

IMPACT OF THE WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN NATIONS ON THE WIDER SOCIETY IN COLONIAL TIMES 1932-1960

JORDAN SAMSON RENGSHWAT
University of Jos

ABSTRACT

Most Churches, including Pentecostals, have women's fellowship under different appellations. But the women's fellowships across the church denominations do not operate the same way. Many people in contemporary society do not fully know the activities of the Women's Fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations. Such people often assume that the women's fellowship is a group of Christian women who meet during weekdays to rehearse songs in preparation for singing on Sunday during worship services only. This study aims to unravel the impact of the Women's Fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations in the wider society during the colonial epoch. The qualitative research approach was used for the study. The findings reveal that during the colonial era, the women's fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations did not look up to the church or European missionaries to fund its activities. In the spirit of 'self-help,' the women raised money by taxing one another or by engaging in farm work during the rainy season, or by selling the craft work they produced to fund their activities that needed money. In this way, the women's fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations impacted the wider society in the area of healthcare, childcare, hygiene, home economics, helping the needy, and skill acquisition. The study recommends that women's fellowship in the Church of Christ in Nations, and in other church denominations, should imbibe the spirit of 'self-help' and work to generate funds from among themselves to have money to impact the wider society, like the women in the Church of Christ in Nations during the colonial period.

KEYWORDS: Church of Christ in Nations, Impact, Women's Fellowship, and Wider Society.

INTRODUCTION

The women's fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations commenced between 1930 and 1935 in Northern Nigeria. It was brought into being and nurtured

by European missionaries who were not delighted with the general backward nature of the womenfolk in the region. Consequently, during the formative years of the fellowship, the female missionaries led the women's fellowship to be an instrument of church growth and social action in the wider community. This paper focuses on the impact of the women's fellowship on the wider society.

The qualitative research design was adopted for this study, with particular focus on the historical method, where both primary and secondary sources were used for the reconstruction of the narrative. The potential beneficiaries of this paper are mainly members of women's fellowships across the various denominations of Nigeria. The narrative and the recommendations made will inspire them to contribute to the development of the wider society. Scholars of gender studies will also find the paper helpful.

The works written by Yosi A.D. Maton (2005), Chentu Dauda Nguvugher (2005), and the work co-edited by Pauline M. Lere and Jotham M. Kangdim are insightful. These works focus on the women's fellowship and evangelism, mission, and church growth. Nonetheless, from these works, nothing is known about the historical context that gave birth to the fellowship. Not much is also known about the impact of the fellowship on the wider society during the colonial era. Thus, this paper is significant. The main thrust of the paper is situated in the context of the history of the Church of Christ in Nations, particularly in the historical context of the women of Northern Nigeria.

OUTLINE OF THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN NATIONS

The story of the Church of Christ in Nations (formerly Church of Christ in Nigeria) is documented by Nanwul Gutip. So, details of the story may not need to occupy space here. To set the stage for understanding the main thrust of the paper, a sketch of the early history of the church is essential. The church was established by the British Sudan United Mission, which started missionary work in Nigeria in 1904 at Wase in North Central Nigeria. In about 1907, the work of the Sudan United Mission from Wase spread to Gyel and Foron among the Berom, and Langtang among the Tarok. At this time (1907), the Cambridge University Mission Party also started mission work in Panyam among the Mwaghavul, and Pankshin among the Ngas. The work among the Ngas quickly extended to Mwari among the Sayawa. From these early mission stations, the gospel spread to other neighbouring communities. In the early 1930s, the Cambridge Mission Society handed over its

work among the Ngas, Sayawa, and Mwaghavul to the Sudan United Mission (Maxwell 35-318; Gutip 27-101; Goshit 50-74).

In 1951, a national church was formed under the appellation *Ekklesiyar Kristi A Sudan* (EKAS). Later, the name was changed to *Ekklesiyar Kristi A Nigeria* (EKAN). Then, in the 1970's the English translation of the name Church of Christ in Nigeria was adopted. Currently, the church is called 'Church of Christ in Nations' because the church now has branches outside the shores of Nigeria (Rengshwat 'First COCIN President' 14-30; Nguvugher 29).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND ORIGIN OF WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP IN NORTHERN NIGERIA IN COLONIAL TIMES

In colonial Nigeria (1900-1960), the womenfolk in Northern Nigeria were generally backward in the areas of literacy, economic independence, and personal hygiene. They were backward in terms of literacy because there were not many schools that they could attend. In the words of Yusufu Turaki: "By 1947, women's education had not received much attention...In general, women's education did not receive much attention, and so it was kept minimal. The major factor militating against women's education was the lack of women teachers" (462-463). Besides, the girl-child was deprived Western education by their parents at this time. Many parents did not believe that the education of the girl-child was necessary. Additionally, women were backward in terms of economic independence since many African customs did not encourage women to own land, the main means of production and wealth, or engage in trading. Besides these, women in Northern Nigeria did not know much about personal hygiene. In consequence, there were diverse health challenges among the women. They also did not know much about the nutrition and hygiene connected to childcare. As a result, there was a high infant death rate in the region (Rengshwat, "Magdalene Pandang Yamsat" 763).

The social, educational, and economic backwardness of the womenfolk, coupled with their needs for spiritual nurture along Christian lines, made some female European missionaries think about what they could do to help the women. It was in this context that the idea of starting a fellowship for women emerged among European missionaries who were working in the region. The particular date and location when the women's fellowship was formed cannot be ascertained today owing to the scarcity of sources. However, Lowry Maxwell (a European field staff of the Sudan United Mission who worked in Nigeria for decades, starting from 1904)

gives us a reason to take 1932 as the year of the formation of the Women's Fellowship. In the words of Maxwell:

Both in Nigeria and in French Equatorial Africa, there was a gratifying upsurge of the womanhood of our districts. One reads of this feature of the work with delight. "The Women's Fellowship was inaugurated, and this new departure has been enthusiastically taken up by many of our districts and churches. Each branch has its own Christian African woman secretary and treasurer, and meetings are arranged to suit the needs and conditions of the various districts. Ten years have passed, and 1942 finds us with many women helpers, and at the services the women are keeping pace with the men in attendance, and will not be kept back (246-247).

Two things can be deduced from Maxwell's statements quoted above. First, the Women's Fellowship was not inaugurated by a single mission society; rather, it was inaugurated centrally, perhaps during the gathering of Protestant European missionaries of the different mission societies that were working in the region. Yusufu Turaki notes that the Protestant missions working in Northern Nigeria were meeting occasionally to discuss issues of common interest. These missions include: the Church Missionary Society (CMS), Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), Sudan United Mission (SUM), Mennonite Mission, which later became the United Missionary Society (UMS), Church of the Brethren Mission (CBM), and Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM)" (Turaki 435). These mission societies met in Lokoja in 1910 and 1913. They also met in Miango, near Jos, in 1926. In 1932, the missions met in Jos. In 1935 and 1937, they met again in Miango (Turaki 435-436). During these mission conferences, the missionaries discussed:

Colonial marriage and divorce laws,
Formation of the council of missions,
Spheres of mission actions and operations,
Advance into Muslim areas,
Relations with government,
Railway fares,
Education: technical training; government grants-in-aid of schools; training of teachers and evangelists,
Combined Native Church and United Church of Africa in Northern provinces,
Land (perpetual succession) ordinance,
Christian literature and printing,

Medical matters, [and]

Women and children welfare (Turaki 436).

The second thing that can be deduced from Maxwell's statements quoted above is that, by 1942, the formation of the Women's Fellowship was ten years old. So, it is most likely that during the mission conference that took place in 1932 in Jos, the discussion on women's and children's welfare led to the inauguration of the Women's Fellowship. When these European missionaries went back to their mission districts, they organised Women's Fellowship in their respective localities. Thus, it is safe to take 1932 as the year the Women's Fellowship began in the Church of Christ in Nations. Taking 1932 as the starting point of the Women's Fellowship in the Church of Christ in Nations agrees with the findings of Yosi Maton among the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria in the Takum District (2).

During its formative years, the Women's Fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations was effectively under the control of the European Missionaries (Farrant, 'Field Report...1943' 46; Barnden 95). The females amongst the missionaries, particularly Miss Bissie Barnie, guided the activities of the Women's Fellowship and helped the women to see evangelism as a priority in keeping with the vision, mission, and activities of the Sudan United Mission (henceforth SUM) (Bature 1-4). Thus, members of the Women's Fellowship were frequently encouraged to evangelize until it became a tradition of the group. Therefore, in the Mission's districts, the Women's Fellowship often visited non-church folks in the neighbourhood and beyond for witnessing (Muir 93).

IMPACT OF THE WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP OF CHURCH OF CHRIST IN NATIONS IN THE WIDER SOCIETY DURING THE COLONIAL ERA 1932-1960

When the missionaries of the Sudan United Mission, British Branch (Now Pioneers), set their feet on the soil of Nigeria, they adopted a mission policy called the indigenous church policy or "three-self" principle. The implementation of the policy was done by intentionally training the Church in evangelism and in self-support and self-governance for many decades. The training was focused on the whole Church and not just the pastors. According to Henry George Farrant, writing in 1954, "There are thousands of Christians, and from the very first they have been trained in indigenous Church principles and are formed into self-supporting local Churches with pastors, elders, and evangelists, none of whom draws any support

from Mission funds” (“Crescendo of the Cross” 74-75, 78). Henry George Farrant was the Field Administrator of the Mission in Nigeria from 1916 to 1948. He oversaw all the work of the Sudan United Mission in Nigeria during the period of the start of the COCIN Women’s Fellowship (Rengshwat, “Henry George Farrant” 19-32).

It was within this context of the training of the entire church in self-support, self-propagation, and self-governance that the Women’s Fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) came into being. At this juncture, it is vital to understand why, throughout its history, the CWF is committed to ‘self-help’ in all its activities. The Women’s Fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations was not looking to the church or European missionaries to fund its activities. In the spirit of ‘self-help,’ the women raised money by taxing one another or by engaging in farm work during the rainy season or by selling the handicrafts they produced to fund their activities that needed financial support (Bature 1-8; Maton 31-33). These were the ways the women’s fellowship generated money from among themselves to impact the wider society.

Impact on Social Development and Community Life

From the commencement of their work in Nigeria, the missionaries of the Sudan United Mission were providing medical care from their own rooms and at their own expense. This was with a view to building friendship and trust between them and the indigenes that they wanted to convert to Christianity (Tett, ‘The Road to Freedom’ 71-76). Later, the missionaries were desirous of seeing the emergence of self-supporting dispensaries, as indicated by an anticipated one which was in the pipeline in Zangli (former name of Alkaleri), Bauchi State (Sudan United Mission 97). As a result, national converts were enthused to help bring them into being, or help to maintain or expand existing ones.

One of the ways the women intervened in social development was in the area of the establishment and expansion of healthcare centres within their localities. In the spirit of ‘self-help’, Jarawa women provided manual labour and funds to build and roof a maternity ward with corrugated iron sheets instead of grass (Churchman 105; Sudan United Mission 35). The exact location where this happened among the Jarawa women is not indicated in the source. Similarly, in Sayawa land, in the spirit of ‘self-help’, Sayawa women and girls contributed money towards the coming into being of a maternity ward (Ware 51). The particular place where this took place in Sayawa land is also not indicated in the source. These healthcare centres built by the

women of the Women's Fellowship were also patronised by non-Christians, such as Muslims and adherents of the African Primal Religion, in these localities. In this way, the Women's Fellowship impacted their communities in healthcare services.

The second impact of the women's fellowship was in literacy for women who were not privileged to go to school. From the outset of the CWF, many women could not read or write. The level of literacy among the womenfolk during and some years after the missionary era was not much. This affected the work of the CWF in two ways: first, in many communities, the women could not lead themselves in Bible study. Secondly, it was very difficult to find literate committee members of the CWF at the grassroots. This situation of illiteracy could not allow such committee members to advance the work of the CWF properly, as they should (Bature 7-8).

To ensure that the women folk were able to read the Bible, Miss Bissie Barnie took it upon herself to begin a literacy campaign within the Women's Fellowship. She mandated women leaders at the grassroots to encourage literacy among women. In the years that followed, and well after the missionary era, the literacy crusade continued. Eventually, the campaign gained a measure of success; as many women in rural communities, including a handful of non-Christian women, such as Muslims, who were interested in the literacy scheme, were able to read and write (Bature 7-8). In this way, the Women's Fellowship impacted the wider community in literacy.

Another impact of the work of the women's fellowship was ensuring the quality of life in homes. From the start of the CWF, many women were not knowledgeable in the science of hygiene and childcare. Therefore, teaching on personal and home hygiene, childcare, handwork (such as knitting), and spousal rapport among Christians became part of the main activities of the women's fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations (Bature iii-iv, 8). These improved the quality of life in countless families and communities as the Christian women interacted with their non-Christian neighbours in their communities (Muir 93).

One more area in which the impact of the women's fellowship was felt in the larger community was in visitation. Reporting in the early post-colonial period, Jane Gill gives us an instance when this happened in Vom, Plateau State, in the following words:

Another area of our activities is visiting. I have been challenged and encouraged by the importance our Nigerian sisters place in this work; praying with the sick, comforting the bereaved, rejoicing with those who rejoice.

What a comfort and joy it is to belong to a sharing and caring community (81).

The visitation of the women of the women's fellowship to the sick and bereaved in the wider community began in the colonial period. The visitations (which often included giving gifts or rendering help) were meant to demonstrate Christ's love so that the non-Christian people, such as Muslims and adherents of the Primal Religion, could appreciate and accept the gospel (Muir 93; Maton 27-29).

Impact on Family Relations, Spirituality, and Economic Empowerment during the European Missionary Era

The women's fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations was not only an outfit for church expansion. It was also a means by which women were trained to be loving wives, caring mothers, better neighbours, better daughters-in-law, and prudent managers of their homes and resources. These trainings were usually featured during weekly local fellowships or at conventions. F.E. Ware and M.M. Ware capture how the conversation at a women's convention at Mwari in 1951 centred on making women better wives and better mothers. In the words of the Wares,

We had many open discussions, which proved most helpful; women told us of their home difficulties [...] we found that in nearly every case the women themselves were at fault [...]. It was just lovely to hear Bilhatu dealing with each case very quietly and serenely, and each time bringing them to the word of God. How she stressed the humility of Christ, and how much of that humility we, as His children, should show. She also took us to the book of Proverbs and pointed out the virtues of womanhood [...]. We also discussed the care of their children, and much was said to help the women. We only wish that they would put into practice what they have been told [...]. We believe the women went away blessed because of the great fellowship we had together in the Lord, and also there was created in many a real desire to learn to read (12-13).

The women of the women's fellowship who practiced these teachings in their lives and homes often became objects of admiration to their non-church neighbours. In this way, the women's fellowship impacted women in the wider society in family life.

The women's fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations impacted women in a variety of other ways. For Mrs. Saratu B. Bature, one of the Nigerian women's fellowship leaders after Miss Bissie Barnie, it was in the women's fellowship that

she learnt knitting and sewing clothes. This enabled her to sew clothes for herself and her kids (Bature 8). In a sense, this was economic empowerment, since she was no longer spending much money in tailors' shops. From these Christian women, keen non-church women (such as Muslims and adherents of the Primal Religion) in the wider society often learnt how to knit and sew clothes.

CONCLUSION

Primarily intended to meet the spiritual and physical needs of Christian women, the women's fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations became useful even to non-church members of some communities in Northern Nigeria. In this way, personal hygiene, child nutrition, childcare, craftwork, home economics, and issues related to spousal relationships diffused from the women's fellowship to impact even non-church women, such as young women who were still adherents of the traditional religion, as well as young Muslim women. The medical facilities that the women's fellowship members procured through their 'self-help' efforts became useful to even non-Church members in some of the communities of Northern Nigeria.

Women's deplorable conditions were among the reasons for the formation of the Women's Fellowship in the Church of Christ in Nations. Therefore, modern-day women's fellowships, under whatever appellation, across the church denominations, should focus on identifying and meeting the spiritual and physical needs of women in their midst and women in the wider society. They should regularly visit the sick and the bereaved among non-church people or 'lukewarm churchgoers', with gifts or any form of help, to demonstrate the love of Christ. They should also demonstrate the love of Christ to the wider society through other social interventions, such as teaching less privileged women hygiene, childcare, handicrafts, literacy, and funding facilities necessary for the provision of healthcare. Modern-day women's fellowship should also learn 'self-help' from the women's fellowship of the Church of Christ in Nations during the colonial period. They should not look up to their churches or foreign aid to finance their activities.

WORKS CITED

- Barnden, P.W. "Vom Hospital (Nigeria)–Report for 1953" in *The Lightbearer*. July–August 1954, pp. 95–97.
- Bature, Saratu B. *Tarihin Zumuntan Mata Ekklesiya COCIN a Nigeria*. Jos: Guest Concepts, n.d.

- Churchman, Jessie. "Jarawa Women Determine and Do" in *The Lightbearer*. November–December 1958, p. 105.
- Farrant, Henry G. "Field Report on the Work in Nigeria and Northern Cameroons, for Year ending 31st December, 1943" in *The Lightbearer*. July 1944, pp. 40–46.
- . "Crescendo of the Cross: The Church in the Mission Field" in *The Lightbearer*. May–June 1954, pp. 74–75, 78.
- Gill, Jane. "VomZumuntar Mata – (Women's Fellowship)" *The Lightbearer*. July–August 1977, pp. 80–81.
- Gutip, Nanwul. *COCIN: Birth and Growth*. Jos: Crossroad Media Communications, 1998.
- Lere, Pauline M. and Jotham M. Kangdim, eds. *COCIN Women's Fellowship: An Impacting Agency for Missions and Evangelism from the Missionary Era to Contemporary Time*. Bukuru: ACTS, 2020.
- Maton, Yosi A.D. *ZME and Church Growth*. Kaduna: Baraka Press, 2005.
- Maxwell, J. Lowry. *Half a Century of Grace: A Jubilee History of the Sudan United Mission*. London: SUM, 1954.
- Muir, W. G. "British Branch–Report for 1953" in *The Lightbearer*. July–August 1954, pp. 92–94.
- Nguvugher, Chentu Dauda. *A Woman of Passion: The Life and Contributions of Mrs. Na'omi John Mankilik to COCIN Women's Fellowship and COCIN Community Mission*. Jos: n.p., 2005.
- Rengshwat, Jordan Samson. 'First COCIN President: The Life and Work of Rev. Damina Bawado.' TCNN Bukuru. MTh Dissertation, 2002.
- . "Henry George Farrant: The Last of the Venns?" *TCNN Research Bulletin*. Number 54, March 2011, pp. 19–32.
- . "A Brief History and Work of Magdalene Pandang Yamsat among the People of Northern Nigeria (1949–2019)" in Onwochei, Pic (ed). *Perspectives on Religion, Morality and Society in Contemporary Pluralistic Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Professor Cyril Okechukwu Imo*. Abuja: Exodus Publishers, 2021, pp. 759–773.
- Sudan United Mission. "Names of Stations, Outstations and Classes for Religious Instruction" in *The Lightbearer*. January–February 1941, pp. 1–3.
- . "A Dispensary at Zangli" in *The Lightbearer*. November–December 1941, p. 97.
- . "Teaching the Women" in *The Lightbearer*. October–December 1949, p. 70.
- . "Figures Accompanying British Report for 1953" in *The Lightbearer*. July–August 1954, p. 94.

- . "Independence, Opportunity, Faith" in *The Lightbearer*. November–December 1958, p. 97.
- . "Indomitable Jarawa Women" in *The Lightbearer*. May–June 1959, p. 35.
- . "1974 Statistics" in *The Lightbearer*. January–February 1975, p. 115.
- Tett, Mollie E. *The Road to Freedom: The Story of the Sudan United Mission*. Kent: Sudan United Mission, n. d.
- Turaki, Yusufu. *Theory and Practice of Christian Missions in Africa: A Century of SIM/ECWA History and Legacy in Nigeria 1893-1993. Volume One*. Nairobi: IBS Africa, 1999.
- Ware, F. E. and Ware, M. M. "Christian Women in Seyaland" in *The Lightbearer*. January–February 1952, pp. 12-13.
- Ware, M. M. "Women's Convention at Kabwir" in *The Lightbearer*. July–August 1952, p. 63.
- . "Women and Girls in the Seya Tribe" in *The Lightbearer*. March–April 1954. 51.
- Webster, Elsie. "How the Church in a District Grows–Panyam" in *The Lightbearer*. September–October 1958, pp. 72–75.
- . "After Three Years" in *The Lightbearer*. November–December 1958, pp. 103–104.

