



EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ASSEMBLIES OF GOD CHURCH TO THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF NORTHERN CROSS RIVER STATE

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Abstract

This paper examines the contributions of Assemblies of God Church to the socio-religious and economic development of Northern Cross River State. The aim of this paper is to understand the contribution of Assemblies of God Church (AGC) towards the spiritual and economic advancement of the people of Northern Cross River. To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher adopts qualitative research approach by using relevant literatures and interviews as instrument of data collection. The study discovered that the Assemblies of God Church (AGC) has contributed significantly to the socio-religious, educational and economic development of Northern Cross River State through involvement in community-building, charitable initiatives, economic support and empowerment schemes. It identified charitable initiatives such as annual financial support to widows and physically challenged persons. The Ogoja District has an institutionalized empowerment scheme that is aim at economic support of young people within Northern Cross River. Furthermore, the church organizes programmes such as youth's annual Bible quiz and debate, compulsory Sunday school for all members, and pastoral training and retreats for all clergies. The study commend and recommend Assemblies of God Church efforts towards socio-religious and economic development of Northern Cross River State. However, it is important that such efforts be extended beyond members of the church.

Keywords: Assemblies of God Church, Socio-Religious Development, Economic Development, Community Transformation, and Northern Cross River State.

Introduction

The history of Assemblies of God Church in Northern Cross River State will never be complete or adequately documented without taking an overview of the history of the church in Nigeria. The Assemblies of God Church in Nigeria began in the year 1931 and has since then spread nationwide. Between the years 1931 to the year 1935, a group of young men and women soundly converted and living at Old Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria, were deeply involved in reading various periodicals that informed them of many people in many lands who were receiving the Baptism of the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues, according to (Acts: 2:4). They became convinced that the Pentecostal experience was for them too. Within a short while, many of them



were blessed with the Baptism in the Holy Spirit with evidenced of speaking in tongues. This led to their breaking away from the Faith Tabernacle Congregation (FTC) and started what they called "The Church of Jesus Christ" (CJC) in 1934. They established a number of churches within that period.

At that time, they were not affiliated to any Western missions but after much prayer, they requested the American Assemblies of God (AG) to send them a missionary. In June, 1939, Rev & Mrs. Williams Lloyd Shirer, a missionary in what was then called Gold Coast (Ghana), was sent to meet the few pastors and young men of the Church of Jesus Christ (CJC). They worked out an agreement of affiliation with the Assemblies of God in Springfield, Missouri, USA and the CJC was officially renamed as Assemblies of God (AOG). In early July 1939, the Shirers returned to Tamele, Gold Coast (Ghana). Late in August, 1939, the affiliation agreement was officially sanctioned. Rev. Shirers recommendation to the American Assemblies of God (AAG) resulted in Rev. & Mrs. Everest L. Philips coming to Nigeria in February, 1940. Other Missionaries soon followed. Consequently, both the Nigerian Pastors and the Overseas Missionaries found a great response to their preaching of the gospel and church planting efforts.

According to Edem (76), the earliest Assemblies of God missionaries who came to Ogoja were Rev. K. L. Godbey, who arrived Obudu in 1952, and settled at Sankwula, while Miss Jacobson, who later became Mrs. Bauer, came to Bekwarra the following year and settled at Anyikang in Chief Ogbudu Ori's compound. Meanwhile Rev. and Mrs. Walter Kornelson also arrived. Ekaju and Mbube. Other pioneer missionaries were Miss Florence Metcalfe, Rev. R. Carlson and Miss Rubby Peterson. They came at different times for the purpose of preaching the gospel. As a result, many of the natives abandoned their shrines and turn to serving the living God.

Impact

In this paper, impact refers to the measurable positive contributions of the Assemblies of God Church in Northern Cross River State. These contributions include spiritual development, socio-economic benefits, community engagement, and cultural influence. Impact will be assessed through indicators such as church membership growth, community service activities, spiritual programs, and testimonies from church members.

Historical Development of Assemblies of God Church (AGC)

The history and origin of the Assemblies of God can be trace to the United States of America (USA) where it was initially associated or affiliated to the Church of Jesus Christ (Nmah, 116; Onwuhaa, 61). The church was a product of the three stages of the religious revolutionary movements that took place in the USA, and gave birth to movements such as the Holiness movement, the Pentecostal movement and then came the birth of the Assemblies of God (ezeigo 65).

The late nineteenth century, saw the breakage of several groups away from the Methodist Church in the USA with aim of proclaiming the second blessing experience that follows conversion into faith. The groups that separated from the Methodist Church, motivated by the desire to live life of holiness and condemn the moral vices in the church came to be known and referred to as the holiness movements (Okpara, 2014). The holiness movements are two brand types and they are



the Wesleyan Holiness Movement and the Keswick Holiness Movement. The Wesleyan Holiness Movement believed and professed that a person who had been converted or justified might undergo another spiritual experience called second blessing or sanctification through the enablement of the Holy Spirit to live a sinless, perfect and holy Christian life. On the other hand, the Keswick believed in salvation, sanctification and a third blessing that is called baptism for service (Nmah 116). This movement was formed in 1905 in an alliance made up of Salvation Army, Missionary Alliance and the Church of the Nazarene (Iroka, 117). They all pulled out from the Methodist Church to form their various movements. It is interesting that both Wesleyan and Keswick Holiness Movements believed and taught the Armenian doctrine of salvation. Armenian doctrine of salvation teaches that everyone who believes in Christ can be saved and that although man cannot be saved without the grace of God, yet God's grace is not irresistible. This means that man has to exercise his free will as to whether or not to accept the grace of God.

According to Onwuha, as reported by Nmah that "modern Pentecostal originated in the USA from the Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, USA at the turn of the twentieth century" (117). Therefore, Pentecostals believe did not think of establishing a Pentecostal branch of the church.

Rather, their aim was to be agents of reform within the existing denominations. But such vision or dream failed to be actualized. Rather the Pentecostal message was greatly opposed and attacked. Pastors and missionaries who accepted the message forfeited their rights. Even some Holiness groups like Methodist and the Salvation Army denounced and criticized the movement ascribing it to Satan. As soon as the Pentecostals left their conventional churches, some leaders emerged within the followership. They included Charles Fox Parham, Florence Lewis from Ford of the Apostolic Faith (James, 117). The Pentecostal movements were led by a group of gifted individuals within specific regions. There was no national organization to coordinate the activities of these many groups that had sprung in different parts of the USA. Such lack of coordination occasioned the unhealthy developments like spreading of fake doctrines by the groups and no financial accountability. There was a general heterogeneous mass doctrinal difference at that material time.

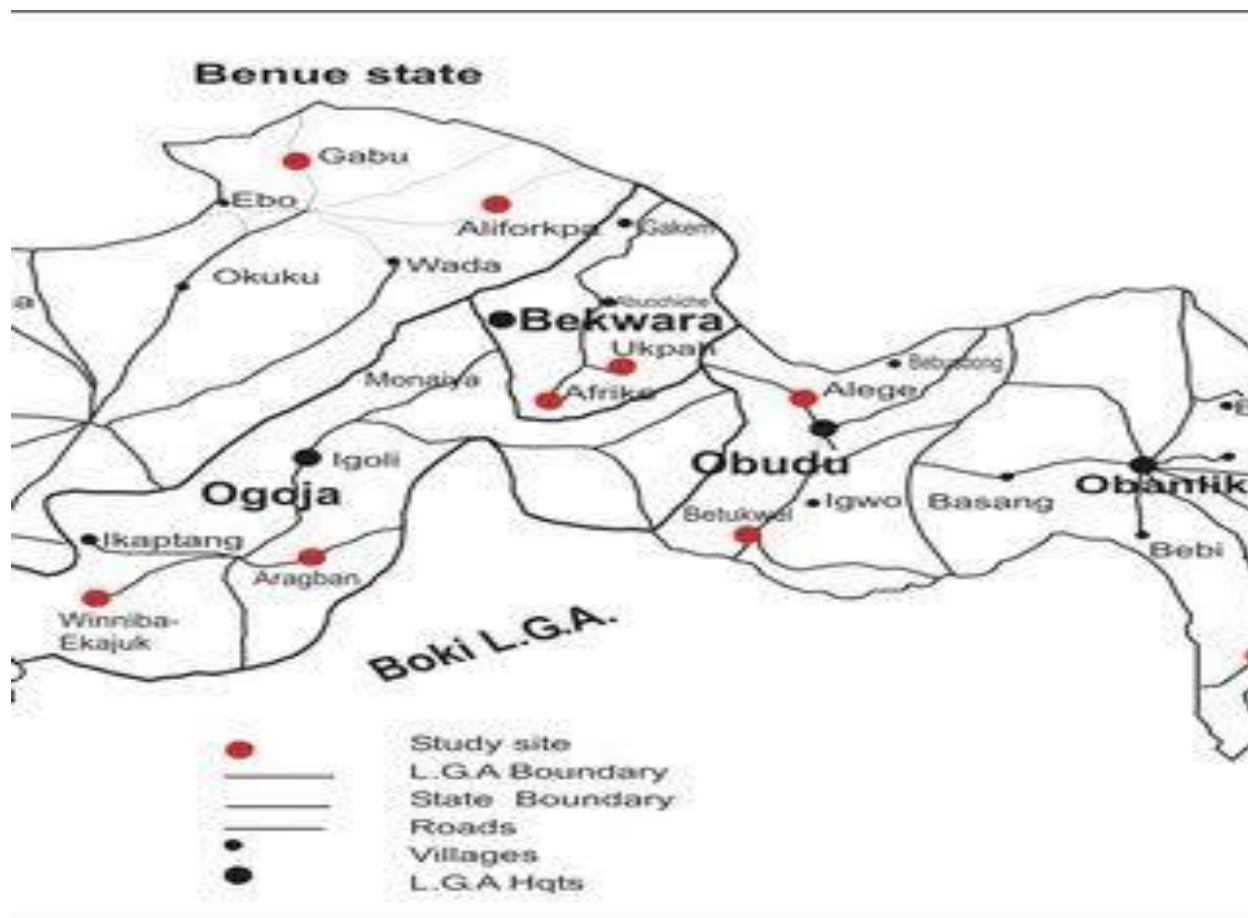
Having observed all these anomalies among the leaders of the Pentecostal groups because of lack of central or national coordination, some leaders thought of the need to hold a convention of Pentecostal believers and churches of God in Christ which was first held on the 12th of April, 1914 at Hot Springs Arkansas (Peter, 118). The aim of the convention included among other things the establishment of doctrinal unity among the Pentecostals. Therefore, by the end of the convention, they opted to adopt a mixture of congregational and Presbyterian system of church administration.

As a result each local church or congregation was made to be self-governing or autonomous while maintaining fellowship with other local churches and yet a national governing body of presbyters was formed to coordinate the congregations. Historically, this council marked the beginning or birth of the Assemblies of God. Each local church or congregation adopted Assemblies of God as its official name, while all the churches or congregations collectively were assemblies of God. Later in 1969, all the local churches in the USA adopted Assemblies of God as general official church name (Cressma, 117).

A brief History and Origin of Northern Cross River State

The Northern Cross River state, Nigeria has a very rich history and origin. During the pre-colonial era, the area was inhabited by various ethnic groups, including the Ejagham, Ekoi and Boki people, who had their own distinct cultures and traditions. In the days of the colonial masters between 1914 through 1960, the British merged the area with other territories to become the colony and protectorate of Nigeria. The Northern senatorial District was part of the then Ogoja province. By 1960 and 1967, after Nigeria gained independence, the area became part of the Eastern Region. According to history, the actual owners of Ogoja were the Iyala and Bekwarraa people (Kalu, 76).

Odey Abu reported that objects are named by their owners, as this was seen in the names given to “Ogoboja”, to mean fertile land (2009). He enunciated that for biological reasons the British imperialists with narrow nostrils could not adequately pronounce “GB” sound. They anglicized it “Ogboja” by dropping the “B” sound. Therefore, the northern senatorial part of land, Yala, Bekwarra, Obudu and Obanliku area and later assimilated other nation like Nkum, Ekajuk, Mbube, Utugwaner, Gabu, who later migrated into the entity brought under Ogoja area through the formation of division by the British.



**Map Showing Northern Cross River State. Source: Research Gate.**

According to Bendi intelligence as reported by Ado, “the Nkum – Nkim or any tribe can never claim to be origins or owners of Ogoja land rather the land lords are the Bekwarras and Yala” people (1932). Historically, the Bekwarra people were the first nation to migrate from Nkimdal settlement to the area known as Ogboja. The next migrant to settle with common land boundary with Bekwarra was the Yala people and the Ugaga people respectively (Ofodile, 40).

According to Ominye by the 16th century, the present settlements were established after East, North, or East movement from Cameroon around 1500AD which would have included Akomaye, the grandfather of Agba, the direct father of Bekwarra, Bette, Alege area the present Obudu (200). Odey share similar view and stated that each of the sets that left the Cameroun came each to their present site through wandering from place to place (20). A much more careful research of their origin, unveiled the fact that the people, judging from their native shrines, the worship of many Gods including the sky god of the land, the ancestral spirits which were agents, guarded and checked the behaviors of the members against certain misdemeanors indicate that the people who composed these area were of one ancestors. Obanliku, Bette, Bendi, Utugwang, allege ukpe, Mbube, Bekwarra, Nkum, YacheIgabu, Igede, UKelle and Afrike. (Odey 25).

The Socio-Religious, Educational and Economic Impacts of Assemblies of God Church in Northern Cross River

The Assemblies of God Church (AGC) has had notable imprints on the socio-religious, educational and economic impacts locally and globally, through its interactions and mission expansion programmes in communities. Apart from the gospel messages AGC has been involved in community-building, charitable initiatives and economic social support and empowerment schemes in Northern Cross River particularly. We shall consider AGC contributions in two headings and broader backgrounds of socio-religious and educational and economic impact.

Socio-religious Impacts

The Assemblies of God Church have the following broad socio-religious programmes:

Community Support initiatives: AGC is actively involved uplifting communities through various programs, including food distribution, housing assistance, disaster relief, and health initiatives. This is particularly important in low-income areas where church supported programs can make a significant difference in people’s lives.

Disaster and Humanitarian support: The church responds actively to natural disasters and humanitarian crises, often through its humanitarian arm, Convoy of Hope. Volunteers mobilize to provide immediate relief, such as food, water, and shelter, in disaster-stricken areas worldwide.

Missionary and Outreach program: With a strong global missionary focus, the AG Church supports projects aimed at poverty alleviation, clean water access, education, and evangelism. These outreach efforts contribute to both spiritual and social development in diverse communities, particularly in remote or underserved regions.



Global Pentecostalism Growth: Founded in 1914, the Assemblies of God is one of the largest Pentecostal denominations, with millions of members worldwide. Its growth has contributed to the rise of Pentecostal Christianity, which emphasizes the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing. This movement has influenced Christianity broadly, with Pentecostal practices and beliefs spreading across denominations. The AG Church is known for its dynamic, expressive worship style, which includes music, clapping, dancing, and personal testimonies. This style of worship has resonated with many cultures around the world, creating a more interactive and participatory form of religious expression. By valuing emotional and spiritual experiences, the AG Church has influenced how worship is conducted, making worship more lively, community-centered, and musically diverse.

Evangelism and Missions: Evangelism is central to the Assemblies of God's mission, with a strong commitment to spreading the gospel. The AG Church supports thousands of missionaries in over 190 countries, working to share the message of Jesus Christ, often among people who have not previously encountered Christianity. This global missionary outreach has introduced Pentecostal beliefs to diverse cultures and contexts, shaping local religious practices and communities.

Emphasis on Spiritual Gifts: Assemblies of God beliefs highlight a direct and personal experience with the Holy Spirit, often referred to as "Baptism in the Holy Spirit." This experience, often marked by speaking in tongues, is viewed as central to a deeper spiritual life and personal empowerment. The emphasis on spiritual gifts, including healing and prophecy, appeals to individuals seeking a dynamic and experiential form of worship, which has attracted many people to Pentecostalism.

Influence on Worship Styles: The Assemblies of God Church has had a strong influence on contemporary worship, emphasizing lively, expressive worship that often includes modern music, open prayer, and personal testimonies. This approach has inspired broader changes in Christian worship practices and appeals especially to younger generations seeking a more interactive and emotional worship experience.

Community and Discipleship: Discipleship is a core value within the Assemblies of God, with a focus on Bible study, small groups, and personal growth. This commitment to community and deepening faith has led to a strong emphasis on local church involvement, fellowship, and accountability. By fostering close-knit congregations, the AG Church has impacted the way people experience church as a community. The Assemblies of God has influenced other Christian denominations through its theological education, publications, and emphasis on revivalism. AG institutions, such as Bible colleges and seminaries, educate pastors and missionaries who often carry Pentecostal beliefs and practices into various Christian circles, impacting theological discussions and ecumenical relationships.

Growth of Charismatic Renewal Movements: The Assemblies of God has influenced the broader Charismatic movement, which has spread Pentecostal-like practices into mainline denominations (e.g., Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches). The AG Church's emphasis on the active presence of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts has inspired many Christians outside Pentecostalism to seek similar experiences within their own traditions.



Cultural Impact: The Assemblies of God (AG) Church has had a profound cultural impact, shaping values, lifestyles, arts, and community norms in the communities it serves. With its strong focus on Pentecostal beliefs, missionary work, and community engagement, the AG Church has influenced cultural practices and identity in many regions. Here are some key ways the AG Church has left a cultural imprint:

Impact on Moral and Social Values: The Assemblies of God promotes values like personal responsibility, family unity, community service, and moral living. These values often shape the culture within AG communities, influencing views on family life, work ethic, and ethical conduct. By emphasizing abstention from alcohol, tobacco, and gambling, as well as upholding traditional family structures, the AG Church encourages lifestyles that reflect its religious principles.

Influence on Music and Arts: The AG Church has contributed significantly to the rise of contemporary Christian music, with worship songs that integrate various musical styles, including gospel, rock, and even pop influences. This music often transcends church walls and influences mainstream media, contributing to the global Christian music industry. Additionally, AG congregations often embrace creative arts such as theater, dance, and visual arts in worship, fostering an artistic culture within the church community.

Community Cohesion and Social Identity: By fostering close-knit congregations that emphasize fellowship, shared worship, and service, the AG Church creates a strong sense of identity and belonging for its members. This sense of community cohesion can have a lasting cultural impact, as members often see the church as central to their social lives, creating shared traditions, language, and a collective identity that shapes community values and interactions.

Missionary Influence and Cultural Exchange: Through its extensive missionary work, the Assemblies of God Church has influenced cultures worldwide. Missionaries often learn local languages, adopt cultural practices, and encourage spiritual growth, fostering a cultural exchange that respects and integrates local traditions with Pentecostal beliefs. In some cases, AG missions have helped preserve indigenous languages and practices while introducing Christian teachings, resulting in hybrid cultural expressions.

Youth Culture and Development: With programs like youth groups, summer camps, and discipleship training, the AG Church has created a vibrant youth culture that emphasizes mentorship, faith development, and peer support. These youth-oriented programs help shape attitudes, promote social skills, and encourage young people to develop a strong faith identity. Youth events and gatherings also serve as social spaces where young people can engage in shared experiences, shaping a distinct Christian youth culture.

Cultural Adaptation of Religious Practices: The AG Church has adapted its worship styles, music, and community activities to reflect local cultural norms in different regions. For example, worship services in Africa may incorporate drumming and traditional songs, while services in Latin America might include local instruments and rhythms. This cultural adaptation has allowed the AG Church to resonate with diverse communities, creating a blend of traditional and Pentecostal Christian expressions.



Social justice Movements: In many communities, AG congregations advocate for social justice issues, such as combating human trafficking, promoting racial reconciliation, and supporting the underprivileged. This commitment to justice and equality often aligns with local social movements, encouraging members to engage in civic activities and contribute to positive societal change. By integrating faith with a commitment to justice, the AG Church influences cultural attitudes toward community responsibility and activism.

Cultural Representation in Media and Literature: The AG Church has contributed to religious media through books, magazines, television, and online content that disseminate its beliefs, teachings, and testimonies. This media outreach shapes perceptions of Pentecostalism and promotes AG beliefs to broader audiences. Additionally, testimonies and life stories of AG members often become part of cultural narratives, showing examples of faith, transformation, and resilience that resonate with others.

Economic and Educational Impact

The Assemblies of God Church have had economic and educational initiative programmes in local communities, including:

Job Creation and Employment: The AG Church provides jobs for pastors, administrative staff, teachers, social workers, and healthcare providers within its organizations. In regions where other employment opportunities are limited, church-affiliated positions offer stable jobs that support local economies. Larger AG organizations may also hire construction and maintenance teams, creating jobs for skilled laborers to build and maintain facilities.

Community Development and Poverty Alleviation: Through community outreach programs, the AG Church often addresses economic needs by providing food, clothing, and financial support to struggling families. Many AG churches partner with food banks and local nonprofits to offer services to low-income families, which can ease financial burdens and improve community resilience. In developing countries, the AG Church may establish sustainable initiatives, such as agricultural projects, microfinance, or vocational training, that help people build long-term financial stability.

Educational Institutions and Training Programs: The Assemblies of God operates numerous schools, colleges, and universities worldwide, providing educational opportunities that equip students with job skills and knowledge. These institutions often serve communities where access to quality education is limited, creating pathways to employment and higher wages. Additionally, vocational and technical training programs associated with AG churches equip people with marketable skills, which can stimulate local economies by generating skilled labor.

Educational Support: The Assemblies of God Church prioritizes education through schools, literacy programs, and scholarship funds, often targeting underserved communities. The church also hosts youth camps, mentorship programs, and after-school activities, fostering a safe and supportive environment for children and teenagers. These programs help prevent youth from engaging in criminal activities, drug abuse, and other negative vices that can easily destroy life and future.



Health and Wellness Initiatives: AGC has developed health initiatives, particularly in rural communities with limited access to healthcare. Some congregations support medical missions, providing free clinics and healthcare services, which can improve general well-being and prevent disease. Mental health resources and counseling services are also becoming more common in AG congregations.

Addiction Recovery Programs: Recognizing the impact of addiction on individuals and families, many Assemblies of God congregations offer addiction recovery programs like Celebrate Recovery. These programs provide community support, mentorship, and resources to help people overcome addiction, fostering long-term healing and stability.

Healthcare Services and Community Health: Many Assemblies of God churches offer healthcare services through clinics and hospitals, particularly in underserved areas. By providing affordable or free healthcare, these services help reduce medical costs for families, allowing them to allocate funds to other essential needs. Healthy communities also contribute to economic productivity, as people who can access basic healthcare are more likely to participate in the workforce and achieve greater economic stability. The Assemblies of God (AG) Church has had a profound cultural impact, shaping values, lifestyles, arts, and community norms in the communities it serves. With its strong focus on Pentecostal beliefs, missionary work, and community engagement, the AG Church has influenced cultural practices and identity in many regions. Here are some key ways the AG Church has left a cultural imprint:

Encouragement of Financial Stewardship: The Assemblies of God emphasizes financial stewardship and responsible money management. Through financial literacy workshops, counseling, and sermons, AG churches often encourage members to budget wisely, avoid debt, and practice generosity. In communities where these resources are scarce, financial education can lead to improved personal and family finances, reducing poverty levels and increasing household economic stability.

Support for Small Businesses and Entrepreneurship: Some AG programs encourage entrepreneurship and business development by providing microloans, business training, and mentorship, particularly in economically disadvantaged regions. These initiatives empower individuals to start small businesses, which can boost local economies by creating jobs, generating income, and fostering a culture of self-sufficiency. The AG Church's humanitarian arm, Convoy of Hope, provides disaster relief and reconstruction services globally. By supporting communities in crisis with essential supplies, shelter, and rebuilding efforts, Convoy of Hope helps local economies recover faster. In the aftermath of disasters, these efforts often provide immediate economic relief and stabilize communities, creating a foundation for rebuilding jobs, businesses, and infrastructure.

Tourism and Local Spending: Assemblies of God events, conferences, and conventions often draw thousands of attendees who contribute to the local economy. These gatherings create economic benefits for host cities, as participants spend money on lodging, dining, and local businesses. Additionally, churches and associated facilities can serve as community centers, attracting visitors and supporting local tourism.



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Gender Roles and Empowerment: The AG Church has historically encouraged women's participation in ministry, including roles as pastors, missionaries, and leaders. This relatively progressive stance has influenced attitudes toward gender roles, particularly in cultures where women's roles are traditionally limited. The AG Church's model of women in leadership has inspired women in various regions to pursue education, leadership, and ministry roles, promoting gender equality within the church context.

Conclusion

It is highly encourage that the AGC mode of mission should be imbibed by well-meaning organizations, in order to contribute to the development of host communities. Although one may argue that AGC is not a pioneer in this type of developmental strategy yet we can see today evident of their good work and resilient in the transformation of Northern Cross River through evangelical outreach and social outreach programmes.

Recommendations

The paper outlined the socio-religious and economic development of AGC to Northern Cross River State and recommend the following:

- i. Missions and development partners should ensure the development rather than exploitation of host communities as the case has been today, particularly in the oil rich River state where most organization deface communities through poor impacts
- ii. takeholders should be involve positively in the development of their communities and be ready to give a level play ground to either missions or meaningful bodies to develop their communities
- iii. overnment should be able to identify and support mission work in Nigeria due to the impacts of missions in the growth and development of the country.

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