over the world" (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2016), had musical training from MFM. In 2018, the MFM's Shalom Chorale, one of the branches of the based in the United Kingdom, won the BBC Gospel Choir of the year. The chorale comprises mainly of youths who are studying or leaving in the United Kingdom. In 2018, the Mountain Top Chorale-MFM conservatory choir, participated in the World Choral Games held in South Africa and won a gold medal in their category. As earlier noted, the unreserved commitment of the church

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founder to developing youths accounts for the chorale's achievement at such a global stage. A newspaper editor writes "a man [Olukoya] who has created such an inspiring environment by being a mentor, has also, made unreserved financial commitments, by providing such talents with opportunities for further development through music studies" (Guardian Newspaper, 2018). Not only can youth empowerment especially in the areas of music be locally relevant but it can also make a significant contribution at the global level as we have seen in the MFM experience.



Fig. 2: Mountain Top Chorale @ World Choir Games in Sochi, Russia, 2016  
Source: <https://web.facebook.com/mfmmusicministry/photo>

Empowerment is multifaceted and affects different aspects of humanity. In the same vein, the music training programme of MFM not only empowers the youth socially and economically but also empowers them spiritually. For the youths, the training develops them musically, morally and spiritually which they believe embodies empowerment in its totality. Like one of my respondents puts it,

one good thing about church-based music programme is that they don't only give you, provide you with the efficiency you need to be a great musician. They also build a structure that is

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*faith-based. You learn morals. Music is very wide..... and it's easy to get lost in the other side of music if you don't start up with your morals and your faith and all that. So, I personally prefer church-based music programmes because they don't only teach you the music you need but also help you build good morals you need. Nobody wants to hire someone with bad character... you know. So, it doesn't only build you musically it builds you spiritually, it gives you the spiritual context.*

Religion and spirituality have been associated with empowerment (Kiit and Nielsen, 1999), therefore, the church-framed empowerment programme embodies spiritually transformation and development. Since man is tripartite in nature-spirit, soul and body, empowerment within a religious context should also affect these areas of people. Empowering youths through musical engagements is an effort that MFM leadership considers very important and do this by providing platforms where "young ones showcase their talents in Godly music through idioms of well-arranged classical, Negro spirituals, native airs and contemporary idioms" (Akinselure, 2018). We contend here again, that music particularly in a faith-based context offers the framework for sustainable well-being-spiritual and social.



Fig. 3: Shalom Chorale performing at the finals of BBC Gospel Choir Competition, 2019

Source: <https://web.facebook.com/shalomchorale>

## **Summary and Conclusion**

Several lessons are to be learnt from the MFM model of youth empowerment through the areas of music training among youths. First, research has shown that music occupies a larger part of young people's lives and it provides them a platform for expression. Therefore, youths can be meaningfully engaged through music training programmes in faith-based organizations. In the opinion of the author, empowerment programmes that exclude music by churches are not wholistic.

Secondly, youth empowerment through musical initiatives has the potentials for sustainable poverty reduction, job and wealth creation as well as value reorientation. Hence, more efforts should be put in place by churches and other faith-based organizations to develop enriching music programmes that will empower their youths economically. As seen in the MFM model, youths were developed and empowered through musical skills which became a source of earning living for themselves. It, therefore, implies that the church can help realize the sustainable development goals project under goal 1- no poverty.

Thirdly, faith-based music programmes help to develop lifelong skills in people which is capable of empowering them to be relevant both at local, national and international levels. Youths in MFM, through its music empowerment programme, have been brought to the limelight and stardom in the music scene locally and globally. While not demeaning other forms of youth empowerment programme by faith-based organizations, music empowerment initiatives offer the platform for creative expressions which attracts global attention. As these youths move to the global stage, they project the Nation's culture and arts.

Fourthly, faith-based organizations such as MFM have continued to support the government's effort in empowering the teeming youth



population and channelling their God-given potential into National development. No nation can develop without developing human capacity. Conscious and deliberate decisions should be made into investing in youth empowerment specifically in artistic programmes like music by the church. This will not only increase and improve the music workforce of the church but will significantly add value to the social, economic and spiritual lives of youths in Nigeria.

Beyond contributing to the literature on faith-based institutions and youth development, this article advocates that the consideration and inclusion of music programmes as forms of empowerment programmes for youths have valuable contributions to human development in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

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