

Research Report

Balancing material prosperity with spiritual growth for effective Christian citizenship: the case of women of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon

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Abstract - It has generally been realized by churches in Cameroon that their role in the public sphere could no longer be narrowly defined by spiritual nourishment of their members. This is especially so in a local and national context of growing poverty and social exclusion, especially of women. This essay seeks to understand why and how women of the Full Gospel Mission Cameroon have recently mobilized local resources and resourcefulness to enhance their socioeconomic welfare. The contribution also explores why broader ideals of the gospel of prosperity embraced by Pentecostal churches in Cameroon have been appropriated and domesticated by women of the church through self-help socioeconomic activities. By getting involved in these activities, not only are women struggling to mitigate the effects of poverty, but also signals an implicit embrace of the ideals of liberation theology that recently emerged in Africa.

Key words: Cameroon, Material Prosperity, Christian Identity, Spiritual Growth, Full Gospel Mission

Introduction and Context of Study

It is difficult to take in the full breath of the history of contemporary Cameroon without making reference to the role of Christianity in the process of state and societal formation. Mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon (PCC) have long been active in the public sphere through the provision of schools and hospitals to assist in the education and health care of the local population. This has been in addition to their main task of spreading the gospel. This influence has been more pronounced in the past three decades because of their role in the democratization process. This development witnessed serious changes in the political landscape of Cameroon and other African countries as churches and other civil society organizations fought hard to throw-off undemocratic and corrupt postcolonial regimes that had since independence in the 1960s failed to serve the economic and social needs of ordinary citizens (Gifford 1995). In the specific case of Cameroon, churches played a prominent role in the democratization process by articulating a counter-hegemonic social and political discourse designed to bring pressure to bear on the government of Cameroon to embark on genuine democratic reforms respective of the civil and political rights of Cameroonians. This explains why these mainline churches tended to pressure the government to ensure that citizens obtained relief from all forms of material, moral and spiritual indignities (Ni-Nku 1993). This new outlook of social and political life in Cameroon embraced by churches and a constellation of local civil society organizations could be linked to the emergence of a new international climate that favored democratic values and economic reforms (Akoko and Mbuagbo 2006). It should be recalled that these reforms were essentially prescribed by the World Bank and other international financial institutions as condition for continued economic assistance in the wake of collapsing local economies. The general economic and social collapse served as breeding ground not only for the active political and social role of historic mainline churches such as the PCC, but also acted as catalyst for the phenomenal numerical growth of the new Pentecostal wave in Cameroon and Africa.

It is in this context of growing economic hardship that churches emerged to provide hope and aspirations by mobilizing local resources and resourcefulness to mitigate the harsh realities of growing poverty to which vast majority of citizens in Africa were exposed. Faced with this growing misery and the insecurity that came in its wake, churches in Cameroon realized that their role in the public sphere could no longer be narrowly defined by spiritual nourishment of members, but must extend their reach to practical economic activities in order to remain relevant at this critical historical moment. Cameroonians increasingly turned to churches for salvation hoping that some invisible spiritual forces could provide hope and meaning to their shattered lives. In this regard, churches have generated practical ways to engage the increasingly difficult socioeconomic and political landscape by providing social and economic services through ministry in the face of crumbling and unreliable state structures.

For Pentecostal-Charismatic churches such as Full Gospel Mission Cameroon, the developing economic crisis in Cameroon was linked to the structure of sin (Akoko 2004), that is, to the morally and socially corrosive behavior of national political elites in Cameroon on the one hand, and also to the world economic disorder that favors the rich (Pastoral Letter of the Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church in Cameroon, 1990). This anti-Gospel spirit in Cameroon, that found expression in corruption and the notorious embezzlement of public funds (Transparency International, 1999; Tabe and Mbuagbo 2012), tended to promote the culture of anti-citizenship in both the private and public sphere as political and bureaucratic elites increasingly transformed the state apparatus to a resource base for primitive accumulation. This explains why several churches and church leaders drew the attention of the government of Cameroon to the dangers involved if these social ills were left unchecked (Ni-Nku 1993). As a counter-measure to this developing economic and political crisis in the country, churches in Cameroon encouraged their members to work hard and shun the temptations that economic misery could bring. The development of self-help economic activities by women of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon could be a reaction to this call for Christians to embrace a new work ethic geared towards economic regeneration. These local economic initiatives seem to fall in line with efforts by motley of Christian churches at rebuilding the social and economic fabric of Cameroon from below. By taking on board the ideal of Christian citizenship as drives of economic and social

regeneration, these self-help economic activities enable participants to walk a fine line between Christian moral responsibility and material growth of members. In this way, local appropriation of the gospel of prosperity by women of FGM appears to implicitly inform the background from which the ideal Christian citizen operates. By engaging in gainful economic activities, personal success is valued and legitimated because it is attributed to divine forces. Generally speaking, for Pentecostal churches such as FGM, wealth is a sign that one has found favor with God, a discourse among Pentecostal churches that has resonated and attracted both the rich and poor in many underdeveloped regions of the world (Mayrargue 2008). This discourse is underwritten by a firm belief in the power of the Holy Spirit which is supposed to manifest itself here and now through healing, riches, and prophesy as overt signs of the power of God. Preaching the virtues of prosperity through miracles is the linchpin of the flourishing Pentecostal terrain as they invoke the Holy Spirit to lead their members to experience financial and social “breakthrough” in all their endeavors. These messages of prosperity and the get-rich-quick syndrome occasioned by its appeal have attracted several Africans especially the economically deprived (Diara and Onah 2014). As in Nigeria for example (Oruwari 2001), the growth of Pentecostalism in Cameroon is rooted more in economic difficulties and the stress resulting from the failure of the postcolonial state project. While mainline churches in Cameroon engaged the state directly by critiquing its dismal political and human rights record, Pentecostal churches preached directly to the social and economic needs of their faithful, enjoining them to work hard while praying so the Holy Spirit could transform their material condition here on earth. From this perspective, there is a complete shift from the Biblical injunction that blessed are the poor to blessed are the rich here on earth, a discourse that gives Pentecostal churches a distinct advantage of grassroots support as they are thought to bring hope to their faithful in an apparently difficult and hopeless world.

This section examines the role of FGM women in the town of Buea in the Southwest region of Cameroon in the social and economic reconstruction of society. Focusing on how local resources and resourcefulness are mobilized through self-help groups, the analysis offers an understanding of how notions of the gospel of prosperity embraced by Pentecostal churches in Cameroon have been appropriated and domesticated by women’s groups in order to develop a sense of national belonging. Though not specifically articulated by Pentecostal churches in Cameroon, the question of Christian citizenship can be inferred from their teachings and activities as far as it is

believed by Pentecostal churches that to attain heavenly citizenship starts with Christian engagement here on earth through hard work which is recompensed through material gain as visible sign of Gods approval. This Pentecostal framework of a divinely inspired work ethic is foundational for an earthly citizenship as what is approved here on earth is equally sanctioned in heaven. This Pentecostal perspective could be compared to Weber's concept of the 'calling' in the Protestant ethic that motivates individuals to embrace worldly success as well Christian citizenship in this Pentecostal understanding implies a duty to do God's will so as to gain material salvation now on earth and spiritual bliss in the hereafter. To achieve this goal mutual assistance through self-help designed to improve the welfare of members and the community at large is part of the duty here on earth. Christian citizenship enjoins members to become self-reliant and mutually supporting to achieve not only spiritual growth, but material and financial self-sufficiency to avoid the large temptations of falling into sin that poverty could encourage.

Balancing Material Prosperity with Christian Moral Growth

Like several Pentecostal churches in Cameroon and elsewhere, some of the doctrines of FGM include divine healing and protection, and more recently, a shift from complete asceticism to the gospel of prosperity. This shift in focus is legitimated by the growing poverty and misery to which Christians are subjected and the realization that material prosperity could be a force for spiritual growth. In this regard, all assemblies of FGM encourage women to form groups to become mutually supporting to enhance spiritual and material growth. Empowering women to contribute meaningfully to the welfare of society is part of Christian citizenship. The role of Christian women in reshaping local economies to improve upon their livelihood and those of their families cannot be overemphasized especially as women historically constitute majority of members in most Christian denominations. And recently new religious movements such as Pentecostal churches have placed the needs of women on a higher pedestal promising them liberation and emancipation from social and economic drudgery. In this connection, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements have provided ethical guidelines to enable women cope with the difficulties of life and by so doing serve as a platform to negotiate the project of modernity premised on material accumulation in consonance with the general gospel of prosperity (Mapuranga 2012). This could not

have been otherwise given the African postcolonial state failed project to respond to the social and economic needs of historically marginalized womenfolk and attempts by Pentecostal churches to fill the vacuum left by the state have made them attractive sites for women who draw on the heavenly kingdom to fulfill their earthly aspirations. In order therefore to come to terms with the volatile and precarious circumstances that surround their lives, churches appear to offer alternative platforms and programs through which women could re-imagine and reinvent their social and economic lives and give it meaning.

Generally speaking, citizenship involves the right of participation in the decision-making of institutions that govern the economic, cultural and political lives of individuals, and this is deemed to serve the good of the wider community. This implies that citizens are active in governance proceedings, through democratic selection of leaders for example, and such an inclusive process characterizes modern democratic states (Aigner et al. 2001). Within the context however, of the vast movement and claims for democratic forms of governance from a variety of social forces such as churches and NGOs in the 1990s, there was a re-examination and re-definition of the citizenship crisis through critically and consciously searching for a realization of a wider definition of citizenship that goes beyond the restricted and essentially statist and institutional understanding to one based on shared social and spiritual bonds. The wave of democratization that swept across much of the world in the early years of the 1990s imposed new challenges to Christian churches who became involved in the movement towards democratic and inclusive forms of governance. And as the economic crisis restricted government intervention in the welfare of citizens, churches faced new challenges of providing relief to their faithful (Mbuagbo 2009) and the ideal Christian citizenship was articulated through the social mobilization of Christians and resources for the promotion of the social and economic welfare of members, that is, beyond the purely legal and political definition of citizenship. This inclusive citizenship that is underwritten by an appeal to both the heavenly and earthly realm led Darragh (2011) to argue that there is a close relationship between an understanding of the Kingdom of God and Christian involvement in contemporary society. This understanding is underscored as strategic when it provides direction and guidance to Christian involvement in society. In this connection, Christians are actually enjoined to commit to societal development because their actions are spiritually sanctioned and therefore embrace in a particular place and time the hope of the realm of God on earth. On this

basis, Christian commitment and public action can be reconciled as one serves as the basis for the other, and are actually mutually reinforcing. An understanding of the Kingdom of God could serve simultaneously as arbiters of social relations and purveyors of Christian values.

Along the lines of the foregoing discussion, TerHaar (2013) maintains that effective development of the human person requires the necessary mobilization of every available resource, including spiritual resources for the improvement of man. In this conception, the separation of the secular and the sacred has no place in an Africa that is largely spirit-oriented. In other words, religion is the basis of social action for many, and the explosion of religion in the public sphere since the 1980s in Africa is itself a big question mark and a challenge to the secularization thesis as a predestined global development. Because there is no separation, in the African cosmogony, between the spiritual and the physical, TerHaar invokes the idea of spiritual capital, that is, people's ability to access resources believed to reside in an invisible world which can be mobilized for the common good. This kind of spiritual capital that is cultivated through commitment to the realm of God and as a charter for human action in the physical world can be translated to material gain. For Ranger (2008), an African holism which implicitly brings together the secular and the religious always prevails and attempts to see the two kingdoms as separate stand little chance in enhancing understanding of the peculiarities of the African social world. While this integrated view of life appears to be collapsing as a result of influences from Western education and politics that compartmentalizes the world into the sacred and secular, or religion and politics (Muchena 1996), the holistic view of life in many an African setting remains relevant and on the experiences of many in the continent this Western bifurcation appears to be a contradiction in terms. It is this holistic view of man as both a physical and spiritual entity that underscores the involvement of women of FGM Cameroon in gainful economic activities that may be described in terms of the common good. This dynamic conception of reality as a totality indicates that participation by Christians in the struggle to construct a more just and fraternal society which advocates the dignity of man as its objective is an indication of the vital role of introducing a divine dimension into the practical activities of man. It is probably in this direction that the FGM document celebrating 50 Years of that church in Cameroon points to the unity of purpose between the Godly realm and the secular realm since it is believed the former should point direction to the latter. The document states that in spite of the numerous

economic, political and social challenges imposed by the so-called modern era, Christians are nevertheless encouraged by the fact that God is still on His throne and in control of all human affairs. This appears to be the source of hope for Christians in a capitalist-driven world where the manic and unprincipled accumulation of wealth has seen the marginalization of large swaths of people in both the developed and developing worlds. Such an optimistic vision in a difficult social and economic context has been the rallying point for ordinary Christians who throng to Pentecostal churches in hope of better days ahead. One of the immediate perspectives, therefore, of FGM is to encourage entrepreneurial skills and ventures with the knowledge that through prayers, God will intervene for a successful outcome. Ojo (2005) has affirmed that there is no fundamental opposition between Christian growth and material acquisition and that salvation is seen to encompass both the spiritual and material dimensions of human existence. In this regard, the Kingdom of God does not reject material acquisition. On the contrary, it encourages a disciplined and spiritually guided material acquisition and in this way the spiritual and the material dimensions of human existence finds fulfillment. Christian citizenship is therefore a socially engaged project that requires God's guidance in transforming the social and physical conditions of man. This is precisely why women of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon use the Bible as a tool to engage in socially and economically viable ventures as a route to the social transformation of society.

On a broader note, Lewison (2011) attributes this new Christian outlook of the prosperity gospel embraced by Pentecostal churches as the outcome of globalization and to significant social restructuring as Pentecostal movements have carved out new niches of demand for meaning, community and livelihood in an increasing uncertain world. The appeal of Pentecostalism, the argument continues, derives from its ability of converting the challenges of the present times onto its basic cosmology of personal salvation by providing a supportive framework for individuals to reinvent and re-imagine their everyday lives in relation to contemporary processes of globalization. In this way, Pentecostalism allows its believers to develop a sense of empowerment and personal agency in relation to developments of the surrounding world. Through the gospel of prosperity, individuals can transcend social spaces cursed with poverty and backwardness and embrace modernity in the form of material prosperity.

A Note on Full Gospel Mission in Cameroon

Full Gospel Mission Cameroon is one of the oldest Pentecostal churches in Cameroon and it is the biggest in terms of membership. Rev. Werner Knorr of German origin introduced the church in Cameroon in 1961 under the sponsorship of the United Missions Friends Inc of Germany (Knorr 2001). Though introduced in 1961, the state of Cameroon officially authorized its activities in 1969 by presidential decree No.069/DF/154 of 26 April 1969 and ministerial order No. 73A/ME/ATF/DAP/LP/1 of 10 June 1969. According to 2015 statistics from the office of the national superintendent of the church, it has a membership of roughly 90.000 with more than 700 assemblies (local churches) located in all regions of the country. Membership has been increasing rapidly and the church has penetrated all nooks and crannies of the country. FGM church has gone down in record as the first Pentecostal church in Cameroon which has extended its activities beyond the national frontiers. It has assemblies in Nigeria, Chad, USA, South Africa, and the Central African Republic. This high rate of growth can be attributed to some of its doctrines and practices such as divine healing and protection, evangelization strategies of the church, and a shift from complete asceticism to a gospel of prosperity (Akoko 2004). In addition to these internal dynamics of the church, the recent political liberalization in Cameroon that allowed for freedom of worship also encouraged the expansion and growth of FGM. It also goes down in record as the first Pentecostal church to have been introduced into Nigeria from Cameroon. This development is rather interesting because Pentecostalism was introduced into Cameroon from Nigeria and a majority of the existing Pentecostal groups in Cameroon were founded by Nigerians (Knorr 2001, Akoko 2002).

Just like mainline churches such as the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, Full Gospel Mission runs a number of establishments in the areas of health and education. In the area of health, FGM has two hospitals located in the towns of Yaounde, and Garoua and three health centres located in Mamfe, Mbakang and Banteng. It runs a nursing school in the town of Bamenda which trains nurses for these health establishments. In the domain of education, FGM runs eleven nursery and primary schools in Cameroon. For the training of its clergy, it has two Bible institutes. One of the institutes is located in Bamenda in the northwest region of Cameroon and the other in Nigeria. Graduates of

these institutes are issued undergraduate diplomas after two years of training and for higher certificates; it runs a Higher Bible Institute in the town of Mbalmayo which offers degrees to graduates. Within the structure of the church, there are a number of ministries. These are the men ministry, the youth ministry, the children ministry, the women ministry, the intercessory ministry, and the music ministry. According to the 2016 church almanac, these ministries are created to keep the gospel alive.

Regarding the women ministry which is the focus of this paper, its national coordinator Madam Kankeur, revealed that the objectives of the ministry are to unite all the women of FGM to help spread the gospel and to lead the life of a ‘believer’, both at home and in the community. In this vain the ministry is concerned with women living as good and faithful housewives/mothers. The women’s ministry periodically organizes training programs where women can acquire some basic knowledge on things like needlework, child welfare, food and nutrition, moral education, hygiene and sanitation at home. Apart from the above objectives, the women’s ministry has given material assistance to some mission projects considered important for church growth. These include; the purchase of a deep-freezer for the Bible Institute in Bamenda, furnishing the office of the national superintendent of the church, buying beds for the Full Gospel Technical College Muyuka, the construction of a women’s prayer house in Bamenda and Yaounde, helping the needy and prisoners in several parts of Cameroon.

Mobilizing Local Resources and Resourcefulness

Greenberg (2000) has shown that the church is a powerful tool for revitalizing politics and the community by connecting people to the political process. By enabling and fostering institutional participation, the church could be at the centre of creating social capital or features of social life through networks, norms and trust that enables participants to act together more effectively to attain shared goals. By drawing on their potential to connect people the church can serve as source of opportunities, resources, and incentives. The FGM women have in various ways translated this social capital into concrete social and economic actions in keeping with the vision of the church. These groups are sites of frequent and regular social interaction through which time is spent to reinforce members not only with requirements of living a proper Christian life, but also to create in them necessary practical skills that could be explored by participants to confront the realities of daily life. The hallmark of these frequent meetings is for women

to see the implications of religious teaching for daily life. The economic activities embarked upon by women of FGM do not only reconnect women of various social and cultural backgrounds, but is more importantly a shared space and site for reinvigorating community life in a context where the state in Cameroon has failed dismally to live up to its promises for a prosperous society for Cameroonians. FGM and other Pentecostal churches in Cameroon unlike the PCC and RCC have never taken official position on political and social developments in Cameroon, and simply regard the economic crisis as a form of divine punishment due to the refusal of majority of Cameroonians to “accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour” or become “born again”. Born again requires repentance, a penitent disposition for Christians to “give their lives to Christ (Akoko 2008). But in Nigeria and Kenya for example, Pentecostal churches have either supported undemocratic regimes or stood firmly against them. In Kenya, several Pentecostal churches supported the repressive regime of President Daniel ArapMoi (Gifford 1998). While not being politically involved in Cameroon, recently FGM has embraced accumulation by Christians as solution to the economic crisis, and so doing embraced the gospel of prosperity. This marked a shift in doctrine from asceticism to a gospel of prosperity to provide social services to members as mainline churches in Cameroon have historically done. FGM has followed the path of mainline churches in providing income generating services in the areas of education, health and printing. Like their mainline counterparts, Full Gospel Mission Cameroon is deeply concerned with the question of poverty alleviation among its members, especially among women and children who constitute the bulk of their followers. These churches have devoted resources to the creation of women ministries which is a strong organ of the administrative structure of these churches charged with mobilizing women to fight the economic downturn in Cameroon as a group. Akoko (2008) has argued that these women ministries have helped to empower women economically and socially which accounts for their continued existence. Socialization in spiritual matters, but equally practically providing resources and developing practical skills for women to be independent explains the relevance of religious organizations in the public sphere in Africa.

This explains why in recent years, religious associations and communities have come increasingly into public view, especially in the role they play within the field of social care and welfare in specific neighbourhoods (Malda-Douma 2013). To concretize their presence within communities, FGM has a women’s ministry charged with

organizing and mobilizing women to pull resources together to fight the economic crisis which has been particularly damaging to them (World Bank, 1994). While spreading the teachings of the church, the ministry provides practical tuition in several areas to help women generate income. By empowering women economically, they can in turn pay for children's fees and health care, for example. Local experts in various income generating activities are often invited as resource persons to educate women on skills such as soap making and knitting. Thrift and loan schemes (locally known as Njangi) are also encouraged. Members are encouraged to obtain loans at very low interest rates to operate a business either individually or collectively. As a measure against any defaulter who fails to pay back the loan, collaterals are usually requested when giving out loans. Training of women for economic improvement, that is, home science, is partly a solution to the on-going economic crisis in Cameroon. These solutions are sought by divine means through prayers and fasting and it is believed that solutions arrived at are basically the work of the Holy Spirit. Within assemblies, for instance, Buea town, the women have in collaboration with the women ministry; strive to empower the women economically. Kamara (2004) in one of her publications on how this is carried out within the assembly begins by using a biblical passage which argues that a virtuous woman uses her hands, head and talents to do great exploits for her family and through these she can become a blessing to her family and community. She revealed that the women of the assembly have adopted such qualities and have been able to pay for the schooling of their children, solve health and other social problems of their families. The women department of the central church provides expert at the request of women of the Buea town assembly to train them in various income generating skills through which they can raise some income to alleviate poverty. They are trained on the making of items such as soap, neckties, dyeing, production and sale of palm oil, fish pies, body lotions, cakes, scotch eggs and mayonnaise

Another scheme adopted by women of the Buea town assembly for the women to raise income is organizing afternoon classes for candidates intending to write public examinations which upon graduation will be automatically recruited into the civil service. According to Kamara candidates for these classes pay a stated amount and any profit made is put in a bank account run by the women of the assembly. The money in the account is kept at the disposal of members. Money can always be withdrawn from the account and given out as loans to those members who may want to borrow at a very

moderate interest rate. Any interest yielded from this account could be used to support some church projects. These local economic initiatives are important because they serve as new social forces that cater not only to the spiritual needs of members, but are veritable arenas for social networking in a context of uncertain economic and social climate. This socially engaged Christianity provides hope and aspirations in the face of social and economic insecurity and serve as anchor among members beyond their purely spiritual definitions. The constructive potentials of members are mobilized within the concrete circumstances that surround the spiritual and material needs of women in particular neighborhoods. The underlying importance of working in groups is not only the spiritual nourishment gained by members through prayers at meetings, but their role in building neighborhood solidarity in pursuit of some collective economic objective.

Conclusion

The primary goal of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon is to develop members spiritually, but this role has increasingly embraced the socio-economic dimension because of the realization that the spiritual growth of Christians can be enhanced if their material needs are addressed. Also important is the fact that there is no fundamental contradiction between the spiritual and the material realms of human existence. This contribution has tried to show how economic reforms of the 1990s reshaped economic policies of the global South especially Africa with nefarious consequences for ordinary people. This development led to the growth and spread of Pentecostal churches that floated the prosperity gospel as a way of coping with the new global economic and social realities. This explains to a large extent why prosperity theology has witnessed spectacular growth in recent decades in Africa. Prosperity gospel entails that the faithful rely on God and trust Him for physical sustenance, a conception that has deep biblical roots. By pooling their spiritual and material resources together, women of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon have created new social spaces or networks that allow them to express themselves publicly through a form of religious socialization that embraces the material and spiritual dimensions of existence. The outcome of working in groups is that it enhances Christian participation in the affairs of communities. Religion in this context is not to be understood as an engagement only with the otherworldly, but a tool to relate to the wider social reality. For many of these women, group participation brings meaning and hope and a source of inspiration to change. This is especially so in the case

of profound difficult economic and social situations as experienced by many Africans south of the Sahara. From the experience of women of the Full Gospel Mission Cameroon, religion drives people to mobilize around shared spiritual and social objectives, and forming groups to arrive at such objectives is a way of engaging contemporary social and economic realities. Christian citizenship entails such an engagement.

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