



Diversity and Cultural Consciousness: A Case Study of Challenges of Interculturality in Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Samonda, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Intercultural competence and diversity management strategy are necessary for effective leadership in any human organization that is characterized with cultural diversity. In a multicultural organization like church, leaders, particularly pastors, bear the responsibility to manage diversity of human experiences, promote intercultural understanding among the congregations, and mobilise them toward achieving common goals. This responsibility, however, requires a certain degree of cultural consciousness. This paper focuses on the challenges of managing Interculturality in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) Samonda, Ibadan. It is concern with the cultural consciousness and challenges among the diversity of the congregants. The paper is based on focused group interviews conducted among pastors in the parish, primarily to measure their level of cultural consciousness and awareness of cultural diversity among their parishioners. The findings of the paper – multiculturalism due to globalization, diverse cultural background, adherents to culture and beliefs, trying to unify through gifts-sharing accounts for the challenges of interculturality in a culturally diverse organization, particularly, the challenges that pastors encounter with multicultural worshippers. The paper therefore concludes that the lack of cultural consciousness and



willingness to adopt culturally–appropriate methods may result into cultural dissonances and disunity among the congregation and, ultimately, hamper the mission goals of the church. The study recommends that the promotion of interculturality among the congregations, pastor’s education on intercultural strategy requires an unwavering attention.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Diversity, Cultural Consciousness, Interculturality, Gift Sharing, Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)

Introduction

The Church and Intercultural Challenges: A Historical Perspective

Since its expansion from its cradle in the Palestine region into Europe, Asia and the rest of the world, the Church had always faced challenges of cultural diversity (Ian). The first Church in Jerusalem was comprised of myriad cultures and languages, comprising Parthia, Medes (present day Iran), Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, Rome, Jerusalem, Cretes and Arabia as recorded in Acts of the Apostles chapter 2. Even the Jewish community that made up the Church comprised of Aramaic-speaking Jews (those brought up in Palestine) and Greek-speaking Jews (known as Hellenists), that is, Jews that were raised outside Palestine. Throughout Palestine, there was tension between the two groups and the tension was carried over into the Church. As a result, the nascent Church encountered cultural dissonance, particularly in the treatment of widows. The Hellenists complained that their widows were neglected and discriminated against during palliative distributions as recorded in Acts of the Apostles chapter 6.

The dissension continued after the dispersal of the Apostles, following oppositions from Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Culturally-based dissonance within the Church grew in intensity, particularly as non-Jewish Christians (Gentiles), whom Jews considered unclean, were brought into the Church fold (Acts of Apostles 10). For example, old Jewish law made a distinction between ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ food. The details of Moses’ instruction to the Israelites on food is recorded in



Leviticus chapter 11 verses 1-23. Jewish Christians observed this strict law of eating only those food or animals that were considered clean. But the Gentile Christians were more liberal and they ate every food without discrimination. As a result of cultural prejudices among the congregations, the Church became polarized along Jew –Gentile lines, on the basis of types of food to be eaten or avoided among the congregation (Froehlich, 1985). Nevertheless, the ‘crisis ‘was resolved through the interventions of the Apostles, Deacons and Elders, the leaders of the Church (especially Peter, James and, later, Paul). These details are contained in the Acts of the Apostles chapters 11, 13 and 15 (Berry, 2022, March 21).

The fact that difference of opinions - based on cultural diversity among the congregation – on a trivial issue as food could negatively alter unity and acceptability within the Church, is an indication that interculturality is a serious phenomenon that requires attention. Indeed, the phenomenon of diversity and how to accomplish interculturality has been a subject of concern within the universal Church, particularly with the way it has impinged on its missional goals. For example, cultural diversity resulted into painstaking translation of the New Testament from Latin to Greek, as well as from Greek to numerous languages of the world (Ehrman, 1993). Attempts to seek the preservation of cultural diversity was also the main goal behind the translation of the Bible into several languages of the world. In Nigeria, the Bible Society of Nigeria has translated the Bible into more than 50 local languages, and is prepared to continue with the translation to local languages. This measure has to closed the linguistic gap and, indeed, cultural chasm among Christians within the country. The adoption of certain common creeds of faith within some denominations, which must be confessed aloud, as an oath of commitment to a common belief and practice, has further engendered the universality of Christian creed and doctrines, such as the Trinity.

The Christendom adopt diverse pragmatic approaches to manage cultural encounters within their congregations in different part of the



world. For example, the Sacred congregation for the Propagation of Faith under the Roman Catholic Mission sent out series of instruction in 1659. The intention was to stimulate the congregation to pursue appropriate cultural means to proselytize and keep its focus: 'Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples, to change their manners, customs and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals' (Peter & Bradley, 1990: 64).

The instruction above imposed huge responsibilities on leadership of the Church at every level to cultivate positive cultural consciousness in daily encounters with their multicultural congregations. The focus of the Papal writ was to ensure respect for all cultures, especially among communities in which missionary enterprises take place. The emphasis was on the unity and universality of the Catholic Church. By the time the decisions of the Second Vatican Council, namely, Vatican II, was adopted three centuries later, specifically, 1962-1965, the overwhelming objective was to ensure inculturation in the mission, with emphasis on ensuring that rituals, worship and theology grow out of the living cultures of the people. It was not surprising that Bishop Firmin Schmidt, a German American, and formerly Catholic Bishop of the Southern Highlands in Papua New Guinea, said: 'God is the authors of culture, we have to respect' (Peter & Bradley, 1990: 64-67)). At the heart of this is the search for points of cultural contact, or the possibility for a synthesis of cultures, that is, interculturality.

The need to manage cultural diversity and promote intercultural relations is not peculiar to the orthodox churches. Among the Pentecostal denominations in Nigeria, the same challenge has prompted them to seek culturally appropriate means to achieve positive interculturality among their congregations. An example is the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), one of the fastest growing Pentecostal denominations in Nigeria, with a global reach and parishes/congregations in over 190 countries of the world (Asonzeh, 2008). The lack of cultural consciousness in pastoral leadership may



result into culturally-based dissonance and disunity among the congregation and, ultimately, hamper the mission objectives of the Church. RCCG has taken different measures to mitigate the challenges of cultural dissonances among its multicultural congregations. The role of pastoral leadership in maintaining and managing the complex relations among the diverse cultural groups within the denomination, the strategies adopted, and the extent of interculturality among members of their congregation is discussed below.

Cultural Diversity in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)

Established in 1952 as an indigenous Pentecostal Church, RCCG is considered one of the most culturally diverse denominations in Nigeria, with membership spreading across all the major ethnic groups, especially the Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Edo, Fulani, among other ‘so-called’ numerous minority cultural groups (Adekola, 1989). In terms of cultural mix, a typical parish of RCCG is a mini-Nigeria, where constant contacts are established among its multicultural congregations. Therefore, it becomes inevitable to rule out tendencies for cultural dissonance among its culturally diverse worshippers.

However, in order to mitigate culturally-based dissonance and promote interculturality among its culturally-diverse congregations, certain measures were put in place by the Mission. These include: instilling a sense of a common vision in them, namely: ‘to make heaven; to take as many people as possible with us; to have a member of RCCG in every family of all nations’, regardless of race and cultural peculiarities. The common vision is further translated into a set of shared mission, namely: ‘holiness will be our lifestyle; we will plant churches in every street in every city, town and community in all nations of the world; we will pursue these objectives until all nations of the world are reached for Jesus Christ” (*The Covenant*, 2021).

Despite these shared vision and mission statement, cultural dissonances occur among the congregations. The tendency of cultural dissonances often cause panic in the leadership circle of the Church. Sometime in the



year 2000, during the Ministers (Leadership) Conference, the General Overseer (G.O) of the Church, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, took a strict stance against all forms of cultural prejudices within the denomination. The G.O (as he is fondly called by his members) issued a stern warning against cultural separatism, and called those who fanned the embers of cultural – dissonances to order. This tendency also stimulated leadership of the Church to seek culturally – appropriate means to promote interculturality among the congregations, from the Parish level, the Area level (made up of 5 parishes), to the Zonal level, comprising of, at least, two Areas. For example, among other strategies, the General Overseer composed a special congregational anthem for the Mission in 2020, in which emphasis is placed on virtues such as unity, love, and shared destiny. All members of the Mission, regardless of cultural disparities, are described as ‘covenant children united in love’ in the song. This special song must be rendered in unison by all members of a congregation whenever a meeting/service is rounded off. This song is rendered standing up, while all congregations join hands across the aisles as a symbol of unity. The adoption of an anthem to be sang in harmony among a congregation is not peculiar to RCCG. Many Pentecostal denominations have, in the past, adopted similar congregational anthems to foster a sense of togetherness (Archer, 2011).

Culturally-learned differences reinforce prejudices and dissonances among people with dissimilar cultures (Kruger, 2019). This is particularly more prevalent within social contexts, such as the workplace and religious settings that bring people from diverse cultural orientations together to achieve common goals. The importance of intercultural strategy in religious context, especially the Church, cannot be over-emphasised as the Church been a melting point of cultures since its inception around 33AD, despite having a unified biblical canon. However, the Church has never been immune from the challenges that cultural diversity poses (Harvey, 2020).

In this paper, the authors appraise the challenges of interculturality in Shekinah Zone (that is a group of more than ten parishes) of the



Cultural Diversity and Challenges of Interculturality in RCCG Samonda, Ibadan: Report of Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

To examine individual level of intercultural communication competence of the leadership of the parishes of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Shekinah Zone, Oyo Province 16, Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria, a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted by the researchers among pastors in charge of zone. The FGD was held on Sunday 1st October 2023 at the Zonal Headquarters in Samanda, Ibadan. A total of nine (9) pastors, representing nine (9) parishes in the zone, participated in the FGD. The parishes are: Shekinah Glory Parish, Breakthrough Parish, Redemption Parish, Salvation Assembly Parish, Messiah Ambassador Parish, His Glory Pavilion Parish, Royal Sanctuary Parish, Latter Glory Parish, and Mercy Land Parish. The FGD was based on cultural diversity, interculturality within the parishes, and the strategies adopted by the pastors to manage their interplay within the congregations. Overall, the FGD was designed to strike a balance between the intercultural communication competence of the participants and their disposition to applying the competence to solving problems arising from cultural diversity among their congregations.

The talking points focused on six main subjects, namely:

- ❖ The level of awareness of cultural diversity among leaders in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Shekinah Zone.
- ❖ The challenges (if any) of cultural diversity to leadership experience among leaders in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Shekinah Zone.
- ❖ The relationship between gift sharing, Christian Social Responsibility and cultural diversity in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Shekinah Zone.
- ❖ The effects on gift sharing on church growth, such as attendance on the days set aside to share gifts and the commitment of members to, for example, evangelism in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Shekinah Zone.



Findings:

Most of the pastors indicated that their parishes comprised of multicultural membership as follows:

- ❖ Shekinah Glory Parish membership comprises of Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Edo, and Ikwere
- ❖ Peace Assembly: Multicultural membership comprises of Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, and Egede
- ❖ Royal Sanctuary Parish membership comprises of Yoruba, Hausa, and Egede
- ❖ Redemption Parish: Multicultural membership comprises of Yoruba, Igbo Edo, and Egede
- ❖ Salvation Parish: Multicultural membership comprises of Yoruba and Igbo
- ❖ Breakthrough Parish: Multicultural membership comprises of Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo
- ❖ Messiah Ambassador: Multicultural membership comprises of Yoruba, Igbo, and Togolese
- ❖ Latter Glory Assembly: Multicultural membership comprises of Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa
- ❖ His Glory Pavilion: Multicultural membership comprises of Yoruba and Igbo.

What the responses suggest is that all the participants demonstrated strong awareness of cultural diversity in their parishes.

Question 2: Has cultural diversity been a challenge to your leadership experience in the Church?

Findings:

Some participants claimed they have no challenges of cultural diversity, as the case with Salvation Parish and Redemption Parish. However, there are indications that cultural diversity constitutes many challenges to leadership experience in some local churches. This is particularly the case where a section of the church is made of non-literate people in English language, which is usually the language of conducting services, especially of sermon rendition. This challenge is not peculiar to any



cultural group, but is prevalent among non-Yoruba speaking members, who are not familiar with the language of the environment.

In Royal Sanctuary Parish, for instance, there were challenges arising from cultural diversity.

For instance, the Egede and Hausa-speaking components of membership of the parish are mostly non-literate in the English language, which is the official language of conducting services, and are yet not-fully integrated into the language of the environment, which is Yoruba, thereby posing a challenge of communication. We, however, have overcome the challenge by interpreting our sermons through a third-party interpreter, especially to the Hausa-speaking members. The Egede group is assimilating the Yoruba language through interaction with the Yoruba-speaking members.

The same challenges were reported by Mercy Land Parish:

We have a similar challenge. Two women that just joined the parish do not understand the English Language. Even before they joined the church, we had people on ground who used the mixture of Yoruba and English language to communicate sermons and other information to those who did not understanding either Yoruba or the English language very well.

In both instances, intercultural communication is enhanced through third party interpretation of sermons. The use of “pidgin” English (mixture of dialect and English language) been adopted to drive home the points is an intercultural communication strategy. Besides, interpersonal relationship is fostered through this.

Question 3: What is the relationship between gift sharing, Christian Social Responsibility and cultural diversity?

Findings:

Almost all the participants claimed that they share gifts to members on certain Sundays in the month that are set aside for the purpose of



embarking on Social Responsibility programmes (Roger, 1991). For instance, some participants (3 parishes) claimed that they share gifts on every first Sunday of the month, which coincides with the monthly thanksgiving service of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Some participants (3) claimed that they share gifts on every third Sunday of the month. While two (2) participants claimed that they share gifts twice monthly, that is, on every first and third Sundays, only 1 participant indicated that they share gifts to commemorate the birthdays of members. Two (2) participants claimed that they share gifts to members in their parishes on every Sunday. Overall, all the participants indicated that they share gifts to members, at least, once in a month. The responses are summarised below church-by-church:

- ❖ Redemption Parish: We share gifts to members every Sunday.
- ❖ Royal Sanctuary Parish: ‘We share gifts twice in a month, first Sunday (thanksgiving service) and on every third Sunday of the month for convenience’.
- ❖ Mercy Land Parish: ‘We share gifts every third Sunday’.
- ❖ His Glory Pavilion Parish: ‘We do it to commemorate the birthday of every member. It might twice or once monthly’.
- ❖ Salvation Parish: ‘We do it on third Sunday alone’.
- ❖ Messiah Ambassador Parish: ‘It is only on thanksgiving service that we share gift’.
- ❖ Breakthrough Parish: ‘We have it every thanksgiving Sunday’.
- ❖ Peace Assembly: ‘We share gifts almost every Sunday’.

Question 4: Does gift sharing have any effects on church growth, such as attendance on the days set aside to share gifts and the commitment of members to, for example, evangelism?

Findings:

All the participants reported that gift sharing has positive effects on church attendance. According to Mercy Land Parish, ‘everybody wants to come on that day, primarily to partake in the goodies’. Shekinah Glory Parish claimed that ‘gift sharing does affect attendance. The attendance is usually higher on the days we share gifts than on the days we do not



share gifts.’ Also, Salvation Parish indicated that ‘on the days we share gifts there is always increase in attendance’. Redemption parish observed that gift sharing ‘motivates members to come for the next service’, while Peace Assembly reported that ‘we have great attendance when we share gifts’. Almost all the participants also indicated that gift sharing as a strategy had positive impacts on the commitment of members to evangelism.

According to the participant from Royal Sanctuary Parish:

When we share gifts, we tell people to bring their neighbours. So, a lot of people find it easy to bring their neighbours if the neighbours have been told that prior Sundays they were given certain gifts. So, consistently, we get people’s commitment, as there were also gifts for people who bring more than a person. We reward people with gifts, and because of that some people want to go all out to ensure that they bring somebody to service.

Similarly, in the words of the participant from Salvation Parish:

The reward gift is like a bait to bring in more people because they will have something to take home. These are mostly students who look forward to have something to take home.

Also, the participants from Latter Glory Assembly claimed similar benefits. He says:

The sharing of gifts has been very helpful. It helps us to keep the members and not losing them.

However, the participant representing Breakthrough Parish observed that they go beyond gift sharing and embark on other interventions to get people committed. He observes:

Through our intervention and follow up, we have seen certain number of them (non-members) committed, and now they are our members.



was tied to cultural restraints. That day the family could not partake in the gift sharing.

Similar incidence was reported by participant from Mercy Land Parish:

It happened a long time ago in our parish when we shared gift of yam among members. One of the beneficiaries returned the tubers gifted their family the next day, because they claimed that the person that shared the gifts was not supposed to be the one to do so, based on personal or class conflict or offence on the part of the beneficiary.

Question 6: How do we improve on our cross-cultural communication skills and strategy to grow the church in the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Shekinah Zone?

Findings:

The challenges of cross-cultural limitation compelled participating parishes to devise means to build bridges across-cultural constituents in the church. Specific instances of how the challenges of cross-cultural limitations were resolved were reported by the participants. These include third party interpretations of sermons, mixed language praise and worship sessions. In addition, the observation of cultural days in which every cultural group in the country (in the Church) is allowed to render special ministrations in songs, dance, drama and poems (*ewi*) to ensure that nobody is left behind in the church. According to participant from Royal Sanctuary Parish:

In my parish two Hausa men joined the parish sometimes ago. But they could barely speak English, nor did they understand Yoruba. We devised a means of communicating to them through a third-party interpreter, also a Hausa-speaking person, but who speaks spattering English.

Similarly, the participant from Messiah Ambassador Parish observed that:



A certain person who had wanted to join the church but could not because of language barriers but decided to rejoin because we do interpret our sermons now.

Also, the participant from Peace Assembly Parish observed that:

When we start service, we mix the language right from praise and worship session.

The participant from Shekinah Glory Parish suggested closer interaction across cultures, or what he called 'language of love', especially with minority cultural groups in the church to improve cross-cultural interactions. In his words:

We can use visitation as a language of love. Although they may not understand the language of the environment often spoken in the Church, if we move closer to them, interact with and win them over, it can encourage them to be interested in what we are doing in the Church.

Discussions

From the analysis of the data presented above, there is strong cultural diversity in the parishes, and pastors in the zones are aware that cultural diversity affect intercultural communication and interactions among the congregations. Thus, to harmonise cultural differences among their congregations, the Pastors adopted some measures, such as third-party interpretation of sermons, adoption of mixed languages in song renditions during services, particularly to accommodate the interests of minority groups among the members.

In other words, the pastors manifest the understanding that their congregations comprise people with different people at different social class and level of life, which contribute to their attitude and behaviour in most cases. Indeed, the seven behavioural measures of intercultural competence proposed in Rubens' theory, namely, display of respect; interaction posture; orientation to knowledge; empathy; self-oriented role behaviour; interaction management; and tolerance for ambiguity, manifest themselves within the church at different degrees.



Overall, there is a positive correlation between intercultural communication among the congregations and their behavioural manifestations. For example, in the management of linguistic differences among the congregations, they display respect, empathy and manifest a positive interaction posture. Thus, culturally-appropriate behaviours, such as use of a common language, such as the English Language, or culture-specific languages, and a third-party interpretation were adopted in during worship and sermon sessions, to mitigate the effects of linguistic diversity and protect the interest of minority languages speakers within the congregations.

In almost all the parishes, sharing of gifts is adopted to bridge the gaps between different people at different social class and level of life within the congregations. The sharing of gift as social responsibility activity has been successfully used to improve the commitment of members. But the practice has, to an extent, revealed that some members of congregation have low tolerance for ambiguity. In the context of Ruben's Theory of Intercultural Competence, 'tolerance for ambiguity' describes an individual's ability to "react to new and ambiguous situations with little visible discomfort'. However, the level of tolerance that certain segments of the congregations manifest in dealing with certain ambiguities that come gift sharing does not align with expectations. There is a tendency for some individuals to reject certain gifts that they consider culturally inappropriate, even when they fully know that the purpose of sharing gifts was humanitarian. For example, there was a case of family in one of the parishes who rejected okro on account that it was a taboo in their culture to eat the vegetable.

There was also a challenge with interaction management in regards to sharing of gifts. There was a case in a Parish, where a beneficiary of a gift returned it, because she had expected the item to be shared in a more discreet manner. The person in question felt that the gift should not have been delivered to her through an individual she considered of a lower social class. Overall, these cases indicate that strategies for intercultural competence within the Parishes were imperfect, and leaves room for



improvement in their intercultural communication skills and strategy.

Conclusion

Intercultural competence and diversity management strategy is necessary for effective leadership in any human organization that is characterized with cultural diversity. The Church, like any other multicultural human organization, is not totally immune from challenges of interculturality. Church leaders, particularly pastors, bear the responsibility to manage diversity of human experiences among the congregations, and mobilise them toward achieving common goals. This responsibility, however, requires a certain degree of cultural consciousness in pastoral leadership, as well as a willingness to act appropriately. The lack of cultural consciousness and willingness to adopt culturally–appropriate methods to accomplish may result into cultural dissonances and disunity among the congregation and, ultimately, hamper the mission goals of the church.

Overall, the findings suggest that pastors are aware of their responsibility to manage cultural diversity, harmonise members' cultural experiences and promote interculturality among the worshippers. It further suggests that Pastors within the zone have a considerably high degree of cultural consciousness, and were willing to promote positive intercultural behaviours among the worshippers. However, the leadership of the church still faces certain culturally-based dissonance and disunity among the congregation, which, in some ways, impinge negatively on overall mission objectives of the church. Thus, in order to promote interculturality among the congregations and mobilise them toward achieving common visions and missions of the church, the leadership of the church needs to adopt certain measures that are recommended in this paper.

Recommendations

1. Based on the foregoing findings and apart from further training in intercultural competence, the leaders and church members are



- expected to manifest Christ-like character, such as respect for people regardless of their cultural affiliation.
2. The need to show empathy for others and tolerate every member in the congregation no matter social class, sexual orientation and level of service in the church.
 3. It is also recommended that Pastors know their members cultural preferences and disposition and treat each cultural preference accordingly.
 4. The linguistic preferences are a good example. Based on the linguistic composition of their parishes, Pastors should make provision for the language differences in their churches through an appropriate use of, first and foremost, the immediate language of the church environment, which is likely to be the language of the majority.
 5. Pastors should make provision for secondary languages, namely, languages that are not necessarily the immediate language of the environment, but which are represented within the congregations. Another strategy recommended is the observation of cultural days. On such days, every cultural group is represented and allowed to participate fairly through extra-liturgical interventions, such as special ministrations in songs, dance, drama and poems (in local languages) with other culture-specific performances.
 6. Overall, the success of these measures depends on intercultural competence and diversity management strategy of pastoral leadership.

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