

# **An Appraisal of Pentecostalism's Impact on Urban Christian Missions in Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

The advent of Pentecostalism in church history, both in the Early Church and more recently, has made a distinctive mark on all aspects of the Church's life and missions. This article examines Pentecostalism as a movement, its historical background, and its belief that the gifts of the Holy Spirit should be in operation as it was in the Early Church. The article uses a descriptive research design that assesses the advent of Pentecostalism, its positive impacts on urban Christian mission in evangelism, church planting and growth, contextualization, leadership development, and power encounter, and some negative impacts as well.

**Key Words:** Holy Spirit, missions, Pentecostalism, urban

## **Introduction**

One of the great movements in Christian history that have shaped the life of the Church and recovered particular biblical experiences is Pentecostalism. The recent wave of Pentecostalism not only brought about spiritual reinvigoration in the Church: it also had significant implications for the Great Commission mandate. The great outpouring of the Holy Spirit precipitated believers' yearning for soul winning, and as souls were won and more churches were planted, the Christian Church continued to expand her missionary emphasis and scope. However, Pentecostalism has not been without some attending challenges to the spiritual vitality of the Church and the gospel missions.

This article's purpose is to evaluate the impact of Pentecostalism on urban missions in particular. The article discusses the origin and movement of Pentecostalism, then examines the impact of Pentecostalism in the context of urban missions in Nigeria. It should be noted that the article is not focused on Pentecostal movements as religious denominations but on all churches or missions organizations that believe in the workings and manifestation of the Holy Spirit in missions.

## **The Movement of Pentecostalism**

Pentecostalism is an event in the life of the Church that recognizes visible manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit as occurred in the Early Church (Acts 2). It is a revivalist movement that attempts to motivate the Church to return to its previous form of spiritual dynamism through the manifestation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially the gift of speaking in tongues as the early Church manifested it (Fatokun 2013, 43). Those who hold to this understanding believe that the manifestation of the Holy Spirit's power and gifts is normative in the Church's life in all ages. Emiola Nihinlola describes Pentecostal belief as a "total doctrine," religious expression, and movement of classical Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal, and Third Wavers based on certain doctrines and experiences of the Holy Spirit (Nihinlola 2008, 134).

Pentecostalism can also be explained as an authentically lived Christian spirituality with a distinct theological view of reality (Archer 2007, 302). Tongue-speaking may be the most

discussed Pentecostal distinctive, but that practice by means is the totality of Pentecostal experience. It is no surprise that many believers deduce from the foregoing that Pentecostalism is a positive movement that revitalizes religious formality and coldness in the Church.

Conversely, other descriptions and views on Pentecostalism highlight some of the challenges associated with its advent. Deji Ayegboyin and Emiola Nihinlola aver that Pentecostalism is a broad term that integrates several fundamentalist Protestant sects that accentuate the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Ayegboyin and Nihinlola 2008, 214). This assertion represents the view of many traditional denominations on the emergence of Pentecostalism. Some Evangelical conservatives even view Pentecostalism as a type of heretical movement in the Church (Melton 2022). Such a belief shares similarities with the presupposition of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and the Lutheran and Reformed churches that the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit were only for the time of the Apostles and have hitherto lost their relevance when they died (Engelsma n.d.). However, Pentecostals retort without equivocation that the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit in diverse ways in the Church is proof that the power of the Holy Spirit was not limited to the Apostles' time.

### **History of Pentecostal Movements**

This article holds the view that the foundation of Pentecostalism is found in the experience of the 120 disciples who tarried at the upper room expecting the gift Jesus had promised them. The gift came on the fiftieth day after Jesus had ascended—a day known as “Pentecost” in the Jewish context—which brought about the birth of the Church (Acts 2). Convinced that what happened in Acts 2 should be a regular occurrence in every generation of church life, Charles Perham taught his students at Bethel College at Topeka, Kansas about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. During one of the classes, a student was baptized and spoke in tongues (*glossolalia*) in 1901 (Bamigboye 2008, 169). Perham later took the message to Houston, Texas, and one of his students, William J. Seymour, a black Holiness preacher, believed that it was possible to experience the workings of the Holy Spirit as in the Bible. Seymour began to preach the same message, and in 1906 he took the message to Los Angeles and founded the Apostolic Gospel Mission on Azuza Street. There was a revival and outpouring of God’s power as the Holy Spirit manifested Himself among the people. Many participants spoke in tongues, there was healing and prophecy, and from there a significant number of missionaries took the message and started spreading it around (Miller 2013, 4-5).

The second wave of Pentecostalism broke out in an event in the United States and dated precisely to the year 1960, connected with the ministry of Dennis Bennett in Van Nuys, California (Williams 2001, 220). J.R. Williams notes that its emphasis was on baptism with (or in) the Holy Spirit as a second blessing after conversion and speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of this baptism, and the continuing function of spiritual gifts (*charismata*) mentioned in I Corinthians 12:8-10. The mainline churches did not accept this teaching; therefore, those who believed in Pentecostalism either freely left or were forced out of those churches and founded their own separate ministries (Williams 2001, 220).

In Nigeria, the Pentecostal movement originated in the 1970s, a decade after most African countries obtained independence. Much of the movement sprouted within college and university student ministries, for example the Student Christian Movement (SCM), Scripture Union (SU), and Campus Christian Fellowship (CCF) (Danfulani 2008, 20). The University of Ibadan and Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) became hotbeds of Pentecostalism. As some leaders

graduated, their Spirit-empowered ministries shifted to house prayer cells, ministering to youths and others. Some expanded to full-fledged ministries in urban centers, for example the Deeper Life Ministry of W.F Kumuyi and the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) of Pastor E.A. Adebayo (Danfulani 2008, 20). According to Matthews Ojo, by 1974 over ten Charismatic organizations had been established by graduates already persuaded by the revival (Ojo 2008, 114).

### **Positive Impacts of Pentecostalism on Urban Christian Missions**

Pentecostalism has had great impact on Christian missions, and the effects are visible in many urban centers. Below are the highlights of some positive impacts of Pentecostalism on urban Christian missions.

#### *Evangelism and Witnessing*

Evangelism and witnessing is a means through which the gospel is communicated to the people. Parham and his students prayed for grace to speak in tongues, so they could engage in missions by speaking *xenolalia*, a form of *glossolalia* where one speaks the language of a tribe the witness has not learned before in order to share the gospel (McGee 1993, 42). Besides in this particular spectacular manner, the Holy Spirit is involved in evangelism and witnessing in various ways. The first is the burning passion for taking the gospel to the heathen as the Holy Spirit inspires believers. While many people in urban areas might not be willing to attend crusades, Christians can reach such people personally in their homes, offices, and the marketplace through personal witnessing (Theology of Work Project 2020).

Additionally, through their own personal testimonies, converts who have experienced the power of God have been able to witness Christ's saving grace to others. This is what happened in John 4 when the Samaritan woman went to the city to call people to come and see Jesus. Also, the Holy Spirit moves unbelievers' hearts toward Christ by giving them a tender conscience to receive the gospel message, thereby convicting them of sin and righteousness (Fuller 2001, 23). These developments result in a great harvest of souls being brought into the kingdom of God, leading to a numerical increase of converts. A recent Nigeria-based example is the Deeper Life Bible Church, which grew from 15 to over a million members in several nations of the world within a short period of time. Falaye opines that one of the reasons for this growth is the church's aggressive life of evangelism, one of her cardinal beliefs and practices (Falaye 2015, 23, 26).

#### *Church Planting*

Church planting is another positive impact of Pentecostalism on urban missions. The outcome of aggressive evangelism and personal witnessing is church planting. Peter Wagner avers that church planting must follow evangelism and witnessing because evangelizing people is not enough: converts have to be brought into the Church to be discipled (Wagner 1991, 11-12). In agreement, Rick Ferguson posits that "the only strategy that has any hope of impacting the growing population of non-Christians... is that of a church planting movement" (Ferguson 2005, 103). The growing populations in urban areas support church planting there. More importantly, the rate at which Pentecostal churches participate in church planting proves that there is a power working among them to achieve this remarkable feat. New Life Baptist church, Port-Harcourt, Nigeria is an example of this. This local church planted 19 other churches within five years by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Adeleke 2006, 2, 98). Also, within a year RCCG planted

over 1,144 churches, a development which was made possible by the move of the Holy Spirit (Olusola 2018, 8).

### *Church Growth*

Another positive impact of Pentecostalism in urban areas is church growth. Adedayo Odesola advises that the leader should be full of the Holy Spirit as that will help to bring about growth (Odesola 2021, 237). The growth could be numerical-quantitative or spiritual-qualitative. Writing on the numerical growth of the Early Church, Gene Getz and Joe Wall assert that the Holy Spirit brought about an explosion in the number of disciples on Pentecost Day; the Lord added an initial 3,000 to souls being saved, and later he increased the number to 5,000. The numerical increase continued even when the disciples were scattered to other nations. Getz and Wall are right to maintain that numerical strength brings glory to God (Getz and Wall 2000, 20).

Meanwhile, the place of spiritual growth is also crucial and is made possible by discipleship. Emmanuel Oyemomi describes a disciple as a person who has a relationship with Jesus and is committed to him voluntarily in obedience and perseverance (Oyemomi 2012, 439). Speaking personally as a missionary who served in the mission field for some years, I realize that the place of the Holy Spirit in changing the lives of the converts cannot be trivialized. He helps the missionaries live transparent lives that reflect Christ and then helps the converts to follow their examples by the power of the Holy Spirit. I have seen the Holy Spirit change cult members into soft-hearted persons and immoral persons into people of integrity through sound teaching of the Word of God. Getz and Wall conclude that “no amount of hard work, no creative strategy, no investment of money can produce any true church growth (people coming to Christ and growing spiritually) unless the Spirit of God moves” (Getz and Wall 2000, 20). In agreement, Walter Hollenweger has also asserted that belief in the work of the Holy Spirit has led to the massive growth of denominations and churches (Hollenweger 2004, 127).

Many Pentecostal movements are thriving in various cities across Nigeria. When looking at the exploits of Pentecostal churches like The Living Faith with over 5,000 churches worldwide, The RCCG with over 20,000 parishes worldwide, and several other charismatic churches with their growth rate today, one would be hard pressed to deny that Pentecostalism is divinely blessed. It is little wonder that among Baptists as well it has been observed that churches that accommodate Pentecostalism are growing, stable, and also largely peaceful (Ayegboyin and Nihinlola 2008, 24).

### *Contextualization*

Delphine Wei asserts that Pentecostalism gives room for people to express themselves emotionally, giving new vitality and contextual relevance (Wei 2017, 34). It aids people to experience God in their very context. Matthews Ojo observes that Pentecostals hold sway in African settings because of their penchant for contextualization (Ojo 2008, 117). For example, in their emphasis on deliverance, Pentecostals have often tended to trace all misfortunes to the influence of witches and ancestral curses, a situation that had earlier been denied or ignored by the Protestant churches but is in fact a reality to the people. Emphasis on prayer in the Nigerian context has led to the expansion of Mountain of Fire Bible Church (Aibanebe 2019) and The Lord’s Chosen Charismatic Revival Church, among others (Muoka 2019).

### *Leadership Recruitment*

Another vital impact of Pentecostalism on urban missions is on raising indigenous leaders. Akinyemi Alawode and Samson Adebayo submit that raising leaders who will help the ministry of the prominent leader is apt in building a formidable church in urban areas (Alawode and Adebayo 2021, 262). The Holy Spirit is responsible for recruiting personnel for urban missions. He recruited Paul and Barnabas for missions (Act 13:1-3) and still does that today. The rate at which people are seeking training in theological education in Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, is highly impressive in this regard. Moreover, almost all the Pentecostal denominations in Nigeria also have schools for training ministers—as the Holy Spirit continues to raise many men and women for the work of ministry in urban centers.

### *Direction*

The Holy Spirit gives direction regarding who, where, and when to do missions. The Spirit's direction is vital as it helps the church and missions organizations in the city to know the places and people groups they need to engage. Akinyemi Alawode asserts that “it is the work of the Holy Spirit to initiate, direct and motivate for world's [sic] evangelization” (Alawode 2018, 3). The Book of Acts highlights how the Apostles engaged people with the gospel under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Philip was moved by the Spirit to minister to the Ethiopian Eunuch, and Paul was forbidden to minister in Asia province but was led to Macedonia by the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:1ff., 16:6-10). The RCCG belief is that it was through the leadership of the Holy Spirit that the current General Overseer of RCCG was chosen by the founder, which has led to great expansion of the denomination (“History and Growth of RCCG” 2014).

### *Power Evangelism*

An urban area is a place where political, economic, cultural, and social powers reside (Conn and Ortiz 2001, 192-193). However, those are not the only powers that reside in the city: the power of darkness also resides there. Pentecostalism is also a demonstration of the ultimate power of God over all other powers. There have been testimonies of missionaries and church leaders who demonstrated God's power over the reign of evil in their communities.

One of the occurrences that made Bishop Idahosa, the father of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, popular was his exertion of God's power over demonic forces in his city and the nation. In the early 1990s (Adaobi 2019), there was an announcement that the first International Conference of Witches and Wizards would be held at Benin City, Nigeria. Bishop Idahosa vowed that the meeting would not take place—and in fact the meeting was not held because the fear of God's power fell on Gen. Babangida, the president of Nigeria at that time. After watching the display of God's power demonstrated by Bishop Idahosa in a telecast with the chief host of the witches' conference (Sampala 2020, 16-18), the president had to call the Nigerian embassies and tell them that a visa should not be given to any prospective conferee, and that was it. God's power was felt not only in the city of Benin but the entire nation at the time. This power of God has been demonstrated over spiritual, political, social, and even economic situations in urban areas, and it is still alive till today.

### *High Level of Giving*

Reaching urban people with the gospel is more expensive compared to doing so in rural areas. The Pentecostals do not only preach prosperity, however: they also give without reservation. The



heavy projects being carried out in different cities of Nigeria prove this. Many Pentecostal members have testified how the Spirit of God led them to donate money for various missions projects in urban areas. Through His Love Foundation of RCCG, a dialysis centre was donated at the OOU Teaching Hospital, Sagamu of Ogun State (“RCCG foundation launches crowdfunding platform” 2021). This is a form of urban social ministry made possible through generous giving.

### **Negative Impacts of Pentecostalism on Urban Christian Missions**

This article’s examination of Pentecostalism’s contributions to urban missions would be incomplete without inclusion of some of the negative impacts involved.

#### *Excessive Emphasis on Financial and Material Prosperity*

Some Pentecostal churches emphasize giving too much, and many people have been short-changed or manipulated through that means in urban centers. The wealth of some prominent Pentecostal pastors like Bishop David Oyedepo and Pastor Enoch Adeboye has enticed some young ministers to focus more on material riches than the ministry. Some venture into gospel commercialization through the sale of handkerchiefs (referred to as “mantles” after they have been prayed upon) and anointing oil to members in order to get quick money (Iheanacho and Ughaerumba 2016). This misplaced emphasis has resulted in a situation where many churches are filled with mere religious people without a genuine conversion experience.

#### *The Challenge of Religious Syncretism*

Religious syncretism involves a replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements (Bediako 2008, 109). Such syncretism is incompatible with God’s plan for mankind. It is unfortunate that some Pentecostal pastors who desperately desire to demonstrate the power of God have ended up seeking power elsewhere, either through occultic or diabolical methods. Such powers are often used to perform signs and wonders in order to make people troop to their churches. Regrettably, vulnerable members of such churches are sometimes exposed to satanic oppression and grip rather than have a genuine encounter with the gospel’s power.

### **Conclusion**

This article has discussed the impacts of Pentecostalism on urban Christian missions in Nigeria. Pentecostalism and its origin have been examined in great detail. Some of the incontrovertible effects of Pentecostalism on urban missions that have been identified include positive impacts on missions contextualization, evangelism and witnessing, church planting, church growth, and availability of financial and human resources, among other benefits. Consequently, one can assert, to a very great extent, that Pentecostalism is a blessing to urban Christian missions and not a curse; the positive impacts enumerated above attest to this. Abuses of Pentecostalism notwithstanding, its positive effects and blessings far outweigh its negative challenges. Therefore, it is pertinent to state that one must not engage in missions activities without depending on the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Christian Church, missionaries, and all mission stakeholders should continue to seek the infilling of the Holy Spirit to be successful in mission engagement in all settings, including in urban areas.

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