

An Appraisal of Spousal Immersion in the Leadership of Nigerian Contemporary Pentecostal Churches

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Abstract

This paper focuses on spousal immersion in the leadership and administration of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. The paper identifies spousal immersion as a recent development in the leadership structure of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, whereby wives of founders and pastoral leaders are vested with authority and official responsibilities, which enable them to serve as co-leaders with their spouses. Three “Mummy G.O.” are selected for this paper: Reverend Dr Funke Adetuberu, Bishop Funke Felix-Adejumo, and Pastor Foluke Adenike Adeboye. To ascertain the roles of these “Mummy G.O” in their churches, their church programmes of activities, bulletins, audio and visual tapes which contain their contributions are consulted. The paper concludes that spousal-immersion type of leadership is important to understanding dynamics in female leadership roles in African Christianity and a remarkable shift from patriarchal domination of religious roles to equality, which accords women opportunities to be on the same par with their male counterparts.

Keywords: Spousal Immersion, Mummy G.O., female leadership, female pastors, Pentecostalism

Introduction

This paper examines the involvement of spouses of male founders and pastoral leaders in the administration of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria and the dynamics of such involvement in relation to patriarchal leadership in both Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Spousal immersion is a recent dimension identified in the leadership structure of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, whereby wives of founders and pastoral leaders (often called General Overseers) assume authority with their husbands as co-leaders and official responsibilities are vested upon them beyond domestic roles as wives and women leaders.

One of the leading topics in religion in the late 20th century and the beginning of 21st century is the women’s role in religion. Women were perceived to be playing a second fiddle in Abrahamic religions, especially Christianity and Islam. Today, women are still restricted to certain roles. For example, only in rare cases are women allowed to baptise new converts in Christianity. In Islam, women are not allowed to lead prayers, especially when men are around. However, such restrictions are scarcely found in African religious traditions where women serve unhindered as priests.

At the incipient stage of Christianity in Nigeria, there were no important roles assigned to the spouses of religious leaders except to support their husbands. Until recently, leadership in Christianity was generally understood from the patriarchal perspective. Men were believed to be naturally endowed with leadership skills, while women were expected to provide the required support, especially at the home front. Kalu rightly postulates that patriarchy was the foundation on which mission-founded churches were built. On the other hand, African Independent Churches gave more room for women to serve as prophets and founders, but “they were still restricted through the enforcement of Levitical prohibitions and gender ideology sourced from indigenous society” (148). Kalu notes further that “in Pentecostal churches, the pastor’s wife or first lady serves as a nodal power point for mobilising and deploying female evangelical power” (153). Olademo corroborates Kalu’s view by asserting that women are now assuming leadership positions, especially among the African Independent Churches and Pentecostal churches, a development which is a departure from the establishment of Western missionaries (161-71).

Traditionally, a pastor’s wife was expected to play a role that overlapped her private and public life. At home, she was expected to take care of her husbands and children. At church, she must support

her husband's ministries and also serve as an adviser to women's groups. In Pentecostal churches, however, spouses of church leaders play more conspicuous roles. While the denominational leaders are referred to as General Overseers (G.O.), their spouses are called "Mummy G.O." "Mummy G.O." is accorded the same respect and ministerial authority as their spouses get from the congregations. In a few cases, these Mummy G.O.s have succeeded as authorities in their churches upon the demise of their spouses. For example, Apostle Nkechi Anayo-Ilopataife succeeded her husband, Bishop Harford Anayo Ilopataife, as the head of Victory Christian Church, Satellite Town, Lagos, after he was assassinated on February 4, 1995 (Diegu). Archbishop Margaret Idahosa also succeeded her husband, Archbishop Benson Idahosa, as the head of the Church of God Mission International after his death on 12 March, 1998 (Marshall 180). The "Mummy G.O." who are the focus of this paper are Revd. Dr. Funke Adetuberu of Faith Christian Ministries, Bishop Funke Felix-Adejumo of the Agape Christian Ministries and Pastor Foluke Adenike Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. With these case studies, this paper examines the activities of spouses as female religious leaders in Nigerian Pentecostal churches, and the implications of spousal immersion for religious leadership and patriarchy in Nigeria. It also discusses the contributions of the selected "Mummy G.O." to the development of their churches.

Three major themes dominate scholarly discourses on women's role in Christianity: contributions of women in the early church and its implications for the contemporary church (Laporte viii+189; Kung vii+103), advocacy for leadership role for women (Bateye 1-12; Soothill xii+261; Phiri 255-68; Olademo, "Women Empowerment and Pentecostal Experience" 161-71), and characterisation of leading Christian women in the contemporary period (Olademo, "New Dimension..." 62-74). Most literature on the role of women in African Christianity focus on advocacy for leadership role for women and characterisation and celebration of women who have weathered the storm of patriarchal domination to assume church leadership role. Such works tend to disapprove male leadership in Christianity as inequality. However, this paper is a departure from this position as it identifies a synergy instead of inequality in church leadership. It presents "Mummy G.O." phenomenon as a type of leadership which gives direct authorities to spouses of church leaders without agitation. Spousal immersion is also a departure from what Jane Soothill describes as "an inherently conservative force, which encourages the domestication of women and promotes the glorification of men as the natural leaders of home and society" (191).

Kalu has categorized discourses on female leadership within African Pentecostalism into four: founders, sisters, first ladies, and jezebels (148). This paper falls into the third category except that the title "Mummy G.O." is adopted in lieu of "first ladies" which is of American origin. "Mummy G.O." is common in Nigerian Pentecostal milieu. The paper also toes the line of thought of Itohan Idumwonyi's work on Margaret Idahosa's ministries. Margaret Idahosa succeeded Benson Idahosa, her husband, as the Presiding Bishop of the Church of God Mission International, Benin. However, Margaret Idahosa was not immersed in the ministry of her husband, Benson Idahosa, until after his demise. Idumwonyi reiterates that "Sadly, he did not ordain his wife, Margaret" (79). This paper's main focus is on pastors' wives who have been ordained by their spouses and actively participate in the leadership of their denominations together with their spouses.

Pastor's Wife in the Contemporary Church

The early church did not have a specific role for spouses of pastors. Pastors were regarded as part of the membership of the church unlike the present-day church where pastoral work is seen as a career. There was no dichotomy between the clergy and the laity. So, pastors' wives were treated like other women in the church. Whatever was expected of women generally was expected of pastors' wives. Also, women were forbidden to serve as church leaders. However, they were allowed to serve actively in the church (Reboli 95). Two passages which have directly address women serving in the church are 1 Timothy 3:11 and Titus 2:3-5. The former, which either refers to wives of deacons or female deacons, highlights some conditions for such women. They must be worthy of respect, they must be temperate, they must be faithful in all things and must not be malicious talkers. Similarly,

Titus 2:3-5 admonishes older women to be of good behaviour, avoid drunkenness and be teachers of good things, part of which includes teaching younger women how to be good and exemplary wives to their husbands.

What being a pastor's wife in the early church meant can be inferred from the two passages. They did not have any specific role in the church. By the fourth century, married and unmarried clergy men were forbidden to have sex and by the thirteenth century clerical celibacy became a law in the Roman Catholic Church (Benoit 11). This continued till the period of Reformation when Martin Luther denounced clerical celibacy as satanic and encouraged priests and nuns to marry (Benoit 12). He also married a nun, Katharina, whom he described as "My lord Katie." Katharina became an example of an ideal pastor's wife. She was taking care of her six children and some orphans, tending their garden and also had time to visit hospitals and prisons (Benoit 12). Many Christians in the Reformation period saw Katharina's dedication to family and her assistance to Martin Luther as a standard for pastors' spouses. She thus became a benchmark for the office of the wives of ministers.

An anonymous author wrote a book which was published in 1832 on the office of pastor's wife titled, *Hints to a Clergyman's Wife or Female Parochial Duties Practically Illustrated*. The book described the role Pastor's wife was expected to play in the nineteenth century. It stated that the pastor's wife must take her office as a divine call and must cooperate with her spouse for the two of them to be successful in their ministries. The anonymous author also portrayed the Office of the Pastor's wife as a highly exalted and venerated position. Women who occupy this office should be grateful to God who selected them to partake in the spread of the gospel and take care of his church. Pastors' wives are to reciprocate God's love by serving meritoriously in appreciation of what God has done for them. Some of the primary duties of a pastor's wife is to visit the sick, especially women, provide temporal relief for the sick, take care of the children's Sunday School class and give private instruction to young women in the church. Her duties are further amplified thus,

The minister's wife, in the survey of her husband's parish, will find a wide field for the exercise of her Christian charity and benevolence. The child looks up to her instruction; the naked and miserable appeal to her for clothing; the starving for nourishment; the sick for consolation and sympathy; and surely it is no less her privilege than her duty, to supply bread to the hungry, clothing to the destitute, instruction to the ignorant; to visit the abodes of poverty and disease, - to soothe the solicitude of tender mothers, - to sympathise with their sorrows and relieve their varied wants, - to rejoice the heart of the widow, and "make it sing for joy," by directing it to Him who is "a Father of the fatherless, and a Judge of the widows, even God in his holy habitation" (*Hints to a Clergyman's Wife or Female Parochial Duties Practically Illustrated* 12-3).

The view expressed in *Hints to a Clergyman's Wife* undoubtedly represents public view on clergyman's spouse in the nineteenth century and beyond. It also reflects some of the attributes of Katharina, Martin Luther's wife which are identified above. By the nineteenth century, a pastor's wife was viewed as a companion, sacrifice, assistant and partner. These models set the standard for how pastors' wives are viewed in many churches today (Benoit 16).

Spousal Immersion in Nigerian Pentecostal Church Leadership

As noted above, traditionally, pastors' wives were expected to support their spouses' ministries by taking care of them and their children, participating in all church programmes and overseeing children's ministries. They were not expected to serve as co-ministers with their spouses. In the contemporary period, clergy wives in many mainline churches such as Anglican and Methodist, do not have active role to play in the leadership of the church. The highest position they attain is women leader or adviser. They earn their respect by supporting their spouses' ministries. It is a common saying that a charismatic clergyman without a good wife cannot be successful in ministry. Some denominations give special considerations to the spouses of pastors before they trust them with church affairs. However, the case is different with Nigerian Pentecostal churches where the

office of the pastors' wives assumes a new meaning with respect and prestige. Some Pentecostal women trained alongside their husbands and ministers (Kalu 148). Starting from the late 90s Pentecostal leaders began to add their spouses' names and photographs to church programmes, magazines, posters and billboards. The spouses were also allowed to minister during special programmes such as convention, ministers' conference, marriage ceremonies and women's programmes apart from regular weekly services. Initially, ordination of women as pastors was limited to senior pastors or General Overseers or Presiding Bishops' spouses. Pastors' wives are now ordained as pastors or assistant pastors. Only few Pentecostal denominations do not ordain pastors' wives as pastors. Such denominations also do not ordain women as pastors. However, many Pentecostal churches do ordain women who exhibit some spiritual maturity, irrespective of whether their spouses are pastors or not (Olademo 66; Kalu 150). Commenting on the global trend on women ordination as pastors among Pentecostals, Miller and Yamamori note that

Many women have played important pastoral roles within churches as co-ministers with their husbands, even though in the eyes of some people this violated St. Paul's injunction that women remain silent in the church. Women have also functioned as pastors by assuming titles such as evangelist or missionary. And, increasingly, women are serving on pastoral staffs of Pentecostal churches, although there are still relatively few female pastors (209).

Reverend Dr. Funke Adetuberu

Olufunke Adetuberu was born on the 7th August, 1963 (Ishola 205). She is a native of Fiditi in Afijio Local Government Area, Oyo State. She grew up in Ibadan where she started her secondary school but could not complete it. While in secondary school in Ibadan, Olufunke became promiscuous and recalcitrant. She suffered sexual abuse and attempted suicide several times. She attributed her failure to her parents' broken home. Her mother got a divorce when Funke was 6 months old. Funke was thought to be a bastard or a product of sexual immorality which warranted her mother's divorce. Growing up without her father and living with a mother who was a liquor seller compounded her woes as she got pregnant and could not continue with her studies ("My Life is Story of Grace - Funke Adetuberu"). She joined a company of people who influenced her negatively. She was a smoker, a drug addict, and got engaged in revelry and partying. After attempting suicide without any success, she decided to seek a solution to her problem by visiting a church where she became converted. Right from her conversion, she focused her ministry on women empowerment. It was in her ministry she met Mr. Wale Nelson Adetuberu who accepted her despite her past. They got married on 6th July, 1986 and have four children (Adetuberu).

Dr. Wale Nelson Adetuberu is the founder of Faith Christian Ministries, Ibadan. Funke Adetuberu refers to him as her mentor, a great support and her good cover. She founded the Women College of Ministry (WCM), a teaching ministry under Faith Christian Ministries. The ministry has the vision of "delivering women from problems that have relegated them to a lower position in the society" (Adetuberu 25). Funke Adetuberu is a writer and televangelist. Some of her books include *Golden Rules for Girl*, *Magic of Marriage*, *Victims of Error*, *Love Notes to Fathers*, *Loaded but Wounded*, *So What: Letting Go of the Past*, *Anointed but Addicted*, *When a Woman makes up her Mind*, *Infidelity: Way Out*, and *One Woman Gang*. All the books were published by the publication arm of the ministry – By Faith Living Publications.

WCM organises interdenominational training sessions for women, which run between January and March every year (*Women College of Ministry News* 12). Adetuberu is also a motivational speaker whose teachings focus on encouraging women and motivating them to rise to their challenges in life. WCM treats sexuality from a motivational perspective with a view to liberating women from their sexual problems.

Pastor Funke Adetuberu is the backbone of Faith Christian Ministries and has projected the image of the church beyond its geographical confines. She assists her husband in preaching and teaching. She also makes use of mass media to promote the ministries of the church. It is not an exaggeration to say that in terms of popularity and ministry opportunities, Mrs. Adetuberu surpasses her husband. In

fact, Pastor Nelson once attested to it with the caveat that Pastor Funke was indirectly promoting his ministries. Apart from ministering on Sundays, she coordinates several seminars of the church. These are different from programmes organised for women empowerment, wherein she ministers with the help of other ministers (Adetuberu).

Lady Bishop Funke Felix-Adejumo

Pastor Funke Adejumo was born on January 28, 1963 in Ibadan. She had her primary and secondary education in Ibadan. She had her Bachelor of Arts' degree from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She got married in 1984 to Felix Remi Isola Adejumo whom she met at the University of Ibadan. The couple moved to Akure where they founded Agape Christian Ministries in 1988 in their living room with other four people. Mrs. Felix-Adejumo did not like the idea of being a pastor's wife initially. However, she was ordained with her husband on August 12, 1989 in Akure, Ondo State. She was consecrated as a bishop on January 18, 2025. The church now has over 30 branches in Nigeria ("Pastor Funke Adejumo Biography").

Bishop Funke Felix-Adejumo is the President of Funke Felix-Adejumo Foundation which oversees the ministry's philanthropic activities and empowerment programmes. The couple has an orphanage called Grace Orphanage and a children's hospital built in 2003. She has a honorary doctorate from Faith University in conjunction with Oral Robert's University. Mrs. Felix-Adejumo is a dynamic teacher, author and speaker on marriage, family life, women empowerment and spiritual growth. She often uses her life experience which include growing up in penury in Ibadan. In a message titled "You can rewrite the Story," Mrs. Felix-Adejumo narrated how her family started humbly in Akure and how "the Lord has written their story" to encourage the congregants (Felix-Adejumo, 00:08:46–00:12:50). She frequently praises her husband for allowing her to develop and use her gifts and for giving expression to the grace of God in her life. The husband gives her the platform to develop and manifest her charisma.

In terms of public recognition and heavy media presence, Bishop Funke Felix-Adejumo is influential among youths and women, particularly due to her extensive work as a speaker, author and women's advocate. On the other hand, Bishop Felix Remi Adejumo has no significant media presence even though he is the Senior Pastor of the Agape Ministries. He has also served as the President of Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Ondo State branch. He is less frequently highlighted in media as an individual figure. His contributions are often tied to the church's growth and philanthropy, but he appears less active in public-facing roles like speaking engagements or social media compared to his wife.

Pastor Folu Adeboye

Pastor Folu Adeboye, an Ijesha princess and the wife of the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, was born on 13th July, 1948 to the family of Jacob and Morounfola Adelusi Adeyokunnu of Owa Obokun Oji ("Bio/Résumé"). Her father was a Methodist minister and teacher. Pastor Folu attended Methodist Primary School, Oke Eshe, Ilesha, and Methodist Girls School, Agurodo-Ilesha. She obtained her Grade II Teacher's Certificate at the United Missionary College, Ibadan, in 1966. She had her Diploma in Education (Science and Mathematics) from the University of Lagos ("Biography of Pastor Mrs. Foluke Adeboye (Mummy G.O)"). She got married to Dr. Enoch Adejare Adeboye in 1967. She was ordained a pastor in 1996. Since her ordination, she has distinguished herself as a televangelist and conference speaker.

As the wife of the General Overseer, Pastor Folu Adeboye's roles are multifaceted, encompassing spiritual leadership, educational advocacy, and social outreach with a significant impact both within the church and in broader society. She is the official Mother-in-Israel of the Redeemed Christian Church of God and second to the G.O. in the hierarchy of the church's administrative structure ("Our Structure"). By virtue of her position as the Mother-in-Israel, she is the leader of Redeemed Women Fellowship, an arm of the RCCG that promotes the spiritual growth, marital guidance and empowerment for women. Pastor Folu Adeboye is the head of the Christian Education of RCCG.

She is the founder and the head of all schools registered as Christ the Redeemer Schools. She is the Founder/Coordinator of the Wholistic Outreach, African Missions Global, Feast of Esther, Habitation of Hope, Friends of Jesus and Christ Against Drug Abuse [CADAM] (“Bio/Résumé”).

Pastor Foluke Adeboye is the Director of RCCG Central Missions Board. She helps coordinate the church’s missionary efforts, ensuring the gospel reaches all nations. She participates in all national and international programmes with her husband. She ministers alongside her husband during their monthly Holy Ghost service and annual Holy Ghost convention. She is known for her intercessory prayers and Bible teaching.

Implications of Spousal Immersion for the 21st-Century Church Leadership

One of the agitations of feminism is equal right and opportunity for women and men in the society. Feminist theologians seek equal right for both women and men in church leadership. With spousal immersion pastors’ wives are not only given the same opportunity their spouses enjoy but are also recognised as part of the church’s leadership. Nobody questions their authority in as much their spouses are alive. Women in spousal immersion participate in church programmes and stand in for their spouses whenever they are unavailable. Church members accord them the same respect, loyalty and reference they give to their spouses. They are also allotted airtime on radio and television through which they propagate family values and promote their ministries (Kalu 153). The “Mummy G.O. cited above are televangelists and international gospel speakers. They have massive media presence. In fact, Bishop Funke Felix-Adejumo and Reverend Dr. Funke Adetuberu have media presence better than their spouses who ordained them as pastors. Apart from their daily and weekly programmes on radio and television stations, they have many followers on YouTube, Facebook and other social media platforms through which they relay their messages to their virtual admirers.

Moreover, spousal immersion gives freedom to women in Pentecostal churches that allow spousal immersion in their leadership that is unavailable to women in mainline churches. One of the reasons this is possible is that most Pentecostal churches are independent and do not have a clearly-spelt-out leadership structure. Church business is run as family business and the church’s property are believed to be the founder’s property (Kalu 142).

Spousal immersion in church leadership is a successional process through which pastors’ wives are incorporated into church leadership. In some cases, as cited above, wives of founders automatically become church leaders after the demise of the founders. It provides an escape from leadership tussles which often characterise the demise of founders.

Spousal immersion leadership style redefines the office and role of pastors’ wives. Instead of being inactive during worship service, pastors’ wives who engage in this leadership style are active and contribute to the success and growth of their spouses’ ministries. Even those who do not possess pastoral charisma do engage in other businesses of the church. Pastor Foluke Adeboye manages all the primary and secondary schools of the RCCG. Before she became the head of Church of God Mission International, Mrs. Margaret Idahosa was known to possess business acumen which she deployed to manage her husband’s business estate (Marshall 179-80). Apart from participating in the weekly services and conventions of their ministries, they do organise women’s conferences, retreats and fellowships where they advocate and encourage women to take active roles in leadership and service.

Nevertheless, critics of female leadership in Christianity may consider spousal immersion leadership style as an aberration, a strange practice and disobedience to the teachings of the New Testament. Bible passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 are often cited against female church leaders by evangelical and conservative theologians who argue that women are forbidden to serve as an authority or a pastor over men (Carson 133-47). Egalitarianism (Adelakun 69-88) advocates usually refute this argument by citing 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; Galatians 27-28, and other passages that emphasise women’s freedom and equality with men (Fee). Such scholars query the textual integrity of 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35 and the authenticity of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as Pauline

writing. There is no doubt that spousal immersion leadership style is not a New Testament practice, nor is there such an office or title as female pastor or bishop. The current practice whereby gifted women are ordained as pastors can be traced to the activities of women in the early years of Pentecostalism in the United States of America. Notable Pentecostal women such as Agnes Ozman, Florence Crawford, Aimee Semple McPherson, and Maria Woodworth-Etter, among others, served as co-pastors, missionaries, and evangelists following the Azusa Street Revival.

Conclusion

The emphasis of this paper is on spousal immersion leadership style, which is gaining influence among Pentecostal leaders in Nigeria. It has been described as a form of leadership that allows church founders or leaders to carry out the leadership responsibilities of their ministries hand in glove with their spouses. There is no limitation to what such pastors' wives can do as they are accorded the same respect as their spouses earn. The three pastors' wives used as case studies are only a fraction of cases of spousal immersion leadership style in Nigerian Pentecostalism. Pastors' wives such as Rev. Oyenike Areogun, Pastor Dr. Becky Enenche, and Pastor Eno Jerry Eze, among others, are deeply involved and play vital roles in their spouses' ministries. While spousal immersion in church leadership is an emerging development among Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Nigeria, there is no doubt that it will soon be widely accepted by other churches in Nigeria. Spousal-immersion type of leadership unveils the dynamics in terms of leadership in Nigerian Pentecostalism. It is a remarkable shift from the patriarchal domination of the leadership role, which is common in mainline churches, to equality, which accords women opportunities to be on the same par with their male counterparts. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, similar to spousal immersion is the pastors' children's immersion in church leadership. This is a leadership arrangement that allows children of church leaders to assume leadership roles in their parents' churches. Interrogating this will advance knowledge on the dynamics of leadership styles adopted by many churches in Nigeria.

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