

## **Evolving Strategic Plan of Action Towards Gender Equality in the Priesthood of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria**

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**Abstract:** This study examined strategy that could be developed to address the issue of gender inequality in the priesthood of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria. Though in the church, women were included in the priesthood but there is no true representation especially at the highest cadre of the priestly hierarchy in terms of gender. The need for more women to participate in the priesthood is informed by the fact that women constitute majority in the population of the church. Using both the primary and secondary source of data collection, the findings of the research revealed that the highest level of the priesthood in RCCG is still largely controlled by men. Women are making steady progress as Parish, Area and Zonal Pastors, though the gap is still wide. Some of the factors that was identified as the reasons for the disparity include, the negative attitude of women, motherhood, genetics basis for sexual role and the culture of most ethnic group in Nigeria that is gender stereotyped. Based on the findings, a model of priesthood for offices and duties for females was proposed to improve female participation in the priesthood. The offices and duties to be allocated for female in the model was specified in order to solve some of the problems for poor representation of women in the priesthood. In the light of the study, it was recommended that the admission of women into the priesthood of RCCG would guarantee wholeness in Christ. The research also contended that Theological institutions and Tertiary Education should include gender issues in their curricula.

**Key words:** Priesthood, gender, redeemed church, scripture, denomination, leadership

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the years, the place of women in the priesthood has been a subject of debate among scholars in the field of religion, especially among the feminist theologians. In the priesthood, women were reported to be few according to the regional breakdown given by the World Alliance Reformed Churches. The statistical data showed that only 66% out of 116 denominations sampled, including those in Nigeria accept women into the priesthood.

Although, there might have been an improvement now because of the time lag. Specifically, some Nigerian scholars have shown in their various researchers that there is an improvement in the gap between male and female in the priesthood, as the Pentecostal churches are more receptive to women priesthood than the orthodox denominations who are not favourably disposed to it. (Je'Adayibe, 2000). This notwithstanding, gender disparity is still noticeable, hence, the need for this study in order to evolve strategic plan of action that could help in improving the total number of women in the priesthood of the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

The study will be divided into four major sections namely: a brief survey of the historical origin of RCCG, the

place of women in the priesthood of RCCG, factors identified as responsible for the constraints of women in the priesthood of the church, proposed model of priesthood to be developed for full integration of women in all the priestly cadre and finally conclusions and recommendations.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**A brief survey of the historical origin of the redeemed Christian Church of God:** Pa Josiah Akindayomi (1909-1981) started The Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria in 1952. Akindayomi was raised in the tribal state of Ondo, Nigeria.

His search for the creator led him to be baptized by the Church Missionary Society in 1927. Somewhat dissatisfied with this group, in 1931 he joined the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. Around 1947, he began to believe that the church was departing from the faith. Akindayomi left the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in 1952 to start a House Fellowship with nine members. Akindayomi led the growing church until his death in 1981 when Enoch Adejare Adebayo assumed leadership (Olayinwola, 2002).

Adeboye joined the RCCG in 1973 and was ordained a Pastor in 1975. Some of his earliest involvement was in translating Akindayomi's sermons in Yoruba to English. Adeboye's appointment was confirmed by the sealed pronouncement by Pa Akindayomi after his burial.

Pa Akindayomi called his House Fellowship the Glory of God Fellowship. He felt, he received the true church name through a vision of words that appeared to be written on a blackboard. The words were The Redeemed Christian Church of God. Amazingly, Pa Akindayomi who could not read or write was supernaturally able to write these words down (Ayegboyin and Isola, 1997).

The statement of the faith of the RCCG reveals beliefs in the divine inspiration of the Bible; the trinity, the deity, virgin birth, sinless life, crucifixion, resurrection and return of Jesus Christ. The mission of the church is to proclaim the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ to the lost and to admonish that we live a sanctified life, growing constantly in the faith for the advancement of the kingdom of God and to the glory of the Lord.

There are over 4,000 parishes of RCCG globally. The church is present in the continents of Africa, in Cameroon, Cote D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Uganda, Zaire, Zambia and Senegal. The church also has a presence in Europe and USA.

**The place of women in the priesthood of redeemed Christian Church of God:** Women in the RCCG receive a great deal of visibility like their male counterparts. They are integrated in the decision making processes and exercise certain degree of power and authority. Women are seen as spiritually important as men, many of whom hold leadership positions in the church.

Within the church, there are women who are commissioned into the Pastoral office. The religious position of the church variously styled Pastors or ministers are seen to have a distinct role in teaching, pastoral, leadership and administration of sacraments. These roles were not seen as male preserves, women were also commissioned as Pastor, Assistant Pastor and Deaconess. It is therefore necessary at this juncture to note that despite the encouragement given to women to serve in various capacities in the priesthood of the church and taking into account that women form 60% of church membership that power of decision are still entirely in the hands of men. Besides, the principal positions of authority in the church are usually held by men. The General Overseer, Provincial Pastors, Zonal Pastors, Area Pastors, Parish Pastors and so on are usually all men.

**Table 1: Statistics of males and females in the priesthood of RCCG**

Positions	No. of male	No. of female
General Overseer	1	NIL
Deputy General Overseer	1	NIL
Assistant General Overseers	6	NIL
Provincial Pastors	60	3
Assistant Provincial Pastors	6	NIL
Regional Pastors	5	NIL
Regional Evangelists	5	NIL
Zonal Pastors	219	6
Area Pastors	5,361	44
Parish Pastors	9,775	432

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Table 1 shows the breakdown of the level of women's involvement in RCCG.

From Table 1, it is very obvious that the highest level of priesthood in the church is still largely controlled by men. Nevertheless, as the Table 1 has shown, women are making steady progress as Parish, Area and Zonal Pastors in the church, though the gap is still very wide. The Table 1 shows that more women work as Parish Pastors than any other line of work in the priesthood. Women made up only three at the Provincial Pastor cadre. This phenomenon suggests that disparities still exist in the church despite the arguments given by some scholars that the Pentecostal churches are more receptive to women priesthood.

This could further be given a graphical representation to show again the extent of the disparity. In Fig. 1, the graphical representation of the priestly order in RCCG, showing areas where women are more crowded.

In the Fig. 1, the broken and straight lines were used to illustrate the area of priesthood shared by both male and female in the RCCG. Below, the priestly hierarchy, the two arrows at both end of the two lines were used to indicate area where women were many and almost at a par with men in the priesthood of the church. While few women three have been able to get to the position of Provincial Pastor, they are excluded from most of the senior priestly positions (A.G.O, D.G.O and G.O). The main reason for putting the bracket between the broken and the straight lines is to show the area of major disparity.

However, one thing that is observed in the gendo-graphic representation given above is that the higher the positions/responsibilities, the fewer the number of women climbing the ladder with men. The idea is that as one moves up, responsibilities increase and few women are on ground to assume those positions of higher responsibilities.

Apart from this, even though most women at the middle of the priestly hierarchy have been able to fulfil the necessary conditions for a chance to the topmost

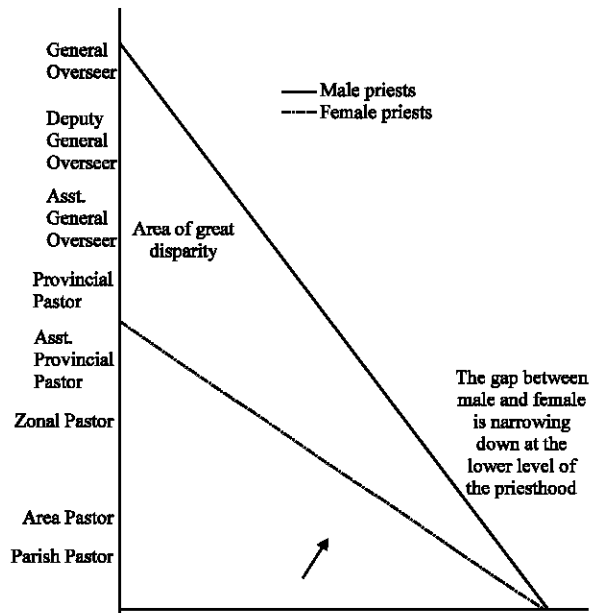


Fig. 1: Gendo-graphic representation of priestly order in RCCG

position, a barrier exists for them. This is usually based on the assumptions that most women dissipate energy in different directions and as such prefers being at the middle level of the priestly hierarchy that does not demand much research.

Based on the above, it stands to reason that some factors must have contributed to the low level of women involvement in the priesthood of RCCG. Hence, the next sub-heading will take a cursory look at some of those factors.

### Some factors contributing to gender disparity in the priesthood of RCCG

**The negative attitude of women:** One of the most notable factors contributing to gender disparity in the priesthood of RCCG is the negative attitude of some women in the church. Through the researcher's personal observations and interactions with women in the church, it was observed that most of the women were not willing to take up the position of responsibilities like a Pastor. This is because they believe the research is too tasking and time-consuming. In the church, the researcher observed that some of the women have to be compelled and persuaded to join the School of Disciples where workers are being trained before ordination into the priesthood. The usual complaint from some of these women is that it is not easy and convenient to combine the duties of a Pastor with the domestic responsibilities.

Also, the priesthood according to some of the researcher's informant said, is full of challenges and pressures. To further confirm this, two female Pastors were interviewed by the researcher and their view was in line with the above point. They said, the fear of coping with the stress associated with the work contribute to poor representation of women at the top hierarchy of the priesthood. Women, they said are still expected to take major responsibilities for maintaining a household, raising children even nurturing an intimate relationship. So for this reason, it is believed that the church will continue to record low turn out of women for the priesthood.

The kind of pressure that one of the female Pastors mentioned is the pressure of the job itself. She said, for women and men, general management of duties may at times be burdensome. They fast and pray, confront people with different levels of problem and receive endless phone calls. The work continues twenty-four hours and may at times grapple with problems that have no right answers. Meanwhile, the church must grow and not static.

They are responsible for the strategy and tactics of deciding the church growth and which one needs pruning. Thus, in order to achieve this, they must conduct programmes where souls need be won and also not relent in the area of evangelism and prayers.

Actually, it need be mentioned that the above kind of pressures are not foreign to men. It is not a piece of cake for anyone. But the fact still remains that sex bias creates some different experiences and additional hurdles for women on the job. The pressure of managing the demands in life outside work generally affects women far more than men. At higher levels, these pressures can become debilitating. The support systems available to help men are not always there for women.

**Motherhood:** Motherhood continues to inhibit women's participation in the priesthood. The primary association between women and motherhood has brought joys and opportunities for empowerment as well as affect most women's access to the priesthood. It has justified the enormous amount of work they do in the home and encouraged most women to set their sights majorly on babies rather than in other forms of work.

Also, the burden of pregnancy, breastfeeding and child care are things that make women less prominent in the priesthood. The immediate result is that it is always difficult for a nursing mother to combine her work with the work of priesthood, which at times may tend to be rigorous (Shaw and Lee, 2001). For instance, men

rationalised, with some validity that the most important jobs required an employee's complete devotion and women with children would always suffer from a division of loyalties in the end, the children they are noted would be considered first by most women (McGraken, 1972).

**The genetics basis for sexual roles:** The factors that have shaped the different role of men and women in the society are partly genetic, partly social. Man and woman are physically different and this predisposes them to different tasks. However, as leadership and domination go, these seem to have been determined mostly by the expectations of the society. It is mainly the way which society lays down its objectives and norms of behaviour that has effectively dictated the fate of men and women.

Moreover, men and women are different biologically. There are inborn traits, which dispose them to different tasks in the society. Although, such differences should not be exaggerated. They are part and parcel of person's physical and mental make-up. In short, man projects an image of strength, woman on the other hand, possesses a body that is structured for motherhood (McGraken, 1972).

These findings have been confirmed by studies in different social milieus and culture. An interesting finding in this regard was the one given by Robert D. McGracken in his book. He said, the differences, in task assignment are based on what is called sexual dimorphism. That is, male species possess greater size and strength and is physically more suited to strenuous tasks.

Apart from the above, another finding was given which dealt with the effects of sex-hormones-the male androgens, especially testosterone and the female estrogens-on the central nervous systems. The evidence according to Robert indicates that striking differences exist in certain brain structures of males and females in varieties of animal species. Thus, these differences are strongly associated with mental functioning, behaviour and dispositions to certain tasks in the society. The point is that viewed in terms of a significant number of traits, men and women are decidedly different and it is erroneous to view them as equivalents. However, it stands to reason that the physical and psychological implications of innate differences between men and women dispose woman to perform certain roles in the society rather than other ones. This to a large extent, contributes to gender disparity being experienced in the priesthood.

**Culture:** One of the most probable root cause of gender disparity in the priesthood is culture. Culture in this sense

is the quality in every society that shapes the way things are done and the understanding of why this should be so (Olaleye and Laogun, 2004).

In most societies, there are clear patterns of women's and men's work both in the household and in the wider community and cultural explanations of why this should be. The patterns and explanations differ among societies and change over time. While gender relations may vary from society to society, the general pattern or usually assumption is that women have less personal autonomous, fewer resources at their disposal and limited influence over the decision making processes that shape their societies and their own lives.

However, using traditional Yoruba culture as example, history made it known that the content of their traditional education maintained a rigid division of labour. The duties and responsibilities of both male and female were clearly spelt out. A female was to play subordinate role and are not allowed to take important decisions. Besides, female education was designed to make her primarily effective mother and housewife. Hence, girls are brought up in the traditional family group to be passive, obedient and submissive to men. A girl child grows up to believe that there are certain roles in the society that are reserved for women and some for men. This perception of roles has greatly affected the desire of women to aspire to certain offices or to desire a particular status in life.

Male child on the other hand is encouraged to be aggressive, competitive and independent. They are further assisted by a traditional political arrangement where men were the ones at the helms of affairs either as kings, chiefs, clerics and the likes. Hence, the supremacy of men was firmly rooted in Yoruba traditional societies (Adelowo, 2006).

These arrangements perhaps might have been what was translated into gender gap being experienced in the priesthood of the church in the past and now.

In the light of this, it is therefore imperative at this juncture to take a look at ways of solving gender inequality in the priesthood of RCCG. This will be done by recommending a model of priesthood for offices and duties for female.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Strategic plan of action towards eliminating gender inequality in the priesthood of RCCG:** Although, there is no law barring women from being at the highest cadre of the priestly hierarchy in the RCCG and from being made the General Overseers, but some of the factors identified above have assigned to women a second class status.

Thus, in order to take care of the constraint that lead to women under-utilization in the church, it is therefore the contention of the researcher to recommend another model of priesthood that could be adopted in the church.

Although in some cases, the models that are most suitable to a particular mission will be those developed over the years of church tradition. In other cases, new models need to be developed that are more adequately suited for the prevailing situations, especially at a period like this, when the issue of transfer, child rearing, pregnancy, the menstrual cycle of women and age of entry were major factors that made women not to show more interest in the priesthood. In other words, the age of entry and duties to be allocated for women in the new model would be specified because of the following:

- Priesthood is labour-intensive and women dissipate energy in many directions
- Priesthood is time-consuming and women are too busy and need to take enough rest during pregnancy
- Child-rearing problems-Young mothers need to take care of their homes and children
- The hubby who is not a Pastor could cope or adjust because he realizes that the work is not enormous at the lower level and also get adjusted as the wife progresses
- Priesthood requires purity-women's menstrual cycle noted to be defiling needs to be taken into consideration
- Priesthood requires being transferred from one station to another-only elderly mothers probably will be able to adjust with the issue of transfer. The reason for putting transfer at the highest priestly cadre

In the light of all this, new model of priesthood that could be explored are hereby designed.

From the model of priesthood for gender in Table 2, it is assumed that women will be able to fit into all the levels of the priestly hierarchy, irrespective of any constraints. This is because the model has taken care of most of the reasons for the under-utilization of women in the priesthood of the church. Also, with the above in mind, it will not be as if women are disadvantaged or marginalized in some area of activities but in a way, it reflects how much concern is shown for their physical and mental being. In fact, women will see the work interesting, easier and also help them to manage menopause period well. Besides, it will afford them opportunities to grow.

However, all the priests in Nigerian context need theological training as a prerequisite to fit into the system. This is necessary to check the wrong interpretations and mis-representations of scripture. It will also go a long way to check every Tom, Dick and Harry in religious duties. Then, the fact that one cannot dabble into other professional field without basic requirements make it necessary to use learning in the field of religion as a necessary condition for pastoral work. For example, as rightly observed in the work of Oshun (2009), he says:

Improved levels of formal and theological education which combine a balanced integration of intellectuality and spirituality would be a significant panacea to catalyse the House of the Clergy, into one responsible, enlightened, dedicated, respectable and acceptable body (Oshun, 2009).

From these things, it could be said that if people in the priesthood are enlightened and knowledgeable,

**Table 2: Proposed female priesthood models for offices and duties in RCCG**

Offices	Requirements	Nature of activities
Senior Priest: Comprises the first three levels of priestly hierarchy	Both male and female: For men, no specific age is required. For women between ages 51 and above. Educational background: as described	Men will perform all pastoral duties at this level Women at this level can begin to give Holy Communion, pronouncing blessings on couples, baptism and every other sacerdotal duties one can think of (Because she is now in menopause period). She can also be transferred
Priest: This comprises all the middle level of priestly hierarchy	For men, no specific age is required. For women between ages (39-50). Educational background: as described	The work here will be a little above the previous ones. Evangelism, preaching and other pastoral duties are to be performed here by both sexes. But men alone are to administer the Holy Communion while women assist in distribution of those ones already consecrated. Women can be transferred here after 3 years of experience at this level
Deacon: Comprises the lowest level of priestly hierarchy	For men, no specific age is required. For women, between ages 27-38 (This period coincides with child care, home care and here she must have gotten married. So, she is a young mother and she is interested in pastoral work. Theological training required for both sexes plus universal Degree especially in Religious Studies (optional)	Less rigorous work. This level is more or less training level for both male and female who have just passed out of theological schools. They are to minister alongside with other senior priests. Blessing of marriage, baptism, administration of Eucharist must strictly be the duties of senior priests and priests here

there will be no room for mediocrity and wrong representations of the scripture and even self-centredness.

Lastly, having known the requirements, the model will encourage both male and female to enter the priesthood without any stress. It will help to reduce gender disparity in the priesthood of RCCG to the barest minimum. But it should be noted that hardwork is very essential before one can move to the next level of each hierarchy. So, the women are hereby encouraged to tap this opportunities made available for them to work and move at the same pace with men to the next level of each priestly hierarchy.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is a great deal of written material available concerning this area and it is not necessarily feasible to draw up a conclusive list of what women are and are not allowed to do. It is difficult to know exactly where to draw the line when it comes to women's priesthood, as scholars do interpret the parts of scriptures relating to women in varying ways, sadly often because they are more concerned with using the Bible to back up their opinions rather than forming their opinions as a result of what they read in the Bible.

But we must not neglect our calling as Christian men and women, to serve God and to do so in line with what we know to be true from the Bible. The controversies of this area can easily distract us from doing this and as a result, there must be a point where each woman must decide how she will apply these truths to her life.

Moreover, the cry of the women today is to allow them a warm response to the priesthood as women did to Jesus' ministry. With this, women in RCCG can find the same rich fulfilment in serving Christ as did the Marys and Marthas of Judea or the Joannas and Susannas of Galilee. Then as the mind of globalization sweeps across the world, with all its attendant consequences, women need be grafted into the mainstream of church priesthood.

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