

ISLAM and Christianity are both inherent parts of the identities of Nigerians and the Nigerian nation. Since these religions are so important within Nigeria, one would assume that Nigerians going abroad would take their religion with them as a central part of their cultural identity.

Islam was and still is an important dimension of the identity of those Nigerians who long ago moved in large numbers to Sudan, Tunisia, and other places in the Middle East.

What about Nigerians christians who have more recently gone to the Western world where religious belief is becoming out of fashion, and where christianity appears to be declining as an important part of every day life? What does christianity mean for Nigerian christians in such an environment?

The history of Christian missions in Nigeria is well documented. The religion first found success in Nigeria through the efforts of converted recaptives in Sierra Leone who began returning home in the mid-1800s. They were followed by Christian missionaries from all over the world, predominantly from the United States and the United Kingdom.

Within a surprisingly short amount of time from the dates of the first conversions of Nigerians, some of these mission churches began

# Christianity in the USA: The Nigerian revolution



sending Nigerian missionaries abroad.

One of the best examples is the Evangelical Missionary Society (EMS), the missionary wing of the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA). Founded in 1949 in Biliri, Gombe State, by the mid-1950s, the EMS was sending missionaries to other African countries. Today, the mission's 1,200 missionaries are spread throughout Nigeria, other parts of West Africa, and beyond, including missionaries serving in London and Chicago.

For a variety of reasons, Nigerian Christians began breaking off from the mainline mission churches to launch the formation of what has become the multitudes of African independent churches, now a central part of Nigerian christianity.

These churches also began sending missionaries abroad

within a remarkably short period of time, especially when one considers how many centuries it took most European protestant churches to get involved in missions.

For example, the Church of the Lord (Aladura) began sending missionaries to Sierra Leone and Liberia in 1947, and to the Gold Coast in 1953. On April 12, 1964, E. A. Adejobi, a Church of the Lord (Aladura) minister who had gone to Scotland for further studies, established the First West African Christian Church in Europe. In the congregation were Nigerians, Sierra Leonions, Ghanaians, and a few white Britons.

By 1965, through their Liberia mission connection, the church had made progress among Methodists and Bap-



tists in Atlanta, New York, and Philadelphia. The tables had begun to turn. Africans were now bringing a very Africanized form of christianity back to the Westerners who had first brought a very Westernized version of the same faith to them.

The number of Nigerian missionaries and churches abroad continues to grow, and the focus of the missionaries and churches are twofold. Primarily, the aim is to carry on spreading the message of christianity as Christ commanded in the Great Commission. The secondary aim is to provide a home away from home to Nigerians and other Africans abroad.

Leaving Nigeria to go to the Western world is a dream of many, but once one arrives, the loneliness can be overwhelming. Nigerian churches abroad help Nigerians find community and a taste of home, even while far

removed from the family, friends, and fellowship left behind. These Nigerians in turn spread Nigerian christianity and culture to others who join their churches.

One example is the International Chapel of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Brooklyn, New York, USA. The church was founded by a small group of Nigerians in March 1998 and now serves a self-supporting congregation of about 150. Nimi Wariboko, the pastor of Brooklyn RCCG, came to church leadership following success in a completely different occupation, just like the world famous former mathematics professor, E. A. Adeboye, RCCG's General Overseer.

After securing his MBA from Columbia University,

Pastor Nimi Wariboko returned to Nigeria where he became the head of the corporate finance division of All States Trust Bank. One of his Columbia University professors had been so impressed by his academic performance that he called Wariboko back to the United States in 1994 to work on Wall Street as an investment banker. Pastor Woriboko quit his lucrative job in investment banking in August 1998 in order to devote more time to the pastoring of RCCG Brooklyn.

A man blessed with a golden touch in the business world, he now has great ambitions for his church in Brooklyn. Plans are already under way to raise \$1,000,000 to build a worship centre in Brooklyn, but even that is only a small part of the church's vision. In explaining the vision, Pastor Woriboko told me, "We have to be the biggest church in America,

we want a church that can seat 500,000 people in Brooklyn. We want not only to grow in size, but to be a centre of holiness and miracles. We put our emphasis on spirituality, not prosperity."

Attending the church certainly does make one feel they are back in Nigeria. Deep in the heart of Brooklyn, the worship takes place in a converted storefront with the energetic preaching, singing, dancing, and praying that makes Nigerian christianity so dynamic. It is only when one goes outside into the cold weather after the service that one realizes that Nigeria is actually far away.

Adesegun Oyesanya Jr. came to Brooklyn six months ago from Ikeja. He found the church, one of the five RCCG churches in the New York City area, off the RCCG's sophisticated website ([www.rccg.org](http://www.rccg.org)); and now works closely with Pastor Wariboko.

"The church provides me with spiritual fulfillment,"

Oyesanya commented, "but the bonus is seeing all your own people."

Another church member, Samuel Adeoye, an accounting student at Medgar-Evers College, said that when he came to the United States three years ago, he was surprised to discover that christianity was not as important to the society as he had expected. After trying other Nigerian churches in the area such as the Apostolic Church and Deeper Life, he decided to settle down at RCCG.

"The ultimate reason for attending here," he said, "is that it makes me feel at home."

Emeka Justin Emenike, a former classmate of mine at UniJos, and presently a graduate student in communications at Brooklyn College, said that in academic and professional settings, Nigerians do not usually work together due to the individualistic nature of American society. RCCG Brooklyn, however, is a different case.

According to Emenike, "It's like a home away from home. It's a nucleus of Nigerians abroad where they can come together to share and commune."

Christian fellowship is a key means for Nigerians far from home to find solace in times of loneliness and homesickness. But Nigerian christianity is also much more than that. Through the depth of christian commitment and the dynamism of Nigerian worship as expressed in churches like RCCG Brooklyn, Westerners otherwise losing interest in their traditional churches are returning to the Christian faith, learning much about Nigerian culture in the process.

A century ago, Western cultural norms were transported to Nigeria through the work of Christian missionaries from the West. Who would have predicted that a century later, christianity would be the means by which Nigerian culture would be imbibed by Westerners?