

Living Faith Church International A.K.A. Winners Chapel

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Abstract: The study assessed the relevance of Winners' Chapel to the indigenous society; the doctrines, administrative structure of the church, the financial income and expenditure. The methods used in this study include interview, observation and review of existing literature. The findings revealed that Winners' Chapel as an indigenous church has more relevant to African Society particularly in the area of evangelizing Africa and meeting the needs of Africans. Finally, there is need for Winners' Chapel to lay more emphasis on pietism and to define modesty and contentment to prevent materialistic tendency.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Living Faith International Church is one of the major indigenous churches in African that has left an indelible mark in the lives of African Christians most especially in the area of self-discovery, discovery of purpose as a requisite for meaningful human existence as well as status elevation that comes from spiritual understanding. Living Faith International is construed as a ministry with divine commission to liberate the African continent from all forms of Satanic oppressions. The leadership of the church, in addition to teaching the biblical principles for kingdom expansion, are committed to human resource development to enhance self-reliance, self economic and spiritual empowerment and financial and spiritual freedom. The Living Faith International Church has been described as the church of the rich.

Without doubt, Living Faith Church is one of the fastest growing churches in Africa. The Winners' Chapel has a network of churches located in over 300 cities, in all states of Nigeria, as well as in the United States, the United Kingdom and also in Dubai.

II. HISTORY OF THE FOUNDER

Bishop David Olaniyi Oyedepo popularly known as Papal was born on the 27th of September, 1954 at Oshogbo the current capital of Osun State in the South-Western part of Nigeria. He hails from Omu-Aran, one of the popular towns in Kwara State. He was born into a mixed religious family. His father Ibrahim was a Muslim healer while his mother Dorcas, was a member of the Eternal Order of Cherubim and Seraphim Movement (C&S) popularly known as White Garment Church, a branch of the Aladura Movement in Nigeria.

Oyedepo grew up with his grandmother at Oshogbo; who attended Anglican Church. He learnt the virtue of tithing from his grandmother. In 1969, Oyedepo gave his life to Jesus through the influence of his teacher Betty Lasher who was said to have shown special interest in him during his high school days. He later attended Kwara State Polytechnic where he studied Architecture. He worked briefly at the Federal Ministry of Housing in Ilorin before he finally resigned in order to focus on the work of the Ministry. Oyedepo is married to Florence Abiola Akano whose name was later changed to Faith Oyedepo. Their marriage is blessed with four children. Two of whom are already married as at the time of this write-up. Their names are as follows: David Jr, Isaac, Love and Joyce. His two sons are already in the ministry of their father as pastors. Both were ordained by Kenneth Copeland in May 2007. At the time of this write-up, his son David Jr. is the presiding pastor of the London branch of the church, together with his wife Kemi. His second son, Isaac Oyedepo pastors the branch of their church in South Africa. Oyedepo was said to have met his wife when he was 22years at the motor park. He is practically a monogamist.

Oyedepo in one of his messages claimed to have had tuberculosis during his secondary school days; which made his roommates shift their beds from him in order to avoid the contagious disease. This was one of the events in his life that impels his faith movement. According to him, he said, he went up to a mountain where he challenged God to heal him and God indeed healed him of the disease. His faith in divine healing grew in leap and in bound. Oyedepo had a whitlow on a finger in his right hand during the period of an examination in his Secondary School days. His father gave him a charm which Oyedepo refused. He went ahead to write the exam and still passed. His clan, Odo-Oro (Place of wealth) and family lineage believes strongly in hard work.

The History of the Church

The history of the Living Faith International Church began with his 18-hour vision in May 1981 where Oyedepo claimed to have received a mandate from God to liberate the world from all forms of Satanic Oppression through the preaching of the faith. At the beginning of his ministry, Living Faith Church was initially known by the name Liberation Faith Hour Ministries. A couple of years later, precisely on the 17th September, 1983, Oyedepo and his wife were both commissioned and ordained as pastors of the new church by Pastor E. A. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. In 1988, precisely five years after his ordination as a pastor, Oyedepo was ordained as a Bishop.

The Living Faith Church (a.k.a. Winners chapel) began in Kaduna. In July 1989, Oyedepo received another mandate from God to reach out to the people of Lagos. Thus, the effort to start a new branch in Lagos, the then Federal Capital of Lagos, began. Oyedepo was instructed by God to send for David Abioye, who was then in charge of their branch in Maiduguri to take charge of their Kaduna branch. Hence, by 1989, a new branch of the Living Faith International was established in Lagos (Adelegan, 2013).

In 1998, Oyedepo claimed to have received another mandate from God to build a new headquarter for the commission in order to accommodate the growing population of membership. This led to his acquisition of a large hectares of land at Sango-Otta, Ogun State a region which the founder claimed was pre-dominated by witches. The land acquire has been estimated to 530-acres (2.1km²) which is now popularly known as Canaan Land. The property currently accommodates 50,000 congregations at a single service. The new church auditorium is located on this land; which has been said to be the largest church auditorium in the world. The New headquarter was officially commissioned on the 8th of September, 1999 during the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo. Most of the striking features of the church are closely related to those common to indigenous churches in Africa except that Living Faith International Church believes in construction of mega auditorium for worshippers which according to the Vice-President of the church Bishop David Abioye was received as a mandate from God.

DOCTRINE OF LIVING FAITH CHURCH

- A. The Scriptures:** The Living Faith Church believes the “Bible as the inspired word of God, the product of Holy men of old who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit”.
- B. The Godhead:** “Our God is one but manifested in three persons, the father, the son and the Holy Spirit being co-equal”. While God the father is believed to be greater than all. God the father is believed to be the giver of the word (Logos) and the begetter. The son is regarded as the one begotten, the word flesh covered. While “the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the father and the son and is eternal.”
- C. Man, His fall and Redemption:** The church believes that man is created in God’s image but became sinful through the original sin of Adam. The manifestation of Jesus through the shedding of his blood brings salvation through redemption, and restores man back to God which is activated through faith in Christ Jesus, “providing works acceptable to God”.
- D. Signs and Wonders:** The Living Faith Church believes that through the laying of hands spiritual gifts can be impacted. Holy Communion is regarded as a feast of victory over the devil. Anointing with oil can bring about healings and supernatural interventions. Feet washing are believed to confirm dominion and covenant heritage on the Saints. Again, the church believes that any anointed material can be used for special miracles (Acts 19:11-12). While the Blood Covenant is for the release of the captives and prophetic utterances are for supernatural encounter.
- E. Divine Healing:** The church believes in the divine healing of physical ailment through the prayer of faith and laying on the hands. The divine healing is regarded as part of the package in the atonement of Christ.
- F. The Resurrection of the Just and the Return of the Lord:** The church believes that Christ will return to the earth together with His Saints who shall reign with Him for a thousand years. The church believes in the spiritual concept of Rapture.
- G. Hell and Eternal Retribution:** Sinners who refuses to accept Christ but dies in sin are eternally lost in Lake of fire which is Literal. The concept of eternal denotes endless existence.
- H. Baptism:** The Church believes in baptism by emersion as public confession of faith after conversion.

Administration

Organizational Structure: Living Faith International Church has its headquarters in Nigeria. The various branches within Nigeria are grouped under eight (8) regions and each region is regarded as a Diocese headed by a Bishop. “Each Diocese has its headquarters strategically located to enhance the coordination of the churches under its coverage.”⁶ The headquarters of all the dioceses are located in Kaduna, Port-Harcourt, Warri, Ibadan, Owerri, Abuja, Ilorin and Kano; while the ministry headquarters is located in Canaan Land, Otta in Ogun State.

The operation of the church is carried out through the world Mission Agency, an organizational arm of the ministry saddled with the task of “*liberating the entire world from sin, sickness, poverty, failure and all such vices through Bible teachings and training, schooling men and women to exploits in life and releasing them to their full potentials to benefit their world.*”

The mission agency of the ministry began in May 1994 with Africa as its focus through a programme tagged as African Gospel Invasion (AGIP). This programme is said to be the first phase of their missionary endeavour. Also, the Ministry operates word of Faith Bible Institute (WOFBI) in which more than 48,000 students have enrolled. In 2001, the Ministry launched the second phase of its missionary work through a programme tagged *Mission to the Word (MTW)* with the view to networking the remaining continent of the world to fulfill the set objectives of the ministry.

Through their World Mission Agency (WMA) materials and Relief Support are provided for people in need and victims of war. The ministry has a publishing press known as Dominion Publishing House (DPH) which received the 1996 ECOWAS Gold Award.

The Ministry operates educational institutions which began with the establishment of Faith Academy in 1999, followed by Model Christian College as well as the Tertiary Institution which began with the establishment of Covenant University in October, 2001. As at the time of this write-up, the Living Faith International Church has three Universities, located in Lagos, Omu-Aran and South Africa.

Leadership

The church is presided over by the founder of the Living Faith International Church, Bishop David Olaniyi Oyedepo. Next in leadership hierarchy is Bishop David Abioye who is the Vice-President of the Church. The church has eight Bishops who head the eight Dioceses within Nigeria. Under them are Resident Pastors who oversees each local church. Each resident pastors have several other pastors serving under them. The church operates the office of deaconship for men and women who co-assist in the administration of a Local branch of the church. The church operates three basic leadership courses for training of their ministers namely:

- a. Basic Certificate Course (BSC)
- b. Leadership Certificate Course (LCC)
- c. Leadership Diploma Course (LDC)

At the completion of the (BCC), anybody who has a call will apply after which he will write exam and interview before posting.

Financial Income and Expenditure

The major source of Income for Living Faith International Church is through tithe and offering, special donation and gifts. The church has a well articulated teaching on tithing and giving. In fact, the church lays emphasis on tithing and giving as kingdom investment that yields double fold return in the minimum.

According to Forbes, an International Financial Magazine, the Income of the church has been put to about 150 million dollars. Recently, Reuters, a News Agency accuses Living Faith Church of raking “*in billions of Naira annually, yet they are immune to the tax system.*” Bismarck Rewane, a renowned economist and CEO of Lagos consultancy Financial Derivatives spoke to Reuters saying “*They don’t submit accounts to anybody. At least six church leaders have private jets, so they have money. How much? No one really knows*”. In his recent interview with Reuters, Bishop Oyedepo said, “*we use the income to serve the needs of the poor*”. He further explained that he could not estimate the church’s total revenues or expenditure. The church pays the salaries of its 18,000 employees in Nigeria alone. However, 5 million dollars weekly income has been estimated.

Relevance of living faith international church to the Indigenous society

- a. **Acceptability to Indigenous People:** Without doubt, the Living Faith Church like every other indigenous church in Africa has gained a wide acceptance among the native people. Nigerians and Africans in general do no longer see Christianity as foreign to Africa. The church has ingrained in their membership a sense of belonging to each local church. Members see the church as their church not as imported church through foreign mission.
- b. **African World View of Christianity.** Recently, the “*Human rights Campaigners and the National Secular Society are urging the United Kingdom government to turn down a request by Bishop David Oyedepo’s Church, Winners’ Chapel International, accused of linking poor discipline to witchcraft, to open an independent school in kent*”¹². This remark succinctly captures the church’s African World view of Christianity, in which negative events and behaviors are associated with the devil, witchcrafting, sorcery etc. The beliefs of Africans in occultic practices and power, and the superior power of Christ over them, makes the church more relevant to the needs of the indigenous people according to G.A. Oshitelu; religion should be able to meet the need of the practitioners¹³

- c. **Divine Healing:** The emphasis of the church divine healing does not only boost the faith of the indigenous people in God but it also affords few individuals who cannot afford the cost of medical treatment in the hospital to look to God for divine healing. Again, some well enlightened Africans prefer the divine healing to the use of medicine with chemical properties that has side effects on the body. More also, the preaching of divine healing and the practical demonstration of God's power show cases God of Christianity as a superior God over other self-acclaimed gods in Africa.
- d. **Educational Development:** The Living Faith International has been able to contribute significantly to the increasing demand for formal education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The church is the only private organization in Africa that can boast of three universities in the African continent.
- e. **Employment:** Living Faith International Church has contributed significantly to the unemployment problem in Nigeria. The church alone has 18,000 employees on its pay roll.
- f. **Evangelism:** The contribution of the Living Faith International in the spread of the gospel cannot be over emphasized. The church alone has established 36 mission stations in 28 African nations.
- g. **Social Welfarism:** The Living Faith International church through an arm of its mission agency (WMA) is committed to alleviating the sufferings of Africans. In 1997, Relief materials were provided in the Northern Nigeria, 80 boreholes were dug to provide portable drinking water. Relief materials were sent through two shipments for war victims in Liberia in 1996.
- h. **Training of Leaders for Continuous Survival of Christianity in Africa:** According to Bolaji Idowu, continuous Survival of Christianity in Africa depends on Africans. Thus, the church is actively committed to training leaders who will preserve Christianity in Africa.
- i. **Leadership Competence:** The church has practically demonstrated African leadership capability as against the wrong notion that Africans are not capable of development.

Challenges

Some of the areas of concern about the church are too much emphasis on prosperity preaching. Also, the church is regarded as a liberal church where members are conceived to be too morally loose, and full of indecent dressing. More also, the church has inevitably created a religious platform in which materialism as a philosophy can thrive. This materialistic tendency as exemplified by the founder who personally owns jets has diffused into the lives of the members who want to live the grandiose heavenly life on Earth even before the call-up of Saints. In order to stem the tide of materialistic philosophy embedded in the teachings of the church, the church should endeavour to draw a line of demarcation between spirituality and materialism and to focus more on the spiritual development of church members being the essential requirement for heavenly kingdom.

III.CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The impact of the Living Faith International Church in Nigeria and in Africa at large cannot be over estimated. More importantly, in evangelizing Africa and also in contributing to the spiritual, intellectual educational, economic and human development of the membership. Their contributions in the area of social security and job provision make the church more relevant to the needs of Africans.

The church should draw a line of demarcation between spirituality and materialism. So that the gospel of salvation will not be substituted for materialism.

- The church should define the Biblical concept of moderacy and contentment in order to avoid the temptation of material accumulation at the detriment of spiritual growth of members.
- The church should lay more emphasis on religious pietism to stall the menace of liberalism.
- The church should adopt a theological dimension to the study and interpretation of the Bible. Thus, theological schools should be established for training of their pastors.

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