

THE RISE AND BOOM OF NEO-PENTECOSTAL WOMEN MINISTRY IN NIGERIA: AN ENTERPRISE OF LIBERATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

In early Christianity and the orthodox churches that flourish in Nigeria, especially before the 1990s, women were seemingly absent in leadership, priesthood and performance of sacerdotal duties. The trend has changed since the rise and boom of neo-Pentecostal variety of Christian practice. This paper examined women's stake in the development, with the method of phenomenological enquiry, balanced with indepth interview technique. In the qualitative report, women are identified as major beneficiaries of the gender neutral, open ministry enterprise and accommodationism praxis of neo-Pentecostalism. Unprecedentedly, women-founded and led neo-Pentecostal ministries are ubiquitous in Nigeria. Profoundly, women are liberated from the discriminatory patriarchal configurations of the church, *ipso facto* men's priesthood hegemony and expropriation. Again, maintenance of equilibrium between spiritual and material empowerment finds deep structure of confluence in the praxis of women's ministry. They build on the premise of sacred attributes and leadership calling to become entrepreneurs, managing enormous assets, as well as embracing the associated elevated social status. The husbands seldom challenge the changing status.

Keywords: Nigeria; Neo-Pentecostalism; Women; Ministry; Feminism; Liberation; Enterprise; Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Amongst women, there is a seeming renaissance and consciousness of the bipolarity of human sex and the concomitant complimentary roles in all aspects of human endeavour and cravings. Women ceaselessly note and agitate the endemic disparity which looms large in the structures of association, status and life chances

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available for both polars. About the 15th Century, women started to agitate, making spirited attack on the situation, as global injustice against them. The agitation has continued to take front burner in world summit and assemblies. The buildup is such that gender sensitivity has become a recurring agendum across nations and cultures of the world.

In the main, women want a revisioning, reversal and dismantling of the structures which inhibit their advancement. In their argument and crusade, no aspect of life should be adjudged complete without feminine content and perspective. Women probe into all dimensions of human activity and existence. It is a holistic approach. Religion is one major aspect of human activity women spotlight as possessing and promoting endemic structures of demeaning status and discrimination against them. However, the rise of neo-Pentecostal paradigm of Christian tradition offers women opportunity for liberal spectrum in exercise and manipulation of spiritual power. In other words, the phenomenon of neo-Pentecostal explosion – free for men and women to tap, exploit and apply, in thought and ecclesiastical charisma oriented venture, offer women fundamental and eccentric chance.

Gifted and courageous Nigerian women have emerged like amazons of ‘divine purpose’ to assert themselves in the pedagogical firmament of neo-Pentecostal Christian enterprise. Overt and covert forms of the plight of women – query of checkered image, feminist ideology and principles underlies their approach in ministry and church activities. Exploratory nostalgia toward understanding the morphology of women led ministries in the praxis of liberation, empowerment and advancement is the thrust of this essay. Nigeria’s religious space is the study area and population. The study is based on phenomenological method of inquiry for eliciting data. The strength of this approach is reinforced and balanced with unstructured interview report of 30 respondents randomly selected from women ministries and members of women led churches. The analysis is presented in qualitative mill.

WOMEN AND CHRISTIAN PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES AND TRADITION

Christ, the founder of Christianity clearly brought solvent oriented fabrics for breaking the structures of male-female discrimination, inherited from Jewish culture. Women had good treatment and featured prominently in Christ’s ministry. However, the drawback and striking imbalance in the buildup was exclusion of women in the selection and mentorship of the twelve disciples. Early Christianity maintained the Christ examples of equal recognition and treatment for both sexes. Consequently, women preachers, prophetesses, evangelists, elders and sundry functionaries featured in the primitive church administration and activities. Ambivalently, all male apostleship dominance remained sacrosanct. Fundamental, as this factor seems to be, it remains a strong reference against women ordination

and ascendance to higher ecclesiastical leadership and sacerdotal duties in the orthodox churches¹.

Inter cultural communication process brought pristine Christianity into contact with societies which thrived in deep structures of patriarchy – apparent social distinction and disparity between male and female sexes. Such cultures and political organization included Greece and Rome, where men wielded absolute and overriding power, as heads in whatever social setting, formation or relationship they share with women. Complementary to the Roman patriarchal wave in the early church was the male-centric cultural patterns of Palestine and the surrounding societies thereabout Greece, Rome and Palestine. There was also the influence of later cultural contents. Consequently, the cloud of patriarchal ideology – a popular culture of the time engulfed Christianity (see Parvey 1974:117–149). Like erosion, patriarchal ideology washed away Christ's equality legacy and, deposited properties of inequality in the gully of sex bifurcation. Christianity could not survive the 'contagious effect of patriarchal virus' endemic in its cultures of formation. The change found strength in pseudo ideas and stereotypical concepts against women. Clear cut gender bifurcation, denigration, defamation and discrimination had lee-way in the articles of Christian faith and traditions.

Ugly and detestable story of the female sex polar loomed large in Christian heritage. While God the father and Jesus the son depict perfection of maleness in spiritual horizon and worldview, Eve, the woman is imaged and identified as architect in the abhorrent debacle and unfortunate Eden corruption that laid foundation for the human condition of affliction and scourge. Overt illustration of the pitiable place of the woman, report how Yahweh placed a curse on Eve – "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 3:16). The primitive church inherited this contemptuous conception as prototype lens to understanding the decoy content of women.

Pauline Epistles are also replete with passages which underscore subordinate and denigrative status of women. They were sternly told to remain mute and confined to a section of the church – "for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Cor. 14:35b). In the letter to the people of Ephesus women were admonished to subject themselves to the authority of their husbands – "wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as unto the lord ... (Eph. 5:22–24). Reason for this can be found in the teaching that: "The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (I Cor. 11:13). Again, in his theological letter to Timothy, Paul reiterates that: "man is the image and glory

¹ The Orthodox Church in the context of this study is used as a term to identify the organized pioneer Christian churches and denominations – Methodism, Anglicanism, Catholicism, Presbyterianism, Baptist and Lutheran Christian groups that propagated Christianity into Nigeria. These churches pre-date the Native African churches, the African Independent churches and, the Pentecostal churches. The liberal and open approach of the Pentecostal churches contrasts those of the pioneer churches.

of God; but the woman is the glory of the man". What is more? Even in the household, Peter the successor of Christ admonished wives to "be in subjection to their own husbands" and "have chaste conversation coupled with fear" (I Pet. 3:1–2,6). The first letter of Timothy adds: "let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man but to be in silence" (I Tim. 2:11–12).

The fathers of the early church sustained the demeaning status of women. Some of the pejorative and contemptuous perception of women came from the likes of the theologian, Origen, who saw nothing in the voice of a woman in any gathering of humanity. Origen's conception is reinforced by that of Clement of Alexandria, that the thought of being a woman should be sufficient reason to be ashamed. Other church fathers like Tertullian strongly supported the pejorative and denigrating imaging of women, arguing that they are instruments of the devil. Women were yet identified as the first deserters of the divine law; as persuaders of him, because the devil lacked enough strength and courage to confront Adam. Consequently, women destroyed so easily God's image – man. Yet, it is being re-echoed over and over, that it was the woman's fault that even the son of God had to die, to redeem humanity again. Perhaps, these insipid tales about women may have been the reason why the 13th Century church father and theologian, Thomas Aquinas opined that God had made a mistake in creating the woman (see Merriam-Webster 1999:829–830; Ruether 1974; Clark 1983). These conceptions remained resilient that in about the late 16th Century skepticism engulfed the Lutheran church at Wittenberg, over what was the 'real human nature' in women. Again, many primitive Christian groups even held women responsible for all sins. The John Calvin led Protestants maintained that political equality for male and female would be absurd to divine and positive order of things in the world. Subversion of the equality content of Christ's ministry is a scenario of equality of souls, but inequality of sexes (McLaughlin 1974:213–266).

Sustained demeaning image of women developed into formidable impediments to female ordination and high level sacerdotal responsibilities. Apparently, women have made little advance in the status of clergy in the orthodox churches. While the Protestant churches are gradually admitting women into the order and cadre of priesthood in a seemingly very slow rate, the situation in the Catholic church is yet impenetrable and foreclosed for women. Yet, women command intimidating numerical strength and resource base of the churches.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE FLOURISH OF GENDER FIRMAMENT AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Dating back to the early 15th Century, women began to spotlight the imbalance in the structures of the bi-polarity of human sex, skewed in gross female disadvantage. Prime and individualistic efforts of the French woman, Courtier,

Christine de Pizan (1365-1430), and the Mexican nun, Juana, Ines de la Cruz (1651–1695) etc., were catalysts for women advancement struggles. The trend was strengthened with the 1789 Declaration of “the Right of Man and the Citizen” and the impetus of the French Revolution, to ask for equal rights for women. Build-up to this crusade was strengthened by the 1923 convention at Santiago, USA – aimed at examining ways of improving the lot of women, under the auspices of the League of Nations. Women’s struggle finally became a global issue and adopted in the founding documents of the United Nations, (see Iheanacho 2015:112–115). Gains from global consciousness and increased women awareness of their place in human existence – orchestrated by shackles of deprivation and disadvantage spurred the renewed vigour and query over their plight in the union and association with men. Women began to probe into all aspects of life, with focus skewed in feminism and gender bifurcation. This is the antecedent development that let loose the firmament of feminist theories and theology. In other words, religion was a strategic flash-point.

Lengermann and Niebrugges’ contemporary feminist theory (in Ritzer 2008:451–453) is the adopted frame. The theory focused on identifying the place of women in all situations, with the poser – why is their situation what it is? In the case of religion, women are active in the traditions, with subordinate roles and marginal leadership responsibilities. Women’s indifference or near satisfaction with second fiddle and followership roles is a form of unconscious blindness and illusionary state of acceptance. This conception influenced the direction of first wave feminism, about the late 19th Century, to a seeming gender-blindness. This was sustained in the drive for human sex complementary understanding of holistic human existence (Woodhead 2003:67). But the continuous invisibility of women in crucial aspects of life is spotted as apparent gender imbalance expropriation and violence. Totally and regrettably disappointed by the asymmetrical status in relation to men, the second wave of feminism took turn about 1960 and 1980, with a paradigm shift which thrust is aimed at understanding and answering the question of “why is all this as it is” (Lengermann and Niebrugge 2008:451). Second wave feminists argued for clear distinction between biology oriented qualities and socially constructed and learned behaviour, as deriving from man-made cultural patterns. Consequently, the drum beat of feminism at the time was women liberation from male subjugation subsumed within the structures of patriarchy (Woodhead, 2003). This is the departure point and underscoring variable for liberation and feminist theology in history.

Essentialist approach of the 1960 feminists was thereafter queried by third wave feminists that took the centre stage from the 1990s. Forthrightly, feminists of this stage contended that human sex polarity is a composition of intricate and complex network of human horizons – that the statuses and roles attached to each polar is the function of cultural configuration. The driving force and thrust of the stage rallied around this premise.

Religion is apparently identified as an incubator and harbinger of women oppression and expropriation. Feminists boldly directed attention at the exploration and attack on the cohort patriarchal structures in which religion provides the fabric of women denigration and marginalization (see Ruether 1974; Fiorenza 1984). Scholars like Rosalind Shaw (1995) Ursula King (1995), Serene Jones (1997) and June O'Connor (1995) carried the crusade into the scheme of religious studies. Identification and delineation of the symbolism of gender bias and, the implicit injustice against women pre-occupied their investigation and discourse. In sum, gender issues have become a perspective in the modern study of religion. Of course, in feminists' approach, the thrust of study is the structures of women marginalization in religion, as well as how they are subtly made to accept the unjust conditions as normal (Kunin 2003:137–148). Actually, feminists and academics of religion bias have sufficiently exposed religious studies paradox and, the provocative images which perpetuate unjust and contemptuous treatment of women. Women's image and conception in religion is therefore the Magna Carta for the endemic demeaning and deprivative experience of women.

Feminists' exposition of religion is skewed in reductionism. In one of the foremost and reasoned critique of Christianity, Ruether, in *Sexism and God-Talk*, debunked the purported generic humanity and gender neutrality, arguing that beneath all religious presentations is the male factor, rather than the truth of human experience, (Ruether 1983). With reductionist approach, feminists transcended mere critique of religion to forthright querying of the disadvantaged position of women. Women theologians emerged to repudiate the hitherto perception of the scriptural definition of women's status as sacrosanct. In the main, emergence of feminist theology is traced to the activism of feminist movements of about the 1960s, with thrust "in extra-ecclesiastical and extra-academic reality" (Vuola 2002:89). The feminist outburst provided strength and synergy between women advancement struggles and studies on the practices of religion. Rallying on the themes, resolutions and covenants of the periodic gender conferences, assemblies and programmes, women found more cohesion and solidarity in the quest for, and creation of women's voice in Christianity (May 2001; Kunin 2003).

Prime and manifest target of feminist theology and theologians, *ipso facto* neo-Pentecostal women ministry is women liberation and rehabilitation. Action plans towards achieving this feat are founded on initiation of reasoned arguments and configuration of ideological and structural changes in understanding the essence of Christianity – in the garb of natural human components and impulse, devoid of patriarchal sentimentalities. Expected outcome of the crusade is giving women deserved identity, understanding and embrace in the same spiritual and physical status with men. In the plot of feminist theology of liberation is the praxis of revisioning the configurations and, symbolic representation of the scripture and traditions skewed in gender bias, to a 'common human' and rationally justifiable conception. In other words, change for the common good of all is the driving force

of feminist theology. There is the use of revisioning strategy towards reclamation of what had been hitherto lost. In enforcing the action plan, symbols, myths, configuration of patriarchy and expropriation of women are condemned, resisted and replaced with inclusive frames of interpretation, especially through language symbolism and practical gestures of the faith. This is transformed reductionism aimed at articulating acceptable reconception of Christianity and its traditions and practices, devoid of man-made gender hegemonic cleavages and discrimination of women. It is to pave way for reality and robust spiritual economy. The praxis is comprehensive and ideological (Coll 1994:14–26).

Feminist theory is therefore the praxis and paradigm of transformed reductionism, with underlying impetus to improving the lot of women in Christianity. Beyond theoretical blue-print, women courageously match their outcry with faith based action. As a theoretical framework the breakthrough and entrant of women into church foundation and leadership is a build up and gain of feminist activism and, the exploits of feminist theologians. The alignment is reflective in the subsequent sections of the essay. Thanks to Pentecostalism for making its call for labourers in the vineyard of God liberal and accommodating for both male and female. Pentecostalist theology is adopted as effective strategy to hearing the voice of women in the pulpit and Christian leadership. It provides solvent and liberation from hegemonic alienation and inhibitions of women charisma in Christian pedagogy and sacerdotal duties.

NEO-PENTECOSTAL'S ACCOMMODATIONISM PRAXIS AND THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN MINISTRIES IN NIGERIA

Pentecostal boom in Christianity is traced back to the 20th Century, (see Achunike 2009; Anderson 2004; Hollenweger 1997). Pentecostalism is associated with the Christian practice of life modeling in the context and lived experience of the Holy Spirit outpouring in Acts of the Apostles, biblical account. Therefore, Pentecostalism can be conceived in human object, with reference to the third facet of the Trinity, along with its accompanying attributes and activities in individual Christian experience. In another prism, Pentecostalism portend the identity of a movement with special interest and devotion to the practice of Christianity, (Achunike 2009:35). As a movement, it is revivalist in its praxis. The emergence came from the process of transformation, from the Holiness Movement groups of Methodism churches. Underlying the thrust of the movements which consequently built up to Pentecostal ministry explosion is agitation for biblical liberalism and solvent to conservatism. In return, it is expected to encourage individual capacity building, excellence and profound satisfaction in respect of commitment to the mysteries of the Christian faith. Thus, liberative intents underscore neo-Pentecostal Christianity. This is the reason for criticizing the conservatism of Calvinism, in the

17th Century, after the Reformation, (Anderson 2004:25–45; Dim 2012:4). Scholars refer to Methodism as the mother of Holiness and Pentecostal Movements.

Neo-Pentecostalism practice is restoratory and driven by charismatic impulse and gender neutrality. The practice involves highly emotional characteristics, with emphasis on charismatic gifts – baptism in the Holy spirit, demonstrated in speaking in tongues, pious living, faith healing and literal words of the bible, culminating in conversion experience – the born again euphoria. It is a praxis of reformation and vigorous presentation of pristine Christian traditions in modern garb, with focus at correcting ‘erroneous conceptions’ of the ‘old church’, especially of the oppression and expropriation of women. In other words, Pentecostalism is a liberalized and all embracing vision of the Gospel, towards responding to the existential circumstances of humanity. The new praxis of rediscovering and professing the Christian message and essence through the Holy Spirit, with gifted persons as instruments, opened the floodgate for charismatic Nigerian women who have calling for Christian ministry. Therefore, neo-Pentecostalism is an embracive nomenclature for all churches, ministries, movements, theologians and Christian activism aimed at re-energizing Christianity through adaptation to the episodic outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and its directional absolutism of the pristine followers of Christ.

Pentecostalism in Nigeria took three dimensional trends of development. First was the stage promoted by African Independent Churches (AIC), of Nigerian origin – such as the Aladura prayer groups and, in collaboration with the Faith Tabernacle Church, in the USA and, The Apostolic Church, in Britain, between 1920 and 1960. Quest for neo-Pentecostal drive of the church was predicated by the AIC’s founding fathers’ disaffection and unsatisfactory spiritual disposition of the congregation over superficial and shallow gospel messages which the early missionaries pontificated. Many of the precarious conditions in African worldview and cultural patterns were glossed over in the liturgy and pedagogy of the missionaries. Evangelization and conversion of the people was skewed in the ambiance of rationalistic spirituality, which resulted in condemnation and destruction of the people’s spiritual base and fabric of values, without commensurate and profound Christian replacement, (Iheanacho 2009:104–117; Bosch 1991:122; Anderson 2001:35). A gulf was seemingly created in the transition, from traditional religious beliefs to Christian culture.

Another factor which contributed to the first phase of Pentecostalism in Nigeria was the discrimination which African clergymen experienced in the orthodox mission churches². Earliest Nigerian Christians were astonished and perplexed that the gospel could be used to practice discrimination and debase fellow humans. Antecedents and foundation of AIC underscore the people’s protest

² The term orthodox mission churches is an emphasis on the missionary approach of the pioneer denominations that planted the Christian faith in Nigeria. It was a project skewed in foreign missionary approach. Hence the churches are as well called missions.

and self-discovery in the gospel project, for the kingdom of God. Operating on the platform of independent churches, the people became liberated – having unlimited freedom to raise their religious voice, define personal identity and self-expression in African cultural milieu.

The second stage was between 1980 and 1990. Fellowship groups in higher schools and tertiary institutions boosted this stage. Educational institutions' fellowship groups and meetings brought together young people who were thirsty for deep rooted Christian exuberance, in the structure of interdenominationism. Campus Fellowships and secondary schools' Scripture Union operated in the frame of search and for, practice of the social and spiritual fervour of the scripture, without leaning to any of the mission churches flourishing in the country. Subscription to the fellowships was further boosted by the reflection which orchestrated the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war, 1966-1970. The fellowship meetings provided rallying points for reflection on the war experience, psycho-social solace and redefinition of life in the horizon of bible knowledge and holy spirit-driven Christian pedagogy. Undaunted quest to draw strength from the open stream of spiritual power outflow gave impetus to the emergence of neo-Pentecostal churches. The fellowships transformed into institutional ministries and churches, (see Ojo 2006:46; Achunike 2009:16; Anderson 2001:170). Floodgate for women entrant into the cadre of clergy and religious leadership was opened, as sex polar was no longer a condition but the function of divine 'calling and anointing' with charismatic ingenuity for the Christian enterprise. Resultantly, full gospel business men and women became the new praxis of Christianity, and assumed permanent status and existence.

The third and current stage of Pentecostalism is traced to about the 1990s. It shares common characteristics with the second stage – such as the involvement of the educated and energetic young people who practice the faith in renewed culture of the present time and society; incorporation of commercial and marketing techniques in the enterprise. This is the height of neo-Pentecostal boom. This stage is more elastic in liberality, gender blindness and accommodation of all entrants, revolutionary reformations and revisioning of deep rooted Christian spirituality. Women became empowered to founding new religious movements and ministries, even within the Protestant denominations, and later break away under their leadership. Women's specific rise to Christian Ministry leadership take different forms and experiences as discussed below.

INSPIRATION, INTROSPECTIVE CALLING AND SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Nigerian women draw inspiration from the work of prominent Evangelicals and Humanitarians, like William Wilberforce (1759–1833), Thomas Clarkson (1760–1846), who were poised to liberate people from the conservative cleavages

of Christianity, (Evans 2008:226). Again, the 16th Century split of the church and the divided Christianity in which the early missionaries heralded the faith, posited in the mind of women – a faith that is not yet exhaustive and foreclosed in understanding, interpretation and practice.

From the drum beat of feminist activists and feminist theologians in the 1960s there was an aura of strong reiteration for plausibility in effort toward promoting women's dignity, right and liberty in all aspects of life. A rebuff against discouraging efforts toward women advancement by biblical scholars and theologians made women's case strong, that feminist theology was Christian indeed (see Marty 2008:237). Nigerian women understood all these as revelatory and a wake-up call. After all, those who planted the faith in Nigeria are also those who champion the revisioning of women's status in the faith. Women overseas were flag bearers of the new Christian perception of women. What is more? Nigerian women are inspired and introspectively convinced that they can successfully assert themselves in Christian oriented management of humanity. In the scenario and ambiance of liberation, open calling, and empowerment, more and more women embraced the free enterprise of neo-Pentecostalism. Embrace and commitment to the faith was so profound that women began to emerge as charismatic leaders of neo-Pentecostal religious groups, fellowships and movements. Consequently, more women were being perceived as possessing some form of extraordinary power with spiritual garb and aura. The divine resource is explored as galvanizing instrument for organizing the group under the given woman's leadership.

There is the inspirational calling from legendary women in the Bible. Nigerian women had inspiration from some prominent women in the Bible, who in spite of conservative patriarchal structures and male priesthood hegemony still made remarkable contribution in the early Christianity. From the Old Testament (O.T.) popular inspirational and empowerment passages of Nigerian women are taken from Exodus 20:12 – that love and respect must be accorded to both the male and female and, that the young must pay attention to the teachings of both the father and the mother. Reference and inspirational empowerment is yet drawn from the resilience and dedication of women to the service of God at the gates of the tents of meeting, in spite of Jewish exclusion of women from priestly duties, on account of women's reproductive emissions, (Exodus 38:8; I Samuel 2:22). There is also the inspiration from post-exile Israel in which women featured as singers (Ezra 2:65; Nehemiah 7:67). Biblical inspirational calling is also drawn from the prophetic and military leadership prowess of Deborah (Judges 4:4). Other noteworthy women of inspiration include Miriam (Exodus 15:20); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) and Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3).

The Old Testament reference sources for inspiration and empowerment are further strengthened with extra-biblical reference to popular goddesses and priestesses of the ancient time, which commanded high patronage of both male and

female votaries, as necessary for the common good of their societies. First wave feminist scholars underscore this finding with account of revelations from the experience of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, which formed contagious culture of primitive Christianity. Educated Pentecostal Christians used their learning in history, sociology, anthropology, theology, religious studies and, philosophy to confirm the report and juxtapose the findings with the biblical writings replete with human configured structures of 'undue' patriarchal sentiments and pseudo specification of women with pejorative subservient social location. In other words, there was seeming knowledge of the human content and form in the scripture. To the Nigerian woman, the illumination of neo-Pentecostalism is a divine call and course to restore the truth, through the voice of both sexes, in theory and in practice.

Inspirational and introspective calling of Nigerian women ministers is yet sustained in the New Testament (N.T.) accounts of the bible. The most popular, animating and inspiring of the New Testament women include Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Matthew 27:56), Salome (Mk. 16:1), Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–40), the women who had come with him from Galilee (Lk. 23:55), Joana (Luke 24:10), – these were the first witnesses of the resurrection of Christ. Nigerian women conceive the activities of these New Testament women as introspective calling. They argue that it is in continuation of Christ's openness and association with women in his earthly ministry that it is rational to give them the freedom and enabling environment to serve as ministers. Anything contrary would be spiritual misnomer, aberrative, misleading and anti-Christ, they argue. Furthermore, prominence of women in administrative activities and growth of the early church is another dimension of impetus to women's inspiration, introspective calling and empowerment. The accounts of Phoebe, Aquila, Mary, Tryphosa, Julia, the Mother of Rufus, sister to Nereus etc., in the Acts of the Apostles are flash point references for Nigerian women ministers. Beyond the calling, legendary women of significance in the Bible are cited as models for emulation and regeneration of their spirituality and pious activities.

Voice of liberation and open gender leadership orchestrate women ministry in Nigeria. Understanding of the Pentecost episode is that the church is a composite of the body of Christ, *ipso facto*, the whole body of Christian believers and congregation who worship under gender free structures and configurations. This is the basic introspective understanding of the ministry of Christ and driving force of neo-Pentecostal churches. Reference to the Great commission is also understood as another clarion call for women's resource component in Christian flourish, (Matt. 28:19–20; Mk. 16:15–16; Lk. 24:46; Acts 1:8). Nigerian women ministers strengthen the argument for their invitation in the sex neutrality of the commission in sacerdotal responsibility. The gender liberal interpretation is advanced with the neo-Pentecostal women's subscription to the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2–9; Rev. 5:10; cf Exodus 19:5-6; Revelation 1:4–6).

Nigeria's women ministers are called through the praxis of religious experience and empowerment. In the profound religious experience of women they become grossly involved in neo-Pentecostal practices in the garb of 'born again' Christians, preaching the faith in a renewed vigour. In a variety of Pentecostal encounter women see vision of calling – asserting that God called them to his service – to win souls for the kingdom of God through establishment of a church or ministry. The women narrate their mysterious encounter in the aura of divine calling. The call experience becomes the background of such ministry. In praxis, the experience skew the ministry towards biblical women with cognate inspiration and characteristics. See table for the various appellative ministry names and cognate programmes of gender bias.

MINISTERIAL STRUCTURE AND MATERIAL EMPOWERMENT PRAXIS

Table 1

Women's Leadership Status and Empowerment Programmes

S/N	Neo-Pentecostal Ministry/Church	Gender Content (Leadership Status)	Special Feminist Programme
1.	Hadasaah Healing Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wife as co-pastor of the church ▪ Wife inherited leadership after death of husband. ▪ Male and Female pastors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Weekly women and orphan programmes
2.	Lifetime Trust Ministry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Women founder and head 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Weekly women and children programmes
3.	Christ Army Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Women founder and head 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monthly special revival service for women
4.	Christian Reforms Church of Nigeria (CRCN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder and leader ▪ Male and female Pastors and Evangelists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Weekly special Ministry and Pedagogy for women to recover the lost role of women in the church.
5.	Towers of Grace Prophetic Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Marriage and Family counselling
6.	Precious Stone of Diamond Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman leader (break away from the Anglican Church) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monthly mothers' prayer
7.	Power Pentecostal Church (formerly known as Christian Apostolic Church)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder ▪ Male and female pastors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Single ladies programme ▪ Monthly women's meeting and welfare watch
8.	Fountain of Life Bible Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spouses as co-pastors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ College of Women's Ministry (also on TV through women's sponsorship)
9.	Agbala Daniel Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder/Archbishop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Women empowerment seminar
10.	Redeemed Christian Church of God	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Equal opportunity for male and female pastors ▪ Founder's wife as Director of Missions and Investments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good Women Fellowship

11.	Church of Christ, the Good Shepherd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder and leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monthly widow's cry and charity
12.	Foundation Faith Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Founder's wife as helpmate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Women Mobilization and Empowerment meeting
13.	Fountain of Life Bible Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spouses as co-pastor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Singles love programme
14.	Church of God Mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman inherited leadership from husband ▪ Woman general overseer ▪ Male and female clergy under woman General Overseer (GO) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monthly women ministry/ assembly
15.	Redeemed Evangelical Mission (TREM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder and leader ▪ Men and women pastors (locally and internationally) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ International women's prayer conference (on women advancement)
16.	Carpenter's Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presiding woman pastor and leader after death of the incumbent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monthly women fellowship meeting
17.	Living Faith Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wife as sacerdotal helpmate ▪ Wife as head of women's fellowship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Family and home Ministry for women
18.	Bethel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spouses as co-founders ▪ Woman G.O. and leader after death of husband 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Christ and widows fellowship empowerment
19.	Jerusalem Church of the Lord International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder and primate (head) ▪ Male and female ministers in local and international branches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Faith healing and special ministry for barren women and children ▪ Established maternity home with church midwives
20.	Christ Embassy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman (wife) leader of London branch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Occasional programmes on women
21.	Liberty Adoration Gospel Ministry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder and head 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hannah's Faith revival
22.	Godhead Ministries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woman founder and head 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monthly virtuous women ministry and testimony
23.	Dominion City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Spouses as co-pastors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mobilization of women and widows for group prayer and retreat

Source: Field data collections

Nigerian women ministers are conscious of their status, as women operating in a culture thriving in patriarchal structures and value. Overtly and covertly, women ministers and church founders, and heads incorporate contents and fabrics of liberation into their theology and pedagogy. Liberative teachings aimed at neutralizing and dismantling oppressive structures against women are presented with relevant biblical passages and applied Christian living, to boost the psych and image of women. The praxis is in tandem with the conception of liberation theology as "the critical reflection of praxis in the light of the Word of God"

(Gutierrez 1990:67). There is direct compensatory and direct response to the lot of women in all circumstances of existence. The intent is subsumed in feminist theological mill of “cultural criticism and concerns itself with theological analysis of the myths, mechanisms, systems, and institutions which keep women down, it shares in the concerns of and expands critical theology ...” (Fiorenza 1975:616). In the main, neo-Pentecostal boom and ministry reduced the problem of women’s invisibility and expropriation in ecclesiastical sacerdotal leadership and further heralded the empowerment of the Holy Spirit at the grass root of Nigerian societies. Thus, even uneducated women are flourishing in the ministry with educated male and female attendants and assistants under them.

Confluence flash points between Liberation theology and feminist theology are explored to improve the image of women, and advance their course for better share in craving and life chances. Revisionary and reconstructive pedagogy which seemingly favour women are stressed against cultural impediments and patriarchal hegemony, inimical to women’s self-fulfillment and capacity building in the Christ economy and society at large. Feats by women are encouraged and eulogized by women ministers, as manifestations of divine perfection that lie potent and incubate in women.

Private family empowerment and stability fabrics are given quality attention by women ministers. This is predicated on the consciousness and apprehension of being identified with unstable family. Ministers’ husbands interviewed during field data collection report of cordial family life with their spouses. This empowerment factor is underscored by Woodhead (2003:56–57), that wholesome family and fecundity are major petitions and prayer points in women led ministries. The status of Christian minister is a source of liberation, as women lead families with men conceding the spiritual headship. Many of the husbands are engaged as administrative heads, responsible to the wife-minister who holds spiritual ace to ratify all activities of the household. What is more? Neo-Pentecostal ministry has reversed women’s status in the family. The minister’s status is also an empowerment factor for spiritual surveillance of marriage and the family system, both for the minister and her members.

Domestic staffs are employed to assist in handling household chores for the woman minister. Yet, members, especially, women offer free labour and service to the woman leader and spiritual head in all ramifications possible, both in ministerial and private family essentials and basic responsibilities. The minister commands the respect of both men and women far beyond the respect and prestige of male members in the church and in the society to a very large extent. This praxis seemingly restructures the family and gender stratification in the society.

Entrepreneurial ingenuity and praxis is firmly applied in neo-Pentecostal women’s ministerial structure and praxis. Although the spirit of industry also looms large in churches and ministries headed by men, the concern here is that it is a veritable new factor of women empowerment which was hitherto absent few

decades ago. Human resources are invested in Christianity, through the window of unregulated economy of Pentecostalism – leading to the holistic economic empire of God. Modern organizational behavior and business ethics principles, skewed in the fabrics of faith and applied Christian living are explored for effective management of the ministries, as spirituality and material profit substances equilibrium must be synergetically sustained, in the name of God. To maintain this balance, neo-Pentecostal women ministers assume the status of both spiritual and industrial Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of their church organization. Scores of employees are on their payroll. Of course, they hire and fire as human resource developers and managers. Women ministers are main signatories to their ministry accounts and transactions – major expenditures and capital projects are only possible with their approval.

Diversification and legal registration of investments is another praxis of empowerment. Entrepreneurial drive encourage women neo-Pentecostal ministries to invest in income yielding ventures, such as real estates development, building of profit making schools, purchase of shares, investments in supermarkets, agro industry – like poultry, snail farming, piggery, etc., around the church premises. Assets of women neo-Pentecostal ministers run into millions of dollars, and are incorporated in their names, with a few in their family members' names.

The entrepreneurial consciousness and empowerment is somewhat extended to members of the ministry, with priority given to women's interest. Loan facilities, business seminar, small and medium scale farming practices and principles etc. are taught. Many of the women ministers have also won awards and honours for their achievements through Pentecostal oriented services to humanity.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing of this essay is the exposition of women's disadvantaged position in the traditions and praxis of the early church, contrary to the sex equality content of the Christ economy and earthly ministry. The discriminatory sex bifurcation was strengthened by the surrounding patriarchal cultures of Greece, Rome and Palestine. Sustainance of the praxis in Christendom held women sway in structures and state of deprivation, from active participation in ecclesiastical leadership and sacerdotal responsibilities.

Concerted and challenging criticisms of feminists led to the awareness that women liberation and advancement was a global concern and project. The lament spotlighted religion as a major flash-point, where women denigration and expropriation looms large. The crusade to revision and reform the structures and existential understanding of the faith, against the backdrop of human essence, equity and justifiable praxis, developed a confluence for feminism ideas and feminist theology in the firmament of neo-Pentecostalism. Accommodationism

praxis of neo-Pentecostalism, driven by gender neutrality in leadership created an open ministry enterprise, in the name of God.

Nigerian women embraced the neo-Pentecostalism impetus through inspirational and introspective voices of call. Beyond the fabrics of liberation, Nigerian women ministries are spiritually empowered as heads and leaders. Their spiritual attributes and exploits, resources, paraphernalia of office and numerical strength of followership endear them to the public, making them popular with better social perception and high position in the societies' stratification configuration.

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