

**CHARACTERISTICS OF A PLATEAU CHURCH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO
GROWTH IN AFRICA: THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

S. A. Akpoigbe, Ph. D
Baptist Theological Seminary
Eku Delta State, Nigeria
E-mail: stevenakpoigbe@yahoo.com

S. Ebomhen
Pastor, First Baptist Church
Agbarho-Delta State, Nigeria
E-mail: revibomhen@yahoo.com

Abstract

It has been observed by church growth experts that for more than three decades now the church globally is experiencing general decline, especially in African. This decline for some is both spiritually and numerically. For others, it is increasing numerically without a corresponding spiritual increase. The third grouping simply concluded that both spiritual and numerical the church is in a state of plateauing. Judging from the above hypotheses, the writer intends to investigate into the above positions through scholarly research to ascertain the current position of the state of spiritual and numerical growth of the church in Africa. On this note, the researcher has used other scholarly works couple with interview with seasoned church planters and church growth experts. The research has demonstrated that the numerical church growth in Africa is not commensurate to spiritual growth as a result of other variables. The paper among other things recommends that emphasis should be shifted from biological conversion, adequate theological education for pastors and manageable size of congregation should be encouraged for effective ministry.

Key Words: Plateau Church, Growth, Africa, Theological, Pastoral Ministry

Introduction

General opinion seems to suggest that the post modern church is in a state of continuous decline. This presupposition may have risen from the rate of opposition from rivalry camps such as Asian, Islamic religions, couple with post modern global phenomenon. The church in Africa seems to be growing in numbers but it is not certain whether the latter growth is corresponding with spiritual growth. Therefore, when talking about growth from ecclesiastical point of view, qualitative and quantitative dimensions must be put into consideration in order to show case the level of equilibrium between the two factors under investigation. This will enable the researcher to determine growth index between spiritual and numerical strength.

Clarification of Terminologies

A church is said to be plateau when it has gotten to a maturity stage. Wagner (1971) defines maturity church as the one who lives for others, takes care of herself and then is relevant to its cultural situation. Contrary to the general assumption that maturity stage of a church is an indication for spiritual pursuit and expansion, some church growth experts are of the view that it is a sign of decline especially numerical growth. Maturity stage also means the length of years a local church has been in existence. Therefore, maturity in Christendom does not necessarily bring spiritual growth, but may be seen as plateau stage. When a church is plateau, she has gotten to her peak, height or zenith. The suggested year bracket for a church to plateau is between ten to fifteen years and there after if nothing is done to sustain growth she may be prone to a decline.

Related to the plateau church are the dimensions for church growth. There are two basic dimensions to church growth which include quantitative and qualitative church growth. By quantitative it means increase in number of followership in the congregation which is also regarded as numerical church growth. While in the case of qualitative church growth, it means the quality of Christians' commitment to Christ and to His Church.

While the latter is interested on spiritual growth of the church, the former is concerned with the numerical increase in the congregation. Although, the two dimensions of church growth above have their merits and demerits, yet both are necessary for a healthy growth of the church. The state of numerical and spiritual growth responses to the assumed plateau state of the church in Africa is the contention this paper has to grapple with. If it is true that Christianity in Africa is generally on the decline, what are the measuring perimeter to determine the level of responses by the two dimensional growth especially spiritual dimension which is not subject to empirical verification. This will lead to the presentation of the types of church growth. Hocking (1976) among other scholars is our major resource person on types of church growth.

Types of Church Growth

Biological Type of Church Growth

This is a growth that concern itself within the local church. It is a growth in which family members' children that are given birth to inside the church become Christians. In this case, there is nothing or little outreach to the lost. This may also lead to spiritual growth but there is the possibility of natural death if the local church continues to relay on biological growth. Zoghbi (1980) regards biological church growth as a "Second Hand Religion". He further elucidates that:

Hereditary faith is often blindly defended by its adherents, even when they don't live up to it. But for many people it's not really appreciated; they won't struggle to propagate it or sacrifice for it. It is easily gained and easily lost. Like money

your parents spent on your upbringing or left you in their will, it's not valued as highly as the money you have worked hard for (p.78).

The assertion above is the true position of the post modern Christianity. It is the kind of Christian experience that does not last because it is a second hand Christianity which has no personal existential touch. It can die naturally. Therefore, biological Christianity kills but existential Christianity last through eternity. Zodhiates further submits that:

Most "Christians," sadly enough, are Christians by accident of birth, in name only, instead of by choice. This is why Christianity today is a decadent religion in many circles...An imposed Christianity does more harm than good. A name change without a transformation of inner man cannot result in outward Christian conduct. Therefore, what the society needs more than anything else is a man who knows God experientially, not simply from what he has learned from others, he concluded.

Conversion Church Growth

This is the type of church growth whereby conversion is made from the unreached communities or from families that have no trace of Christianity previously. It was like the biblical account of the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter two whereby three thousand souls got converted. Church growth experts have generally observed that conversion church growth is the best compare to biological growth. Reasons given by them include:

That Christian converts from typical pagan homes are more zealous for the things of the Lord than those born in the church. Secondly, they also seem to be more committed to evangelistic work and the over all progress of the church than they that were born into it. Thirdly, they are more receptive to the gospel, grow more spiritually, passionately and learn faster compare to biological Christian counterparts. The newly founded churches have the propensity of rapid growth because they have the above characteristics which are lacking by churches that are already plateau.

Convenient Church Growth

This is the type of church growth whereby church members are more interested on what their churches will do for them rather than what they can do for the church in order to promote growth. This is against President Abraham Lincoln's unforgettable slogan that says "Americans should think of what they can do for America and not what America will do for them". Church growth experts refer this attitude to church growth as "rice and stew Christianity" which can lead to extreme social gospel without reference to spirituality.

Historical origin of social Gospel came from a man called Walter Rauschenbusch. He was popularly known as the "Father of the Social Gospel". He became aware of the social and economic problems of laboring people and their families. The distressed by the harsh treatment of laborers by industry, insanitary health conditions, child labor and other problems of the

emerging industrial society made him to be convinced that the message of Jesus is applicable to society as well as the individuals. With others likeminded he formed the brotherhood of the kingdom in 1892 to apply the gospel to modern needs. This vision itself is good for the advancement of the gospel. However, it has been abused in some Christian quarters by regarding social ministry of the church as the ultimate.

Homogenous Church Growth

Hardin (1978) defines homogeneous church planting as a church in which God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, in contact with people of a particular cultural setting, give rise to a Christian body that is outwardly and uniquely molded by that culture over a fixed framework of fundamental scriptural doctrine. This is the type of church growth whereby a church that is planted in a community is sandwiched with one ethnicity, culture and language. It is a church that has only one major ethnic presence. This type of church growth, though the worshippers enjoy the use of native language without an interpreter, coupled with the use of proverbs and local idiomatic expressions, yet the possibility of numerical expansion is limited.

While we acknowledged this type of church growth because of its peculiar local environment and limitations, caution must be taken to avoid deliberate establishment of churches from the perspective of racial discrimination or ethnocentrism. In the generation of racism, Euro-America-church growth expert (McGavran, Donald Anderson) advocated that the congregation of White race should be separated from that of the Blacks as antidote to the problem of racial discrimination. Reacting to McGavran submission Obaje (1996) declares that to plant churches on the basis of ethnicity in itself is demonic. He further explained that the ticket to heaven is neither tie to the color of our skin nor race but by simply believing on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Heterogeneous Church Growth

This is the type of church growth whereby a church that is planted in a community is sandwiched with diverse ethnic grouping, where different occupations and skills are present. It can also be regarded as a metropolitan church setting whereby several professionals converged for greener pastures. These self employed professionals and civil servants find their way into the church where their various skills, talents and wealth are used to grow the church. These are the reasons while metropolitan churches grow faster than homogeneous church setting.

Faircloth (1991) a church planter expert has counsel that churches should be planted beginning from the urban to the rural and not the other way round. His reasons were that the urban churches are easily developed and they have the ability to take care of the rural churches. Secondly, if a church planter begins from the village, it will be difficult to sustain and the possibility of coming into the urban area in the near future may be elusive. Some of the White Missionaries were guilty of this in their missionary exploits to Africa in the nineteenth century.

Expansion Church Growth

This is the type of church growth in which the church increases internally by reaching out to the lost. It is characterized by evangelism. She also increases numerically and added membership as more converts join the church as well as transfer of membership from other churches. Closely related is extension church growth.

Extension Church Growth

This is a type of church growth with a deliberate attempt to start a new mission or preaching point by reaching out to the lost. This type of church planting and growth is as a result of the necessity for proximity especially where the place of location is too far from the mother church. This is one of the major strategies the Redeem Christian Church of God in Nigeria is using to spread her denomination. A church that is involved in extension growth can also be involved in internal and expansion growth. In this case, members from such distance places form the initial membership of such extension branch along with some members deliberately sent by the mother church. When the mission station has fully developed, the sent members may be withdrawn back to the mother church for another assignment.

Bridging Church Growth

This is the type of church growth that is designed for reaching out to other areas or another kind of people and culture different from the kind of the local church (Mother Church). This kind of church growth is also related to extension growth but it is not limited to the locality of the mother church. It is regarded as cross-cultural church planting and growth.

Crisis Church Growth

This is a situation whereby a church is given birth to as a result of crisis or persecution. The early Church in Jerusalem left for the Gentile worlds because of persecution and as a result they formed new churches wherever they went.

Discipleship Church Growth

This is a type of church growth with a deliberate attempt to form discipleship training classes for all categories of church officers and non officers. By so doing, all members of the church become potential leaders. This also makes the church not to lack leadership at any given period. Thirdly, apart from the benefit of raising matured members, the financial commitment and responsibility of every member will be understood by all without much emphasis by the senior pastor. Fourthly, discipleship church growth strategy can easily give birth to other churches with already made pastors without much stress. Fifthly, the latter in return will also easily produce another congregation of his kind and by so doing, matured Christians are raised. Chukueku (2013) in his work collaborates the above kinds of church growth extensively.

Effective Participatory and Mentorship Church Growth

Participatory ministry church leads to rapid growth, skill development, talent discovery and spiritual manifestation. It also creates the sense of belonging and sustained ministry. A church that has no regard for participatory membership, such a church ministry will die gradually. Participation makes membership feel a sense of belonging and commitment to Christ through the church. Mentorship on the other hand, keeps ministry a life perpetually, but non recognition or lack of encouragement for mentorship ministry in a local congregation kills ministry ultimately.

A growing church should not practice life church officers but rather church offices are tenured and rotational. By so doing, members are involved in church life in several ways without being redundant or being novice. The continuity of tomorrow's church with its undiluted doctrines depends on the ability of mentors of today mentoring her future leaders. This is the sole reason while effective participation and mentoring ministry of the church is very important. The following are biblical sample for participatory and mentorship in growing a church for continuity (Exodus 17:10-16, 18: 21-23; Deuteronomy 34: 9, ii Kings 2:1ff, Matthew 28: 16ff).

Reasons Why Churches do Plateau and Consequently Decline

The reasons why churches do plateau can also be seen as characteristics of a plateau church. McIntosh (2003) observes that the first fifteen to twenty years of a church life cycle are typically its dynamic ones. For other church growth experts put it between ten to fifteen years span. During this time according to him, vision and understanding of the church's purpose are extremely clear. Morale is high and this helps to draw people into participation and sacrificial giving. There is also the feeling of mutual dependency and all members are willing to serve. As membership increases, the need for involvement in new ministries at a higher level in neighbor communities is conceived.

Without realizing what is taking place, a church gradually begins to find itself on a ministry plateau. After the period of the above years' effective ministry, the church discovers that the original vision and mission that propelled the church forward have been forgotten. Some members will begin to withdraw from devotion to the church by assuming that others will do the work. The plateauing of a church is always characterized by the increase of bureaucracy, unwillingness to change, emphasis on maintenance of existing structures, change of focus and failure to hand off ministry, deviation from sound doctrine, lack of motivation for outreach and internal satisfaction and an overgrown small church style. The paper will elucidate on the listed symptoms on a plateau church.

Bureaucratic in Nature

One of the sign of a plateau church is a strict adherence to due process before anything is done. It is constitutionalized and bureaucratic in nature because nothing is done without

following lay down procedures. That is to say decisions have to be passed through the appropriate quarters for approval before implementations. The bottle neck processes do take time before the final execution. Consequently, it may sometime lead to unnecessary delay which can create another problem out of the original one. This process may lead to frustration and discouragement to church members especially when it involves social action for someone in dire financial need from the church. McIntosh (2003) describes the above system as a church:

With a bureaucratic structure that becomes a maze of maintenance with multiple committees that have lose their sense of purpose and direction but continue to fight for relevance. However, energy may have been exhausted in order to keep the system intact without asking how effective the she has served the congregation (p. 142).

Unwillingness to Change

To decide not to change in itself is a change because philosophers always believe that nothing is constant. A church at plateau stage is always afraid of change because she feels she has arrived. She has a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction; therefore there is no need to seek for other methods for growth. The sense of satisfaction itself is the beginning of the experiencing a plateau church. She will always see new methods of growing a church as either a threat or foreign doctrine to the church. Fear of taking risk is one of the major characteristics to a plateau church, hence she enjoy being stagnate without exploiting modern ways of growing a church. At best, according to them modern churches who desire change are fanatics. If there is need for plateau church to change, others would have accomplished much with that same vision before realizing the need for a change.

Emphasis on Maintenance of Existing Structures

Church growth experts have observed that churches that are on the decline in most cases only look inward. They are concerned with the maintenance of their existing structures. If they are not building new churches, they will be doing expansion of the church or renovation of it. They are always interested in inward change within the physical structures of the church without corresponding to spiritual renovations. These changes include replacement of the woody pulpits to glass, woody pulls to plastic chairs, from plastic chairs with arms to armless ones, from ceiling fans to air-conditions, from wood windows to modern glass windows and from rug to tiles. The list of physical renovations is endless while there is no evidence to show for it as it affects outsiders. Therefore, a plateau church is egocentric in nature.

Change of Focus and Failure to hand off Ministry

Easum (2015) gave two reasons why so many churches plateau. According to him over the years had noticed that a good number of churches grow for two or three years, plateau, and then decline. It is not unusual for a church to grow to 150-200 over a three-year period and

then go nowhere. In his experience, there had been two causes of this failure to continue to grow.

Firstly, the pastor changes his or her focus from getting butts in seats to taking care of the membership, tinkering with organization, and formalizing leadership. This shift seems to be due to a couple of things: one, the laity begin to complain about not being taken care of; and two, it is easier to work with participants than to continue bringing butts into the seats. For him “not until the church reaches 500 in worship, the pastor's main focus should be on getting butts in the seats”. Secondly, as the church grows, the pastor fails to hand off ministry as soon as possible. Often the pastor enjoys ministry so much that he or she amasses the good ministry and robs the laity of the joy of serving. The more the pastor continues to do so, the more self-centered the laity become and the cycle continues to deepen.

What Easum is trying to express here is a description of a church pastor whose leadership style is rigid and too formal. He behaves like an actor while the congregation is spectators. He does not believe using untrained laity in the leadership positions. Consequently, ministry has no meaning outside himself while the congregation remained redundant. This lack of participating ministry by the laity in a long run, may not only lead to church plateau, but to a state of decline whereby members who are willing to work for God may relocate to where their services are needed.

Deviation from Sound Doctrine

In the 1600s, hyper Calvinistic theology stood as a hindrance to the advancement of the gospel, because the church then believed that God will save the elect without evangelizing them. This theology prevailed in the church for a very long time until in the 1800s when John Wesley “Great Awakenings” coupled with William Carey’s missionary breakthrough among the Particular Baptists before the barrier was removed. Currently in South Africa, the Church is facing a decline because of heretical teachings.

Molan (2015) elucidates on a recent spiritual decline in Reformed Churches in South Africa as a result of the denial of the basic fundamental beliefs of the Church doctrine. The five fundamental beliefs include: premillennial eschatology, sanctification as a second work of grace, salvation through regeneration, the inerrancy of scriptures as God’s word and the Deity of Jesus Christ. These five fundamentals are being watered down by liberal theologians and their followers. While some denominations are at their early stages, others have gotten to advance stage of decline.

This development has given birth to new religious movement mostly associated with young people coupled with Liberal Christian congregations. While the New Religious Movements are growing numerically without a corresponding spirituality to show for it, their parent churches remain in the state of perpetual numerical plateauing and declining.

Lack of Motivation for Outreach and Internal Satisfaction

Plateau churches do not have interest for reaching out for the unreached. They are unlike the newly established churches that have strong desire for the unsaved souls. They are always satisfied with the size of the congregation and the finances of the church. The notion is always characterize with a sense of "we have arrived slogan." They perceive younger generation churches that have passion for souls as member snatchers and much room churches. Also, they see church expansion as a way of reducing the size of the mother church membership without realizing the philosophy behind church growth. The secret of church growth is by expansion because, when the size of the congregation is too large, it will result to a state of plateau. This will lead us to the next stage of a plateau church.

An Overgrown Small Church Style

According to Lynch (2015) plateau churches are faced with either too small or over large church size. These churches are often called "Medium-sized" churches and have between ninety and one hundred and sixty in average attendance. They are called "plateau" because they are in many ways stuck between being small membership and large membership churches.

Furthermore, plateau churches are uncertain of their identity, because they are caught between the relationship focus of the small church and the activity focus of the larger church. Their pastor is often busy being a repairperson or a gardener. The pastor is always pulling weeds, because they grow as soon as the back is turned. There is always something to fix whether it be relationships or hardware. There are always many small fires to be put out. A Plateau Church is often beyond the work of one pastor, but there are rarely the funds for additional professional staff. Burn-out is common among clergy and lay leaders for they are afraid to walk away for a few minutes because some other fire will crop up to be put out! The lay people and leaders in these congregations need to learn how to throw water on fires instead of gasoline.

Another characteristic of the Plateau Church is the development of small groups. This is one of the areas that will help the church move toward an activity focus like the medium church. Some members want to be nurtured through small groups, while others will want to be nurtured by personal pastoral care. Some want both! These churches often vacillate between the personal pastoral care and the activity focus.

They will move upward or downward (neither is good nor bad) on the type of church they are based on the focus (relationship or activity) of the day. They have a common problem that has to do with a growth barrier. They grow, hit the barrier and fall back again and again. They become larger than one person can handle for pastoral care and soon someone feels "not cared for" and average attendance drops back to a comfortable place for one-person-pastoral

care. This will happen repeatedly over a period of years. People are aware of it but usually can not explain it.

The Measuring Index for the two Dimensions of Church Growth in Africa

The key issues in this paper is on how to measure quantitative and qualitative church growth in Africa Christianity and how it affects the level of plateau and consequent state of declining. Are there instruments to determine or measure numerical and quality stages of the church in Africa in order to know where she stands? This research will use some variables and scholars opinion on the above vital question.

Numerically, evidences are bound that the church in Africa is growing geometrical because currently, research has revealed that while Christianity is weaning in the Euro-American societies, it is on the increase in Asia and Africa. It has been observed that numerical growth is not necessarily the most important measure of church growth, and yet McGavran (1980) elevated it to the position where it became the test of whether a church is growing or not. The reasons why churches in the latter continent are on the increase include the following:

Population Explosion

Crawford (2015) information on the net December 23, 2011 reveals that the number of Christians in Africa, Asia and the Americas are on the rise, while Christianity is declining in Europe, according to a new survey. A U.S.-based Pew Forum reports that the number of Christians in the world is currently 2.18 billion, which is one third of the world's population. This number represents a rise from the 1910 Christian population, when the world has 600 million Christians. Back then, 66.3 percent of the world's Christians were Europeans, according to reports. That number, however, has dropped to 25.9 percent. Sub-Saharan Africa's Christian population is up from 1.4 percent in 1910 to 23.6 percent. Christians in the Americas make up 36.8 percent of the population, up from the 1910 figure 27.1 percent, while Asian Christians are up to 13.1 percent. They had 4.5 percent of Christians in 1910.

Christians account for the same percentage of the population that it did in 1910. In fact, there was a slight drop off over the past hundred years. In 1910, Christians made up 35 percent of the population and today, they make up 32 percent. This was caused by the increase in global population that paralleled an increase in the Christian population. The world's general population grew from 1.8 billion to 1910 to nearly 7 billion today. The majority of Christians still live in the Americas and Europe, which boasts 63 percent of all Christians. However, this number is down from 93 percent a century ago. Despite still having the largest Christian population, the Americas reported a drop in Christianity from 98 percent to 86 percent. The European Christians also dropped in percentage from 95 percent to 76 percent.

Over a third of Christians worldwide live in the Americas, where nine of every ten people are Christians. These numbers are a result of the Americas featuring the U.S., Brazil

and Mexico, which collectively account for almost a fourth of Christians worldwide. According to the Pew study, Christianity is now a global faith, unlike a century ago. Christians have spread across the globe, which is a reason for the decline in European Christians.

The above analysis seems not to have affected African Christian population for the following reasons. Birth rate in Africa is always on the increase because of the level of illiteracy and lack of government policy on maximum size of children a family should raise. Secondly, religious diverse opinions on birth control have not helped in any way since some are of the opinion that birth control is against God's injunction of go and multiply by filling the earth. Thirdly, early marriages for female child especially in Muslim communities, coupled with African mentality of polygamous marriages, have added to uncontrollable population explosion in Africa. Fourthly, the population explosion which has affected increase in African Christianity is more of biological conversions since there is no much evidence of conversion in the Muslims dominated areas. In reaction Cheesman (1997) said that:

Only God knows the hearts of men so no estimate will be given of those truly born again of the Spirit of God and so in the Church of Christ worldwide. Experience shows that even in the Evangelical Segment there is much Christianity that is in name only (p.70).

In the same vein, from the above source it has also been observed that:

It is a great weakness to stress numerical growth almost exclusively since that is a bad overall indication of real, spirit led, growth. Numerical growth can simply mean that many nominal Christians are adding themselves to the church such as occurred after the conversion of Constantine in the 4thC. Other indicators of church growth are the deepening of spiritual life, a greater understanding of the faith and joyful service (p.74).

In consonance to the above, Hocking (1976) observes that:

Membership growth does not always reveal the factors of growth in a local church...Also attendance growth is sometimes related to factors that are not spiritual or immediately discernible in terms of church growth principles...It is difficult to evaluate and measure spiritual growth. Spiritual growth refers to maturity in doctrine as well as in practice. Spiritual growth is obviously a qualitative factor in terms of church growth. There will not be a great deal of true numerical growth in the Bible sense if there is not also an accompanying spiritual growth among the members of the body of Christ. We must be very careful in our discussion of church growth to understand the relationship between spiritual growth and numerical growth (p.123).

If this is the case, where do we draw the balance between quantitative and qualitative church growth? This is one of the major discrepancies this paper is out to resolve.

Liberal Theology

The new generational denominations have been influenced by liberal theologians as a result of globalization. Liberal theology seems to water down the mainline denominational orthodox beliefs. These modern trends enable them to practice Christianity in free way without holding stringently to the religious norms which the orthodox movements hold on dearly. The higher education students and young people generally are comfortable with these liberal religious movements. The latter have grown numerically faster than the older denominations because of the excess freedom they enjoy in comparison to their parent churches. While the liberal denominations are excelling numerically, their parent churches have plateau and on the state of decline. Cheesman (1997) commenting on liberal theology submits that the latter entered and affected the mainline denominations in the West and soon dominated the missionary approach of many churches. This picture is not different in Africa.

African Self-Initiated Churches (ASICs)

Jenkins (2002) asserts that globalization has assisted Afri-Americans and Euro-Africans the opportunities to herald African Indigenous brand of Christianity in a foreign culture. In fact, the secret of the shifting of gravity of Christendom from Western world to the South in the 21st century is as a result of the popularization of ASICs that has become a blessing to both Africans and Euro-Americans because, the African brand of Christian tradition has become a competing commodity in the global religious market both at home and abroad. This makes African Christians in overseas to feel comfortable in a foreign land since African congregations are right at their door steps. Some or few whites who became attracted to African congregations are also part of the latter in their own homeland.

In fact, the dispensation whereby Christianity is regarded as foreign to any continent or race is no longer in vogue. Euro-Americans, especially African renowned evangelists are scattered over the globe for evangelistic work. The slogan scholars in the field of religion do use such as cold or white theologies and black theologies are matter of cultural identity which may not necessarily fit into globalized Christianity. This is because globalization in this paper is used as the integration and interconnectedness of religious concepts into a holistic whole; whereby both white and black theologies may gravitate into a new theology that can be called globalized theology. Beside, this may be aside what various cultural identities hold for the individual society.

Therefore, the fact remains that the concept of globalization has helped to popularized ASICs world-wide. Olagoke (2003) submits that:

In Africa, in spite of political, social and economic upheavals, Christian faith has served as a bulwark for cultural defense, cultural identity and cultural transition. African Christian Fellowships have dotted the cities, college campuses and suburbs of the United States. African immigrants have come with religious zeal and expectation not only to improve their lot in the United States but also to be a channel of assistance to their brethren in Africa (p.112).

The above discussion reveals that Christianity in Africa has developed beyond the African soil to other continents of the world numerically. Can this be said about spiritual growth of the church in Africa? This is the main crux of the matter. If numerical growth can be measured quantitatively, can that also be applicable qualitatively? If the answer is no, what other perimeter can we use to determine qualitative growth? In fact, the quantitative perimeters used above can never count as a true representation for spiritual growth. For instance, as earlier observed that population explosion that gives birth to biological children can never count as a measuring standard for spirituality. In the same way, liberal theologians and their followers coupled with their water down and shallow theologies, though they parade mass followership can not take the place of qualitative church growth. This is also true of African Self Initiated Churches that in some cases are victim of syncretism.

Turner (1967) said that within the ASICs we have the messianic groups. They were so called because of the charismatic nature of their prophets (leaders), who made their followers to exalt them as messiahs. They do live communal life, camp sick patients in their churches, they live in isolated camps popularly called “Holy Cities”, and their prophets are highly honored and considered as messiahs. Turner, had difficulties in classifying them. It must be noted that some of these ASICs are either Zionists or Messianic churches. Some other time, it is a mixture of the two or completely a different phenomenon that has no Christian coloring but a mere covering up with a Christian name. Erivwo (2009) in an interview subscribes to the above observation when he declared:

The Igbe worshippers (Water spirit worshippers) have turned their shrines into churches and places of worship. This has become necessary if they would become relevant in the globalized religious competitive market. The implication to true Christian’ doctrine and practice is beside the issue but rather seeking for relevance in the globalized world is the most important. On the other hand, the acculturated nature of the ASICs is been eroded as a result of the influence of globalization. Therefore, there is no segment of ASICs that want to be regarded as syncretism, hence the cultural milieu is been tailored to reflect global taste, whereas deeply there is some thing secret than the ordinary.

If the above reasons that promoted numerical church growth are not necessarily ingredient to spiritual growth, what then can one say as evidential factors to spiritual growth in the church in Africa? The church in Africa currently is involved in prosperity, poverty alleviation and power gospel seekers. All denominations are involved in the trio approaches to the gospel of Christ. The redemptive purposes of the gospel and the eschatological burden of Christ second coming has been placed as secondary and is non essential. If the latter is been emphasis by modern preachers is just less than five percent of African preachers and in most cases their voices are neither popular nor held. Affluence and power seekers are the modern currency for African Christianity at the moment. If you do not possess any among the two above then you need to evaluate your Christianity.

Findings

Judging from the above research, it is evident that the Church in Africa generally is growing quantitatively because of biological birth, liberal theologies that are saleable in the African religious market among the young people and African brand of indigenous type of Christianity that is culturally suitable to African culture. Specifically, this numerical church growth is evidential among the new generational denominations, whereas it is plateauing and declining in the mainline churches. However, this numerical growth is not commensurate to qualitative growth because the church in Africa currently is neither salvifically nor eschatological focus but rather on the peripheral. In a close observation, the modern generational church seems to be more prone to spiritual decline compare to their older generational churches.

Theological Implications for Pastoral Ministry

The challenges facing the contemporary African Pastor is enormous. If the contemporary African pastors will be relevant in the post-modern church they should endeavor to subscribe to the suggestions presented below.

Emphasis on genuine conversion especially among the Muslim and pagan communities should be exploited. The notion of regarding biological children as Christians without evidential conversion should be discouraged. But rather, Christian parents should intensify evangelizing their immediate families in order to ensure continuity in Africa Christianity. Thirdly, the dynastic approach to leadership succession among the General Overseer churches in Africa should be discouraged. If this continues, on the long run it will result to spiritual and numerical counter productive. Christian leadership should be seen as purely divine call and not family heritance.

The pastor should maintain perpetual simple and flexible church structure in order to accommodate and cope with ministry of the local church. Simple structure keeps the church focus on the vision and mission of the church. Few committees and boards allow for a clear and accessible decision-making climate. Simple structure emphasizes relationships rather than organization. People are seen as more important than programs and this attracts visionary people who are committed to doing whatever it takes to respond to Christ's command to make disciples. Thus, this will make the church to be more stable and less maintenance culture will revolved.

In order to effectively achieve the above submission, the size of the congregation must not be too large. If it does, it will be difficult to effectively minister to the parishioners. If the largeness leads to multi staff ministry, it is not also effective on the long-run. The best option is for the over size congregation to give birth to a baby congregation where some members from the former congregation resign into the latter for effective ministry continuity. Most mega churches have been turned into business ventures from their original mission purposes. But for the smaller size churches will always maintain their originality.

The leadership implication in the modern church is another challenge in Africa. It is only in Christianity you find self made leaders without formal training. Every other professional field of endeavor has a prescribe level of training before practice. If the state of spiritual decadence in the church in Africa must be corrected, pastors must have formal theological training aside their spiritual gifting. Untrained pastor may do more harm to his parishioners than half backed medical doctor. This is because, the mistake of unknowledgeable medical doctor may send his patient to death and if he or she is a Christian may go to heaven, but un-informed pastor may send his parishioners to both death and hell.

Therefore, the antidote to shallow spirituality in African Christianity coupled with substituting numerical index as the only basis for true Christian growth in Africa ignorantly is to make formal theological education compulsory for all who wish to be preachers of the gospel with the evidence of preaching license from the government. This will help to check the quality of preachers and Christianity in Africa. While the researcher has no personal bias against numerical church growth, he wish to advocate that both quantitative and qualitative church growth should be placed on equilibrium. This will be the only basis we can agree that Christianity in African is growing geometrically.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to justify its earlier hypothesis that the evidence of quantitative church growth in Africa does not correspond with qualitative growth. Therefore, while Christianity in Africa is increasing in numbers, she is experiencing spiritual decadence. The only evidence to justify her numerical growth index is to place her qualitative growth level at a state of equilibrium of which for now is unattainable because of variable factors discussed on this paper. Conclusively, contemporary African pastors need to rise up to their God given task through adequate theological training, maintenance of simple and flexible church leadership style that is design for meeting congregational felt needs and emphasis on genuine conversion experience. This will certainly lift Christianity in Africa to match numbers with quality Christian life style in her growth index.

References

- Cheesman, Graham (1997). *Mission Today: An Introduction to Mission Studies*. Great Britain: Cox and Wyman, Reading.
- Chukueku, Agbobu (2013). *Planting and Growing a Viable Church*. Asaba: Cave and Cam International Ltd.
- Crawford, Setrige (2015). Christianity Declines in Europe, Increases in Africa and Asia. <http://christianpost.com/news/Christian-is-world-largest-religion-says-pew-forum-survey-65253/>. Retrieved October 30, 2015.

Easum, Bill (2015). "Why so many Church Plants Plateau?"

<http://effectivechurch.com/author/beasum/> Retrieve October, 26, 2015, at 22.11pm.

Erivwo, S.O. Interview at Delsu: January 15, 2009.

Faircloth, D. Samuel. (1991). *Church Planting for Reproduction*. Benin City: Praise God Christian Publications.

Hardin, C. Daniel (1978). *Mission, A Practical Approach to Church Sponsored mission work*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Hocking, L. David. (1976). *The Worlds Greatest Church*. California: Long Beach Publishers.

Jenkins, Philip (2002). *The Next Christendom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jenkins, Philip (2006). *The New Faces of Christianity*. Oxford University Press.

Lynch, Mikey (2015). Plateau Church-90-160-People.

http://.genevapush.com/blogs/xian_reflections/plateau-church-90-160-people Retrieved on 26-10-2015

McGavran, A. Donald. (1980). *Understanding Church Growth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

McIntosh, L. Gary. (2003). *Biblical Church Growth*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books.

Obaje, Usufu Amen. (1996). Ministers' Conference Held at NBTS, Ogbomoso: oyo State, Nigeria.

Olagoke, A. Ezekiel (2003). Religion and Globalization: African Christians in the United States. Presented at annual meeting of the Association for the sociology of Religion, Atlanta, Georgia.; <http://www.geocities.com/missionalia/aic.htm> Retrieved June 4, 2009

Molan, Johan (2015). Spiritual Decline in Reformed Churches in South Africa. www.bibleguidance.co.za/engarticles/decline.htm **Retrieved October 26, 2015**

Rauschenbusch, Walter. *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. New York: 1912. online edition

Social Gospel. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Social_Gospel&oldid=586841091. Retrieved on February 27, 2014

Turner, H. W. (1967). *African Independent Church V. II*. Britain: Oxford Claredon Press.

Wagner, C. Peter (1971). *Frontiers in Missionary Strategy*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.

Zodhiates, Spiros (1980). *You can be a Winner*. USA: AMG Publishers.