



A Theological Pastoral Perspective to Prayer Ministry in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines prayer ministry in Nigeria from a theological-pastoral perspective. The objectives of this study include (1) to assess prayer ministry in Nigeria; (2) to explore reasons for the boom in prayer ministries in Nigeria; (3) to assess the impact of the activities of prayer ministries in Nigeria. Existing literature has not adequately explored prayer ministry from a theological-pastoral lens. In Nigeria, prayer ministries could be seen everywhere, intending to exploit unsuspecting Nigerians. Religion has been so commercialized and commoditized to the extent that we now have "prayer consultants and contractors" whose task is to assist spiritually "weak" people to fast and pray for divine solutions to their problems. Their trademark is to see scary visions about their victims, whom they will ask to go on fasting and intense prayers to ward off the looming danger in their lives or those of their families. If the victim says they do not have the strength for such a spiritual exercise, they will offer to help out for a fee. Frequently, the so-called vision is a figment of the imagination of these fraudsters masquerading as men of God. This study adopted content analysis through a phenomenological approach. Findings reveal that several of these prayer houses engaged in prayer merchandising, collecting money and material things from their victims, with the promise of prayer for them to gain spiritual and physical freedom. Also, there are reports of immoral activities such as rape. Thus, Christian religious worship is long longer practiced in truth. However, prayer houses are no longer a place of righteousness but a place of economic and material exploitation. With this study, Nigerians are better sensitized to prevent themselves from falling victim to religious fraud, and the church must know how to deal with a menace of this nature. The article concluded that a theological-pastoral perspective of prayer ministry in Nigeria exposes how prayer houses have derailed and started extorting covertly and overtly from the unsuspecting members. The recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: Ministry; Nigeria; Pastor; prayer houses; Prayer; theology.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a highly religious state. According to Miller (1998), the reason for it is that most religions' purpose is to cultivate spirituality in their members. Christianity is one of the prominent religions in Nigeria that has won many of its adherents over the hearth due to the promises that come with accepting the religion (Kिताuse & Achunike, 2013; Ngbea & Achunike, 2014). It is the basis of the widely accepted belief that Nigerians are committed overtly and covertly to religion and spirituality. For clarity, religiosity involves religious affiliation, participation, and association. Spirituality, on the other hand, is viewed from the perspective of the individual and their relationship to, connection with, and feelings about God or some higher power, and how this connection is related to an individual's search for self and meaning (Lesser, 2000). Amid this religiosity and spirituality that exists among Nigerian Christians, there are still several challenges they face. It ranges from physical to spiritual challenges. They suffer untold hardship because hunger is the worst weapon of mass destruction (Orakpo, 2022). Thus, "most Nigerians see religion as an escape route to most of their problems, and they feel they can pour it all out to an ever-listening God" (Dachen, 2016).

Because of the many adherents that Christianity commands, Nigerian Christians tend to run away from the traditional method of approaching God through the ancestors (Okeke, Ibenwa, & Okeke, 2017).

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Received: September 07, 2022; Revised: November 23, 2022; Accepted: January 01, 2023

People who show that they have the power to command the hands of the Christian God to overcome Nigerian Christians' difficulties enjoy followership and respect. These people open prayer houses where most Christians seek a solution to their physical and spiritual problems. No street in Nigeria does not have at least one prayer house. Individuals or groups of Christians run these prayer houses. The church sometimes owns these prayer groups.

These prayer groups' owners claim that they were formed to find solutions to people's physical, economic, and spiritual challenges. Physical challenges include lack of sight, lack of hearing, lack of ability to walk, spinal cord injury, epilepsy, and other illnesses or accidents. Regarding economic challenges, Nigerians come to prayer houses in huge numbers to find solutions to problems such as poverty, a lack of food, affordable housing, and other basic necessities. It is critical to emphasize that spiritual challenges are important for people to visit prayer houses. Nigerians think that everything that bothers them has a spiritual basis. There is no doubt that Nigeria is in Africa, and Africans intentionally integrate religion into all elements of their culture. According to Mbiti (1999), Africans are notoriously religious, and to live is to be caught up in a religious drama. As a result, Nigerians feel that in a profoundly religious environment like Nigeria, most, if not all, life challenges require a spiritual approach.

The sad development is that prayer ministry in Nigeria has shifted to a new dimension. There are horrifying stories about pastors and ministers in prayer houses duping their victims out of vast sums of money. They give out fake prophecies to them, anticipating the solution to the victims' challenges in how much free will offerings they can do. Take, for instance, the case of a woman named Chioma, whose husband bought a new car for her. However, she took the car and sowed the seed to her prayer pastor because the prayer pastor said that there was a spiritual war her family had been going through (Oluwagbemi, 2016). Another case is the increasing belief among pregnant women in Nigeria that it is better to deliver in prayer houses or some faith-based centers, where a pastor will pray for them, or they deliver there (Dailypost, 2016). In addition to both cases above, a pastor whom a lady approached for prayers; instead, the prayer prophet asked her for sex in return on the ground that she needed sexual spiritual fortification (Oke, 2019).

Most research has focused attention on prosperity preaching among churches in Nigeria. Smith (2021, p. 103) opines that "preachers of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria criticize politicians' greed and government corruption, even as many church leaders amass great wealth themselves." On his part, Ejikeme (2022, p. 1) explains that the "prosperity gospel has brought in spiritual lukewarmness into the church. Materialism is promoted higher than godly living. Moral values are sacrificed in place of wealth acquisition. Carnality is widespread." Omavuebe (2021, p. 401) said that "each time the prosperity gospel is preached, the amalgamated theology articulates the American prosperity gospel element. Those are seed faith, positive confession, visualization, faith healing, and giving for hundred-fold returns. Also, elements of Nigerian Pentecostal revivalism such as exorcism, the power of God to subdue satanic forces, victory over demonic agents, and divine intervention in human affairs are made manifest". Despite extensive research on the activities of the religious houses in Nigeria, there is, however, a dearth of literature on the activities of prayer houses, which appear to have had far-reaching consequences on families and individuals, then the activities of prosperity preachers in religious houses. This study will critically sketch prayer ministries' challenge to Nigerians, especially as it affects women the most.

This study examines the theological-pastoral perspective on prayer ministry in Nigeria and its impacts on Nigerians. First, this study assesses prayer ministry in Nigeria. Second, it explores reasons for the boom in prayer ministries in Nigeria. Third, it assesses the impact of the activities of prayer ministries in Nigeria. At the end of the study, conclusions and recommendations were made.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative method through a phenomenology approach. Phenomenology aims to describe the meaning of an experience or phenomenon—both what was experienced and how it was experienced (Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, & Varpio, 2015). The data was obtained from relevant academic literature, gazettes, and periodicals. The data were analyzed through content analysis (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). In the words of Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health (2022), content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given text.

PRAYER MINISTRY IN NIGERIA

A prayer house is a physical building managed by individuals or groups of individuals, with deliverance from physical, economic, and spiritual as their vision and mission statements. Prayer ministry is intentional, focused prayer that leads to an authentic encounter with God and His truth, which transforms the mind, will, and emotions. Through prayer ministry, it is believed that prayer recipients can overcome struggles with anger, unforgiveness, fear, stress, anxiety, shame, trauma, sexual sins, and depression, as well as other undesired behaviors and thought patterns (College of Athens, 2022). The prayer ministry aims to constantly intercede with God on behalf of the church's leaders and members and to encourage and motivate church members to develop a prayer life (First Shiloh Baptist Church, 2022).

Pastors of prayer ministry set their ministry in targeted areas. Most times, prayer ministries are sited in the forest, in the desert, or somewhere where people will not disturb their continuous morning till night lamentation, singing, and shouting at God. Other prayer ministries are located on prayer mountains, especially in western Nigeria. Yaovi, Nwosu, Alamu, Odeh, and Mohammed argue (2018, p. 10),

Prayer Mountain is simply referred to as Ori-Oke in South Western Nigeria. Ori Oke, within the praxis of the Nigerian Christian lexicon, is synonymous with enacting a sacred space on a mountaintop characterized by various prayer regimes, rituals, exorcism, and religious practices aimed at eliciting the help of the divine to alleviate the existential challenges of a devotee.

Individuals run some prayer ministries. A group of individuals or the church owns others. It is believed that prayer ministry allows people to pour out their hearts to God and that God will hear them. According to Dachen (2016), Nigeria is skewed in such a way that they just have to believe in something; therefore, Nigerians seek refuge in churches and mosques to escape the economic crisis, poverty, unemployment, family issues, and other societal problems. People prefer to project their hearts' cries to God and seek his intervention in their concerns through prayer ministry.

Some of these prayer ministry has some rules and regulation governing them. In some prayer houses, people do fasting and prayers for three days there. In other prayer groups, people must leave their victims in the prayer ground and go home. Also, some prayer houses require people to pay for prayers so that God can hear fast. In fact, there are many reasons prayer houses are booming in Nigeria. Lovina (2022) narrated that:

Many people diagnosed with a disease, like cancer, will seek prayer from a pastor or a prayer house rather than medical treatment. They will stay for more than six or eight months. When the situation becomes untenable, they will return to the teaching hospital, expecting the doctors and nurses to perform miracles that will not occur. They will label the teaching hospital a death trap. Meanwhile, investigations have discovered that those who visit some healing homes pay for

services because they are always forced to pay some cash and buy enormous goods for prayers, implying that healing in such facilities is not free.

Unfortunately, the good motives behind the formation of prayer ministry have been thwarted by the current bad developments. Some unemployed graduates and school drop-out have become Pastors and Evangelists overnight in their bid to extort money from their unsuspecting members and live big (Okafor, 2008). There are narratives about prayer houses being used for sexual practices. Prayer clergy was busy impregnating their wives and daughters. For rituals, prayer clergy used newly born girls and women's children. The 'pastor,' apparently unfazed by his exploits' indignity, had declared proudly, "A lady must be naked for my prayers to affect her, for her problems to be solved" (Macaulay, 2018). Also, prayer clergy have prophesied fake prophecies to their members and went as far as hypnotizing their victims. First, their fake prophecy has brought instability in most families. Second, they hypnotized victims to bring all the money in their accounts to the prayer clergy person. In this case, the woman uses all the money to feed the child to sow in the prayer house. In fact, some women also use their daughters to sow seeds to the man of God. Women, especially, are easily maneuvered by these fake prayer coordinators. In fact, some women are known to be going to these prayer houses with their daughters and sons. Unfortunately, there are permutations in some of these prayer ministries that use enchantments in putting evil spirits and also taking the glory of children and women. However, rarely, men are also manipulated.

Another challenging perspective is the activities of prayer houses concerning their advice for pregnant women to come to their prayer houses instead of going to antenatal. They lead pregnant women to believe they can solve their difficulties and have a safe delivery in the prayer house. Medical experts in Nigeria have decried the increasing cases of pregnant women patronizing prayer houses and faith-based centers for the essence of deliveries (Dailypost, 2016). Unfortunately, the cry of medical experts has fallen on deaf ears.

Several thoughts have been expressed regarding the ordinances that have befallen Nigeria's praying ministry. Churches are springing up in every nook and cranny of the country, many of which are demonic and satanic in nature. Their leaders are immoral, corrupt, and materialistic. As a result, Christian religious worship is no longer conducted in its true form: truthfully and spiritually. As noted by the Catholic Bishop of Uyo in Obiora (1999, p. xiii),

False teachers breed in such hibernations (churches). They abound everywhere. Today, many communities find self-made pastors, bishops, archbishops, and various hierarchies of prelates. Seers, visionaries, and healers are as present among us as the air we breathe. A false gospel is sold in virtually every classroom, mechanics workshop, taxicab, bus, train, Lorries, etc. The number of registered but fake churches whose proprietors brew nothing but poisonous ideologies to imprison the unwary whom they profess to liberate and save (p. xiii). It is slightly greater than the number of registered but fake churches whose proprietors brew nothing but poisonous teachings to enslave the unsuspecting people they promise to liberate and save.

As previously stated, prayer house managers place a higher value on demon possession, deliverance, miracles, and the gospel of prosperity. This exaggerated claim poses a significant threat to citizens. The spread of prayer houses is a cankerworm that eats away at the country's fabric. So-called preachers have dislocated many people's reasoning caps. Some people prefer to move from one prayer house to another from Monday to Sunday instead of going to work or taking care of their business. They are easily duped into believing that God is their provider and that wealth comes from Him. Based on this study, it is one way to make people mentally lethargic, as opposed to the quality of their hard work and

entrepreneurial spirit of Nigerians. Some people are no longer willing to accept suffering and adversity as a part of life. Suffering in any form is viewed as the work of the adversaries. Many families today have been sown with discord by so-called "ministers of God." Their over-emphasis on demon possession and evil spirits led them to blame evil for everything that went wrong. They (the so-called pastors) would always and easily state that the father, mother, brother, sister, father-in-law, or mother-in-law is to blame when someone's business is not doing well or when a lady is experiencing difficulties during pregnancy. This mindset has extinguished the communal spirit that underpins human existence. The point is that the proliferation of prayer houses in Nigeria has significantly impacted the human condition.

People believe that establishing prayer houses is a faster way to get money. Religion has been so commercialized and commoditized that we now have "prayer consultants and contractors" whose task is to assist spiritually "weak" people to fast and pray for divine solutions to their problems. Their trademark is to see scary visions about their victims, whom they will ask to go on fasting and intense prayers to ward off the looming danger in their lives or those of their families. If the victim says they do not have the strength for such a spiritual exercise, they will offer to help out for a fee. Often, the so-called vision is a figment of the imagination of these fraudsters masquerading as men of God. Ojo (2019) explains this:

Religion has been so commercialized and commoditized to the extent that we now have "prayer consultants and contractors" whose task is to assist spiritually "weak" people to fast and pray for divine solutions to their problems. Their trademark is to see scary visions about their victims, whom they will ask to go on fasting and intense prayers to ward off the looming danger in their lives or those of their families. If the victim says they do not have the strength for such a spiritual exercise, they will offer to help out for a fee. Frequently, the so-called vision is a figment of the imagination of these fraudsters masquerading as men of God.

Instead of attempting to restore his business, a person whose business is failing would easily convert his shop into a prayer house. Everything now revolves around prayer, with little emphasis on hard labor and discipline. This mindset can be quite harmful, and according to Ikeazota (2013, p. 210),

Economic activities have been stalled by those who claim that the economy is worldly. What matters is preaching the gospel. Many unguarded individuals have been deceived into accepting that hard work is not necessary for wealth. As a result, many non-disabled individuals who should have been gainfully employed spend time praying in the church in total abandonment of the development of the economy.

In order to woo their adherents and admirers, prayer house managers have used deception in the name of religion. Some citizens' mental health has been harmed due to the variety and methods of operation of prayer houses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. The causes of the boom in prayer ministry in Nigeria

There are many causes for the increasing number of prayer ministries in Nigeria. However, some of them are:

Physical Challenges: People go to prayer houses to find solutions to problems in this life. The quest to find a solution for every problem in life has increased the number of prayer groups of various inclinations in the church, especially in southern Nigeria, the most Christians are. Hence, most Christian faithful are ready to travel miles, climb mountains, and visit whatever river or lake provided they are assured that the solution to their problem is there (Okafor, 2008). Sometimes it may be barrenness, low

sperm count, physical ailment, and other challenges that make people seek the help of prayer houses. Logically, when one is in trouble, he seeks ways of solving the trouble within the shortest possible time, and prayer houses promise quick answers within the shortest possible time. It is the reason for the high patronage they enjoy.

Economic and Spiritual Challenges: First, Nigerians run to prayer houses for economic reasons when people who took a loan or borrowed money start chasing them. Others also go to prayer houses when they cannot pay house rent or school fees for their children and wards, are unable to get admission, or are unemployed or underemployed. Prayer houses promise solutions to these problems. Rap (2016) lamented that the modern-day shiny suit-wearing pastors with punk hair have never failed to capitalize on the people's predicaments to extort them of their hard-earned money and properties. Second, any suspicion of spiritual problems pushes Nigerians to prayer houses. Thus spiritual struggles make Nigerians easy prey to prayer houses. Even people with no certificates and skills will say they have no job to do or were sacked from their job because of the witch in their village or bad luck at their father's house. The pastors of these prayer ministries and houses deceive such persons that witches, wizards, or other spiritual forces cause their problems. It is the psychological manipulation of the gullible ones.

Too much emphasis on the impact of prayer houses has made Nigerians believe every problem is spiritual and needs a spiritual solution.

People also go to prayer houses when they believe their problems result from ancestral powers. According to Cole and Middleton (2001), there are conceptualizations of ancestral authority: enabling and enslaving. Much emphasis on the African worldviews comes about in anthropomorphism, ancestral veneration, mystic powers, ritualism, and totems (Gumo, Gisege, Raballah, & Ouma, 2012). All these variables can be viewed as systemic ancestral powers that work in frameworks. Most Nigerians link their physical and economic challenges to a spiritual curse. They believe that their enemies are chasing them or that spiritual arrows are being used to block good things from coming to them.

2. Impacts of Prayer Ministry

The impact of prayer ministry in Nigeria cannot be underestimated. They include (but are not limited to):

Rape: These prayer ministers have raped some women and their daughters. Unfortunately, these prayer ministers, under cover of conducting special prayers, rape women and girls. For instance, the 48-year-old pastor, Michael Abiodun, raped and impregnated a 12-year-old girl in Oluwo, OwodeEgba, in the Obafemi Owode Local Government Area of Ogun State. According to Oludare (2022), the prayer minister, a father of three, asked the victim's mother to send her to him for special prayers. However, when she arrived, the pastor forced her into a room within the church. He had carnal knowledge of her, resulting in a pregnancy.

Divorce and Death: Many families have been destroyed because of the prophecies of these prayer ministries. The woman or the man visits a prayer house and is told that the spouse is a witch and the one stopping the progress. It leads to chaos in the home. In this vein, Odey (Odey, 2022) lamented that "it is a great pain that the church and its ministers, who are supposed to be agents and apostles of sustainability of the family. They, which the Catholic Pontiff, St. Pope John Paul described as 'the domestic church' are the precursors and catalysts of broken marriages and families today". Also, there have been cases where the spouse uses the family property to sow seeds in the ministry. It causes commotion in the family, eventually leading to divorce among the couple. Some women love their prayer ministers more than

their husbands. Some even kill their wives, husbands, children, mothers, or fathers. Some of these prayer ministries' pastors tell false prophecies to make cheap gains.

Health Complication: There are also cases where prayer ministry pastors advise their adherents not to take medication. This advice has led to an increase in maternal and child mortality and morbidity. Also, expectant mothers are known to have developed diseases such as vesicovaginal fistula (VVF), excessive bleeding, and death (DailyPost, 2016). Some people may, out of ignorance, believe that their ailments can be cured by applying holy water, anointing oil, or sleeping in prayer houses for cleansing. However, sometimes when their case is irredeemable, they will go to the hospital, which in most cases may be too late (Lovina, 2022).

Poverty: Prayer ministries are known to extort money from victims to the extent of having the victims' entire money in the account of the person that founded the prayer ministry. While many Nigerians struggle from poverty and want, prayer leaders and men of God who have taken a public vow of poverty enjoy at least adequate material well-being. They frequently have luxurious residences, cars, and top technology like phones, computers, and so on (Kukah, 2017). They tell them that the car they are using is demonic and that they should bring it to the prayer ministry to sow to God so that God might chase away the enemies' arrows from their victims. Prayers ministries leaders have turned their elevated platforms into gimmick platforms for personal gains. In contrast, gullible impoverished citizens are shortchanged by the system, dropping their hard-earned money in exchange for the miracle (Olatunde, 2016).

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The study discovered that prayer houses are now avenues for the rape of women and girls. This fact shows that there is not enough prosecution of those caught in the act by the government. It is due to a lack of government political will to recruit specialists and implement the necessary infrastructure. According to Ogunwale, Oshiname, & Ajagunna (2019), the lack of forensic evidence may adversely affect the successful prosecution of rap perpetrators in Nigeria, while the lack of psychotherapy may hinder the effective psycho-social rehabilitation of survivors of rape. In addition, the Nigeria Police is limited by a lack of specialized training and capabilities. We require particular training for situations like these, which is why some take this matter with levity (Olufunke, 2018, p. 145). Shedding more light, Akinkahunsi (2019) believes that Nigeria's laws are not helping at all and most perpetrators go unpunished with the punishment for rape as either one year's imprisonment or an option of N2,000 fine. N 2000 naira is below 3 dollars.

It also shows that parents are silent whenever their girl child is purportedly raped by some leaders of these prayer groups. These families' silence has sustained this gender-based violence. Many cases are never reported because parents want to save the honor of their daughters and protect the family from embarrassment (Onyejekwe, 2008, p. 22). Also, the "fear of not being believed, or even being blamed for being raped, is creating a dangerous culture of silence that prevents survivors from seeking justice" (Amnesty International, 2021).

Also, it shows that the church is not doing enough to monitor its members' activities. Most of these prayer houses are owned by members of various churches. Some prayer houses pay their alpha church money every month or week. For instance, the Primate of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), the Most Rev. Henry Ndukuba formed the Church of Nigeria Prayer School (CONPRAS) at the formal opening of the Church of Nigeria Leadership Retreat and Pilot Prayer School program at Rehoboth Institute of Missiology (RIM) Ngwo, Enugu North Diocese, Enugu State (Owoeye, 2021). It shows that the

prayer ministry is financially committed to the mother church. Another prayer group, the Precious Stone Society, was founded as a spiritual support for those suffering from health, physical, and spiritual challenges, emphasizing prayer and a rejection of western medicine. They understand that human susceptibility to disease represents a complex set of issues, including spiritual vulnerability and the malevolent influence of others (i.e., witchcraft)(Harvard Divinity School, 2022).

The study also shows that hospital counselors do not give maximum attention to women who come for antenatal. For a pregnant woman to go to prayer houses to give birth instead of a health unit shows that she greatly lost faith in the services of health institutions. It is in line with Adedokun (2019) assertion that the fewer the number of the antenatal clinic a woman attends, the more her likelihood of not delivering in the health facility. In fact, at the Federal Medical Centre in Ebutte Metta Lagos, pregnant women who came for antenatal were turned away, which according to the hospital, is because it has a policy that institutionalizes only 20 women for the antenatal clinic (Premium Times, 2014).

Policymakers also have failed to enact policies that should be able to take care of poor women who have little or no money to pay for their antenatal checks. Thus, they go to prayer houses which they feel is cheaper. Nigerian women are not receiving special treatment from the government due to the high cost of maternal care. The delivery fee is N10,500, and antenatal care costs N20,000. Also, in a situation where a woman delivers through a caesarian section, it costs N45, 000 or more, depending on the patient's condition (Adunwoke, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Prayer ministry in Nigeria is engulfed in a materialistic mentality seen in their psychological manipulation of Nigerians. Due to physical, spiritual, and economic challenges Nigerian in mass find their way into prayer houses. A theological-pastoral perspective of prayer ministry in Nigeria reveals that most have derailed and extorted covertly and overtly from the unsuspecting members. The activities of these prayer ministries spread along the length and breadth of Nigeria have resulted in the rape of girls and women, increased divorce cases among Christians, and increased marital instability. Also, it has led to increased maternal and child mortality and morbidity. The following suggestions could help in reducing the increasing influence of fake prayer ministries in Nigeria (1) It is high time that Christians in Nigeria begin to devise ways of approaching God themselves rather than through third parties (2) There is also the need for the government of Nigeria, to begin the registration of prayer houses and also monitor the reports that come out of the various ministries (3) Churches should also monitor the prayer houses opened by some of their members so that anytime there are strange developments they can call them to order (4)There is a need for the prosecution of those who are caught raping girls and women in their prayer houses. Also, all the property these prayer houses got from their victims should be taken away and returned. There is a need to prosecute those owners of prayer houses who have been using their prayer houses for cheap gains and benefits. Future research could examine the psychological impact of those rapes in prayer houses. Also, how these prayer house ministries have been able to evade government watch could form a solid base in the study of prayer ministries in Nigeria.

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