

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE CHURCH OF THE LORD (*ALADURA*)⁶⁴

1. Introduction

The Church of the Lord (C.L.) started with only ten people who attended its inauguration at Ogere on July 30, 1930. The group has grown into an International organisation with the expansion of the Church beyond Nigeria since 1947 to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, London, United States and Europe. The members who constituted themselves into this fellowship followed a catechist, Oshitelu who parted company with the Anglican Church over the accusation that he was engaging in unorthodox practices like relying on healing through prayer alone, use of consecrated water and holy names. When Oshitelu could not be persuaded to desist from these practices he was shown the door out of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Anglican Church.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this chapter are to accomplish making students to:

- (a) Understand the beginning and development of the C.L.
- (b) Discern some of the beliefs and practices which are peculiar to the C. L.

3. Content

(a) *The Founder*: Josiah Oshitelu

Ifakoya Dawodu Oshitelu was born at Ogere to pagan parents in 1902. He renounced his first two names at his baptism and took the names: Josiah Oluwalowo (God deserves honour).⁶⁵ As a boy, Oshitelu demonstrated much zeal for the things of the Lord and after his elementary education he continued in the service of the Anglican Church as a pupil teacher and catechist.

(b) *His Call*

Oshitelu was preparing to go to St. Andrew's College in Oyo to become a trained teacher when, on the night of May 17, 1925, he started having a series of intense visionary experiences which haunted him and made him to become restless. On investigation, an old Prophet Somoye explained these encounters to mean that Oshitelu had been called to work in God's vineyard as a prophet. Papa Somoye counselled Oshitelu to desist from the use of traditional medicine, put his faith in God and use the book of Psalms for his daily devotion. On the instructions of Pa Somoye, Oshitelu commenced fasting with prayer.

⁶⁴ For details, see Harold Turner, *History of an African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord (Aladura), Vol. I; The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura), Vol. II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967; J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968; P. B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Arnold, 1986; Wobo Sam, *A Life Course of Dr. J. O. Oshitelu* (Ogere, Nigeria: n.p., 1955, and A F. Walls, "Building to Last: Harold Turner and the Study of Religion," in A F. Walls and Wilbert Shenk, (eds.) *Exploring New Religious Movements: Essays in Honour of Harold Turner* (Elkhart: Mission Focus, 1990), pp. 1-18. For the development and growth of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in Ghana, see C. G. Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of Some Spiritual Churches* (London: OUP., 1962). For its expansion in Sierra Leone, see H. W. Turner, "The Church of the Lord: The Expansion of a Nigerian Independent Church in Siena Leone and Ghana," *Journal of African History* Vol. 3, 1 (1963): pp. 91-110.

⁶⁵ "Ifakoya" literally means, *Ifá*, (god of oracle) refuses suffering; while Dawodu is the Yoruba version of the Arabic name for David. The first name indicates he came from a pagan background and then converted to Islam. Our attention has been drawn to the fact that Oshitelu was not a convert from Islam rather his name "Dawodu" denotes that he was the first male child in the family. See Oshitelu, R.O.O. *African Initiated Churches*, Lit Verlag Munster, 2002, pp 56ff, 122ff.

Not long afterwards, Oshitelu began to hear voices which confirmed Prophet Somoye's predictions. From that point in time, Oshitelu grew in spiritual development through disciplines of prayer and fasting. Within a short time, some elders in the Anglican Church noticed the new dimensions which Oshitelu was introducing into the accepted practices of the Church and cautioned him to desist from those so-called erroneous beliefs, practices and teaching.

When Oshitelu was adamant, he was dismissed from the Anglican Church. He went back to Pa Somoye for a two year stay of apprenticeship as a disciple until in 1929 when he emerged as a public and prophetic preacher. He organised his first revival in his hometown on the 9th of June at Ogere. He inaugurated his Church the following year, July 1930 at the same place.

(c) The Expansion of the Ministry

Oshitelu's fame spread quickly as did those of the leaders of the Indigenous Churches like Orimolade, Captain Abiodun, Joseph Babalola and J. B. Sadare. The Faith Tabernacle leaders expressed interest in knowing more about the energetic young prophet from Ogere. However, disagreements over Oshitelu's use of holy names and what he called "sealed words" kept the two groups apart. Some of the strange words revealed to him include holy names such as *Awobisillal* (Healer) *Arrabablathus*, *Anomonomollahujah*. Oshitelu insisted on using these holy names quoting Ezekiel 33:7, "So will I make my holy name known in the midst of my people. . ." in support of his convictions. He advised that henceforth the leaders of the F.T. should mind their own business while he minds his.

With promptitude, Oshitelu and his disciples embarked on mass evangelistic campaigns which yielded fruitful results. The C.L. spread quickly starting from Oyo and Ijebu towns. Further expansion took the Church into the Ondo and Ekiti lands. Subsequent major developments awaited the advent of a gifted evangelist Adeleke Adejobi who joined the ministry in 1940. He has resigned his appointments as a teacher to become Primate Oshitelu's disciple.

In the mid-1940's Adejobi managed to establish branches in Lagos where earlier emissaries had failed. From here the Church spread rapidly into the Edo speaking areas. Expansion into the other regions of Nigeria also followed soon.

In 1945, Primate Oshitelu had a vision about the expansion of his Church beyond Nigeria. He commissioned Apostles Adejobi and Oduwole to launch out to other African countries. Adejobi was dispatched to Sierra Leone while Oduwole went to Liberia. The two Apostles later converged to establish in some other West African countries. While Adejobi was on a two-year course at the Glasgow Bible Training Institute in 1961, he inaugurated the first branch of the CL outside Africa, thus fulfilling Primate Oshitelu's prophecy that the Church would go beyond the African continent.

(d) Some beliefs and practices

Some of the unique practices of the CL include the following:

(i) **Prayer and Fasting:** In obedience to the instruction of the Primate who prescribed strenuous religious exercises especially prayer and fasting to aid Christian discipline, the CL has instituted a wide range of prayer techniques. These include a three-hourly prayer, day and night; some meticulous use of the Psalms; pronouncement of holy words and the number of times some prayers should be said. Special vigil and healing clinic services are held weekly. Places where prayers are said include the mercy ground home altars, hills, and the beach. Fasting is regularly practiced because along with prayer, it is believed to induce and make revelations in dreams and visions sharper. There's a variety of fasting which includes: the ordinary, dry and white fasting.

(ii) Pattern of Worship: The Church preserves a substantial part of the Anglican Church practices. All the Anglican's Lent, Easter, Whitsun and Palm Sundays are observed. Except that during the Lent the Church is usually cleared of pews. Worshippers sit on the floor, the altar and the sanctuary are covered. Ministers and choristers may wear black gowns, drums and other instruments are usually discarded. On Easter eve the Church is scrubbed and polished, the fresh covers and curtains adorn the sanctuary.

(iii) Thanksgiving: Public thanksgiving by individuals or groups during service are usually very elaborate. The individual recounts the acts of goodness and mercy of God. Each group or individual's thanksgiving concludes with seven spiritual exercises which include: shouting 'Halleluyah,' 'Hossana,' *Wura*, followed by outbursts of laughter, then jumping, prostrating before the Lord, and singing.

(iv) Revelations: Ministers and elders with the spiritual gifts of making known things which are hidden or secret, prefix their revelations with the declaration that the message comes from the Lord before whom one must not tell lies. If the message is spoken in unknown tongue the minister may interpret it. As the message comes forth the members receiving the revelation are expected to be kneeling or prostrating before the Lord.

(v) Sacred Objects: Items which are treated with reverence in the CL include the staff of office for the minister. It is also known as the 'rod of power.' The minister uses it to touch things such as fruits, oil, water and the forehead of one seeking spiritual help — it is what the prophet uses for consecration. The Church also uses the holy rosary, vestments, small and handy crosses. Candles, incense and other symbolic objects like palm leaves are also used.

(vi) Spiritual exercises: Apart from fasting, one of the rigorous' spiritual exercises which members engage in include rolling on the sand. This exercise which is also called "struggling" or wrestling in the sandy mercy ground may be prescribed by a minister. The number of times this rolling from one end of the mercy ground to the other may also be dictated by the minister. This is usually done as a sign of deep sorrow, sincere self-humiliation and earnest pleading.

(vii) Healing technique: The procedure for healing, unless otherwise dictated by the Holy Spirit, include confession of moral wrongs, by the person who needs healing, followed by the exorcising or expulsion of evil spirits, priestly blessings and administration of holy words. Some petitioners may be expected to live at the Church premises for a time. Such people join the service especially at prayer time. The CL believes in water-cure. Sanctified water is perpetually on the altar and in the mercy ground.

(viii) Removal of Sandals: Before entering the Church or the mercy ground, members are enjoined to take off their sandals. They maintain that "no foot wear of any kind can be taken into our house of prayer." This is explained with the experience of Moses before the burning bush. It is a sign of honour to come to God's presence without sandals, they affirm.

(ix) Annual Festival of Taborar: This is an annual pilgrimage festival. It is held on August 22nd at Ogere and other places designated "Mount Taborar" in countries where the Church has been established. It is a time of joy, a time to fulfill vows made in the previous years and a time to seek the face of the Lord for the coming year. Elaborate predictions of events which would happen to individuals, churches, organisations and nations are made.

(x) Polygamy: The Church seems to tolerate polygamous marriage apparently because the first Primate, Oshitelu had many wives. He however explained that God allowed him to have multiple wives as a compensation for obeying God's order to enter the ministry first before thinking of marriage.

4. Summary

The CL is an indigenous break-away group which parted company with the Anglican Church when its originator was dismissed from the Anglican Assembly because he was introducing unorthodox rituals into the accepted beliefs and practices of the Anglicans. The Church was formally launched in July 1930. From Nigeria the Church spread to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Togo, Ivory Coast and London. Some of the practices, which set the CL apart from other indigenous churches, include use of glossolalic words, holy names that are neither of Yoruba, Greek or Hebrew origin. Others include its distinctive sacred objects, rolling on the sand, annual Taborar festival and observance of a variety of fasting.

5. Post-Test

- (i) Trace the origin and development of the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) in Nigeria.
- (ii) Discuss the practices and beliefs of the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*).
- (iii) How biblical are the characteristic doctrines of the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*)?
- (iv) Explain the special features of the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*). Evaluate the motives for introducing such distinctive features.
- (v) Assess the achievements of Primate Oshitelu and his Church of the Lord (*Aladura*).