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COMMERCIALIZATION OF PRAYER HOUSES HEALING HOMES IN ONNA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERA: A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CONCERN

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Abstract

A bird's eye view of religious space in our contemporary society has shown that commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes are on the increase. Commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes imply running of prayer houses and healing homes as a business with the aim of making economic gain or manipulation of its services with the intentions to exploit members for financial or economic gains. Thus, in the context of commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes, no service is free of charge. However, in this paper, efforts are made to examine the realities of commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes in Onna Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. The paper equally discusses the causes as well as the effects of commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes in Onna Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Method of study adopted for this work is survey and phenomenological methods. Findings from this study reveal that many founders of prayer house are taking advantages of gullible miracle seekers, who will do anything just to have respite from their troubles. The result of the findings equally revealed that many founders of prayer houses and healing homes are selling religious tokens acclaimed to possess powers capable of bringing solutions to the problems of the users. Such items include oil, salt, handkerchiefs, water among others. Thus, it is concluded from the paper that Christian religious leaders should guide against commercialization of healing and prayer. Religious leaders need to be contented with what they have, pursue righteousness, honesty, integrity and love for humanity. Finally, it is recommended that the founders of prayer houses and healing homes should be properly trained on theology for proper interpretation of the Bible and better dissemination of the gospel.

Keywords: Commercialization, Prayer, Healing, ONNA, Exploitation.

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Introduction

Commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes is gaining a lot of grounds in this part of the world. It does not take much to observe that prayer houses and healing homes found expression in the economic sphere thus speaks for the value of religion as a social institution. Religion is therefore seen as a social reality and found expression in services it renders. It is common knowledge to notice that prayer houses and healing homes are on increase in our contemporary society. It has also been observed that some of the founders and purveyors of these houses and homes earn a living from there and it seems to be a thriving business as evident in the proliferation. Moreover, the astronomic proliferation of these houses and homes in recent time has created wrong images for the church in the society. The majority of people see the church as a “commercial venture”. By this act, these houses and homes have been turning to business ventures with different names, missions, ideas and general overseers (GOs) without any positive impact in the society. Commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes imply running of prayer houses and healing homes as a business with the aim of making economic gain or manipulation of its services (spiritual and emotional) with the intentions to exploit members for financial or economic gains. This phenomenon has caused so much damage to faith and belief of adherents. Many gullible followers just take in whatever they are being fed by their religious leaders. It is not only the poor and desperate people who are hooked and fed by all kinds of things but many rich folks are also being fooled.

There are many clear cases of situations where the some founders are taking advantages of these prayer houses and their positions to amass wealth and exploit their innocent members. There are many other cases too in which ministers desecrate the sanctuary with jesting and other disdainful behaviours. Most founders of prayer houses and healing homes are noted for various nefarious acts ranging from embezzlement of church funds, extortion of money from members and abuse of positions or offices among others. Thus, Nnadi (2013) writes in this regard that this age has recorded the most explosive religious crusades, the most populous religious pilgrimages, the most resurgence of the phenomenon of proliferation of churches and the most dynamic witness concrete structure and flamboyant edifices that manifest the existence and physical vitality of various faiths. Yet, the society of this ‘religious’ magnitude launches herself into the self-destructive forces of moral laxity. With this, one can say without fear of contradiction that our contemporary generation is suffocating in the hands of various shades of religious aberrations fashioned by morally bankrupt deviants who enthrone moral depravity over virtues of the hallowed teachings of religion. Based on the above observations, the present researchers became interested in the assessment of the realities of commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes in Onna Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State on the simple logic that it will bring to light the causes, consequences and other dynamics of commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes in the area.

Concept of Commercialization

Commercialization is the process of managing or running something principally for financial gain. It enables customers or buyer to obtain a wider choice of products/ services and allow the sellers or marketers to generate more profits or gains. Commercialization therefore is the acts of making something available for sale or viable as a profitable commodity. It is equally the process of making service(s) available for sale to the public. When a business has experienced growth and scales its operations, commercialization can occur. The term often connotes especially bringing services into the market and making it available with the intention of making financial or economic gain. Commercialization in the religious context involves turning spiritual services into commodities for sale. As Ukah (2008:10) notes, the commercialization of religion reflects the encroachment of marker logic into spiritual domains

resulting in the monetization of prayer, healing, prophecy, and blessings. In prayer houses, this takes the form of mandatory seed offerings, special fees for consultations and seeking anointed materials. Concern is the overt commercialization of spiritual activities, where access to prayers and religious rituals increasingly depends on the ability to pay. Prayer sessions are often linked to offerings, seed sowing, and the sale of religious items like anointing oil, holy water, and prayer garments.

Concept of Prayer

Prayer is a universal medium of communication between man and God or object of his veneration. According to Onunwa (2005: 54), prayer is an invocation or act that seeks to activate with an object of veneration through deliberate communication. In other words, the term “prayer” refers to an act of intercession or supplication directed towards God or object of man’s veneration. Moreover, prayer can also have the purpose of adoration or thanksgiving, and is closely associated with more abstract forms of meditation that required rapt attention and mental concentration. Prayer can take a variety of forms. For instance, it can be part of a set of ritual or liturgy and it can be performed alone or in groups. (Onunwa, 2005: 67). As opined by Ukpong (2019:65), prayer is rooted in the idea of divine providence. It is an affirmation of a superior Intelligence which controls the affairs of the universe. It helps a believer to discover his or her position in God’s design and provision. The act of prayer is attested in written sources as early as five thousand years ago. Today, most major religions in the world involve prayer in one way or another; some ritualize the act, requiring a strict sequence of actions or placing a restriction on who is permitted to pray, while others teach that prayer may be practiced spontaneously by anyone at any time. Scientific studies regarding the use of prayer have mostly concentrated on its effect on the healing of sick or injured people. Thus, the efficacy of prayer in faith healing has been evaluated in numerous studies, with contradictory results. Simply put, Prayer is conversing with God or petition and intimacy towards God. It is a communion between God and His creatures (Onunwa, 2005: 66).

Concept of Healing

The word “healing” is an adjective derived from the verb “to heal” which means “to cure a disease or disorder”, “to restore to soundness or “to make whole and healthy. Healing involves the removal of the factors that cause disease and infirmity (Obi, 2001: 17). Adigo (2019: 33) defines healing as a process of bringing together aspects of one’s self, body mind and spirit, at deeper levels of inner knowing, leading towards integration and balance with each aspect having equal importance and value. Healing comes from the meaning and purpose which people attach to life and experience that helps them to cope with pain. When sickness strikes, and people’s hope and meaning are crumbling beneath them, they search for something more substantial to anchor them. Faith healing is an attempt to use religious or spiritual insights such as prayer to prevent illness, to cure disease, or to improve health. According to Egnew (2005: 111), those who attempt healing by prayer, mental practices, spiritual insights, always say that they can summon supernatural help or assistance on behalf of the sick (Adigo, 2019: 34).

Pastoral healing on the other hand is the process of being restored to bodily wholeness, emotional well-being, mental functioning, and spiritual aliveness. Healing may also refer to the process of reconciling broken human relationships, and to the development of a just social and political order among races or nations. Medical healing is defined in terms of developing a sense of personal wholeness that involves physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of human experience (Egnew, 2005: 112). Here, healing can be either orthodox or traditional, which includes use of herbs. Similarly, psychological conception of healing involves reordering an individual’s sense of position in the universe. From Egnew’s view above, healing

can be defined as a process in the service of evolution of the whole personality towards ever greater and more complex wholeness. Furthermore, the concept of healing among Africans is derived from their perception of the aetiology of sickness. Africans have an integral understanding of creation, with a harmonious membership or union between the gods, the ancestors and living human beings. Life goes on well when this mutual relationship is intact, but when there is a crack in the relationship, there is a consequent disharmony and disintegration (Adigo, 2019: 34). The result is sickness or any other form of misfortune on the part of individual who is believed to be responsible through his or her omission or commission. This is believed to be the principal cause of sickness. Healing therefore follows the process of restoring the broken relationship through rites and rituals. According to Onunwa (2005: 74), the charismatics' perception of healing is dynamic and problem- solving. Such dynamic has helped charismatic movements to increasingly attract people with such needs as employment, children, marriage partners, relief from pain and so on.

Concept of Prayer Houses and Healing Homes

As rightly opined by Ekarika (2017) prayer houses and healing homes – *Ufok Akam* are offshoots of traditional African healing houses just like the neo-primal movements but they abhor anything diabolic or demonic. They comfortably fit into the mould of religious movement but not as churches properly so-called because often practitioners and adherents have recourse to divine assistance for the cures that are performed. They are similarly eclectic, syncretism and exogenous and draw from a large range of sources including Christianity, Islam, Occultism, Oriental magic, Astrology and Metaphysics. Some homes are homeopathic and employ botanical medical clinics, physician among others. According to Hackett (2004), such healing homes have places where patients often stay, the healer having recourse to traditional healing practices and mixing them with whatever religious direction they consider appropriate. During healing session, mysterious invocations are chanted and rituals are performed to ensure the repeal of the ailment which is considered to be a manifestation of evil. Often, the healing is carried out in such a way as can impress upon the patients and the public that the pastor-healer has specific gifts and charisma which come from some other enigmatic sources only acquired by the healer (Ekarika, 2017).

History of Healing in Christianity

One of the central themes in the history of Christianity is the concept of healing (physical and spiritual). Healing is, therefore, one of the most constant themes in the long and sprawling history of Christianity. Porterfield (2005: 18) affirms that Jesus himself performed many miracles of healing during his ministry on earth and Christians, down the ages, have seen this as a prominent feature of their faith. The early Christian church deeply integrated divine healing into their faith, relying on scriptural promises like those found in Mark 16: 17-18 and James 5:14-15, which emphasize healing through prayer, laying on of hands, and anointing with oil. Apostles such as Saints Peter and Paul played pivotal roles in the history of divine healing. Again, early church fathers such as Origen, Alexandria and Saint Augustine of Hippo played significant roles in divine healing, both through miraculous healings and theological contributions that emphasized on the power of faith.

The above observations are meant to show that early believers embraced the power of prayer, laying on of hands and the anointing of oil, believing firmly in the healing promises of Scripture. Thus, the legacy of divine healing within the early church continue to influence contemporary Christian practices, encouraging prayer, faith declarations, and healing services that mirror the holistic care and belief in miracles demonstrated by early believers. Healing is a cardinal theme in the history of Christianity, threading its way over time through ritual practice

and theological belief, and across space through the sprawling, heterogeneous terrains of Christian community life and missionary activity (Porterfield, 2005: 19). Much more commonly, Christian healing involves relief from suffering and enhanced ability to cope with chronic ailments. Thus, medieval pilgrims often made repeat visits to healing shrines, apparently because such visits relieved suffering but did not produce a lasting cure. Part of Christianity's appeal as a means of coping with suffering is the idea that suffering is not meaningless but a part of the cosmic vision of redemption. Along with the actual healing that might be stimulated by faith in a higher power, this imputation of meaning to suffering has itself been a tonic. While the effectiveness of Christian practices as a means of relief from suffering has contributed enormously to their popularity, the real genius of Christianity has been to embrace pain and disability and death and not to limit the meaning of health and healing to their expulsion. Thus, many Christians have accepted the persistence of suffering as part of religious life, while also celebrating relief from suffering as a sign of the power and meaning of their faith.

Origin of Commercialization of Healing in Christianity

The term, church commercialization, denotes two things. First, it denotes the application of commercial principles in the running of the church or applying business principles to church administration or run it as a business with the aim of making economic gain. Secondly, it depicts the manipulation of the services of church (spiritual and emotional) with an intention of exploiting members, or prospects for economic or financial gain (Obiora, 1998: 20). From the Old Testament, prophets Amos, Micah and Ezekiel decried the above aberration. For instance, in the book of Amos chapters 2:8; 4:1; 5:11; 8:4-6; 5: 7 and 6: 12, Prophet Amos raised his voice in protest against the oppression of the poor and needy, corrupt and degenerate religious practices, corruption of justice and honesty, excessive indulgence and disregard for the laws of God. The negative attitude of prophet Amos towards commercialization of religion came out in the clash between him and Amaziah who refused to acknowledge, in any way, the divine source of Amos' prophecies, but considered him as a political agitator. Hunu and Azembeh (2018: 19) commented on this attitude thus: "The fact that Amaziah and other priests in Israel had commercialized religion is indicated in his derogatory advice to Amos that he should go to Judah and earn his bread there" (Amos 7: 12). This reveals that to them, religion was all about money making.

Prophet Micah equally spoke against his listeners for their apostate life style. Their sins include perversion of worship practices, empty religious formalism, oppression of the poor and the defenseless, perversion of justice through bribery and dishonest business practices (Micah 1:7; 3:5-7; 6:6-7; 2: 2. 8-9). As recorded in Micah 3: 11; 6: 11), religious leaders were accused of commercialization of religion while pretending to be serving the people, their true intention was for economic gain. Rather than serve and care for the people as the Shepherds of the nation, these false prophets were leading the people astray. The leaders were concerned with their own welfare, rather than the nations' welfare. Similarly, prophet Ezekiel was particularly against the false prophets and prophetesses who were into the business of commercialization of religion. He warned against using religion as a money- making venture and enjoined religious leaders to lead by example and precept. Prophet Ezekiel was also against lip service and outward show of righteousness by religious leaders. In the New Testament, commercialization of religion got to its peak at the time of Jesus Christ as illustrated in Matthew (21: 12-13; Mark 11: 15-18; and Luke 19:43-46). Jesus expressed his indignation against the people changing money and selling doves in the temple. Again, during the Passover feast, selling of doves as reported by Hunu and Azembeh (2018: 19) became popular. The organizers of the feast of Passover strictly advised worshippers to buy doves at the temple stalls at an exorbitant price. This was also an evidence of commercialization of religion. Simon Magus or Simon the

magician whose confrontation with Peter is recorded in Acts of the Apostle (8:9-24) attempted to buy the Holy Spirit with money. In fact, the act of simony or paying for position in the church is named after Simon who tried to buy his way into the power of the Apostle for commercial purpose.

Ethnographic Sketch of Onna Local Government Area

Onna Local Government Area was created out of the larger Eket Local Government Area in 1989 by the Military Administration of Gen. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, former Military President and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Atteh and Umoh, 2014: 35). Its name comes from acronym of the four predominant clans in the area: Oniong, Nnung Ndem, Awa Afaha and Awa. Onna is bounded by the east by Eket, west by Mkpato Enin and south to Eastern Obolo and Ibeno. The people of Onna are predominantly farmers. Onna is not a host to any oil company while search is ongoing for oil discovery. The state government is doing its best to claim neighbouring community ancestral lands and draw its boundary toward the Atlantic Ocean, so as to enhance and benefit from the PIB bill signed by the Federal government (Atteh and Umoh, 2014: 35). The local government is also home to a number of highly intellectual populations who have made numerous impacts in the community, nationwide and in the diasporas. Onna Local Government is abundantly blessed with natural resources. First of these natural resources worth mentioning is fresh water. Mankind through ages has been struggling for good quality water for use by humans, animals, plant and industries. In Onna, water is always available in flowing streams serving majority of communities. The fairly generous rainfall most of the year results in flows of the streams given reliance on surface water for domestic uses and industrial purposes. Nature has also endowed Onna people with the presence of a number of minerals. It is part of the basement complex which is an important source of minerals and provides rich quality stones for building and engineering construction. It is blessed with various kinds of clay particularly good ceramics and pottery (Atteh and Umoh, 2014). Moreover, the people of Onna by way of worship are predominantly Christians. They believe in the existence of one Supreme Being. Outside this, there are Traditional worshippers with their unique shrines for their *Idiong, Ndem, Ibok* etc. Their belief is that, though they are different they are messengers of Supreme Being that see to the peace, stability and well-being of the area.

The villages in Onna are: Ikwe, Ikot Akpatek, Ikot Ebidang, Ikot Ebekpo, Abat, Ndon Eyo, Mkpato. Okat, Ikot Edor, Ukpana, Mkpaeto, Ikot Esor, Ikot Eko Ibon, Okom, Ikot Ndudot, Ikot Ebiere, Ikot Udo, Ikot Nkan, Ikot Ndua Iman, Ikot Obong Ishiet, Ikot Akpan Ishiet, Atiamkpat, Awa Iman, Nnung Oku, Ntan Ide Ekpe, Awa Ndon, Awa Atai, Ikot Abasi Oniong, Ikot Mbong, Afaha Ikot Idem Udo, Afaha Ikot Akpan Mkpe, Afaha Atai, Afaha Ikot Nkan, Abak Ishiet, Ini-Ikwe and Ini-Edor (Atteh and Umoh, 2014: 12). Before the emergence of Christianity in Onna, there was indigenous religion which was handed over by the fore-bears. The core premise of indigenous religion was loyalty to the ancestors and accompanying rituals that are expressed by this loyalty. It has been said that Africa including Onna is a *terra religiosa- religious people*. Religion indeed has a profound impact on the attitudes, behaviour, plans, and destinies of the people. At all levels, collective and individual, the indigenous religions of the people inspire reactions and dictate options. Traditions and customs have been religiously expressed and persist for Centuries (Sidibe, 1991:87).

Factors Responsible for Commercialization of Prayer Houses in Onna LGA

Quest for Material Things: One of the major causes of commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes in Africa in general and Onna LGA in particular is the quest for material things.

The glamour and flaunting of wealth by many prayer houses and healing homes' founders and purveyors have made them to become desperate as well as equate success in service to God to mean status and much acquisition of material things. Founders of such homes take advantage of gullible miracle seekers, who will do anything just to have respite from their troubles. The extent to which some of these houses and homes founders or purveyors go to satisfy their curious followers and rip them off their monies is dastardly. Essien (2010: 12) puts it more succinctly that the mad craze for money has made some people willing to commercialize religion for their own benefits and interest. Though one might be tempted to say that there is no difference between the quest for money and that of material things, both walk hand-in-hand. In the early 30s down to the late 70s, simplicity and modesty were the watchword of the pastors. The pastors or reverends as the case may be have relatively simple methods of worship and living Spartan lives. It is also expedient to point out here that, they (clerics) do not own properties like houses, fanciful cars and fat bank accounts. All that mattered to them was modesty if and whenever they wanted to acquire any of the basic needs and nothing more (Essien, 2010: 12).

The experience of the church now in Nigeria since the middle of the 80s down to the present time is a clear indication that there is a sharp departure from the original land mark of reaching the unreached and placing of genuine emphasis on the hereafter. Many of these preachers' messages promise health and wealth to those who believe. Most of their programmes are politically inclined, centered on this world rather than eternity. A bulk of their theology is experiential and emotional, highly influenced by human philosophy and mental psychology, minimizing doctrines and ideas (Raphael, 2013: 34). Their theologies are as well shallow, fraudulent and manipulative in nature. Of a truth, the level of material quest by Nigerian Christians is radically in deviance, and inimical to the values and life of the early Church. Consequently, the position of Raphael (2013: 34) becomes relevant here in that; "a new kingdom in which treasures are found here on earth is preferred to a delayed gratification, and treasure in the heavenly kingdom of 'the other world'". This scenario places the Nigerian church in a dilemma and frightening challenge. In the beginning, the religious trends and point of emphasis have been that of values of poverty, simplicity, and detachment from this world of illusion. But now, capitalist ideals – which emphasize and esteem individuals and group betterment, which can be measured in material terms and can be paid for with money are the order of the day (Raphael, 2013: 34).. In their campaign, it was believed that promotion of financial success is a means to attaining personal satisfaction. It was against this background that Raphael (2013) lamented that the idea that poverty could be a state of blessedness in itself, a favourite of preachers as recently as a century ago, is now hopelessly discredited. Even the post Conservative Pulpiteers nowadays exhorts their poor in the name of healing to get ahead, but to do it by non-violence means

Economic Pressure

The economic condition of Nigeria in general which is depicted by the high level of unemployment rate in the society, has led many people into what they would not have done if things were in good shape. Immediately people are unemployed, they float their own prayer houses and healing homes, claiming that God has called them. Although the Nigerian society still needs to be evangelized, people should be aware of false prophets using the name of God to work miracles under black magic (Makinde, 2007). Again, people lose hope due to the harsh social conditions and the lack of political stability needed to revamp the ever-failing economy. Their expectation that politics could solve their economics problem has been shattered. In desperation for solutions, they turn to religion. With prayer houses and healing homes

flourishing everywhere, many people trooped to them for healing. Focusing primarily on the gospel of prosperity, prayer houses and healing homes raise the hope of people.

Quest for Money

Going by the position of King Solomon, 'money answers all things' (Ecclesiastes 10:19b). A careful look at the activities of prayer houses and healing homes today, reveals that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). The early Apostle and believers did all they could to penetrate the interiors for the purpose of evangelism, but in Nigerian society today, there appear to be a great deviation from the example set by early church in the way they go about their preaching and seeking the "lost". The question that is urgently begging for an answer in the minds of many concerning the proliferation of prayer houses and healing homes in today's society is; why are they operating in the major cities and also charging their members for all the services they render (Raphael, 2013: 55). The plausible answer that readily comes to mind is the fact that, the population density in such locations makes it easier for one to amass wealth than in the remote areas that are ridden with high level poverty. What plays itself out is that, with catchy and animating words, founders and purveyors of healing homes advertise for miracles, which turn out to be a harvest of money. Using both fetish and satanic powers to draw large crowds, they convince their followers to sow 'quality seeds' and wait for their on-coming miracles. It is based on this unfortunate development that Raphael (2013: 48) lamented that many have embraced the doctrine of money, wealth and prosperity instead of the message of salvation. Jesus, during His days on earth, had a similar experience with the Scribes and the Pharisees. He strongly rebuked them for all that they were pursuing was nothing more than how to get rich.

Quest for Fame

Competition, which is a common feature of business in the secular society, has silently masqueraded its way into prayer houses and healing homes. It is sad to say that, so many people are not willing to be "human followers" as taught by Christ (Matthew 18:1-4), but try hard to be *seen and heard*. This is one of the reasons why people who are supposed to be under the tutelage of others are now founders of prayer houses and healing home as well as becoming General Overseers (G.O) everywhere especially in the cities. It is germane to posit strongly here that, behind the veil of church proliferation in Nigeria lies silently the quest for fame (Iheanacho, 2012: 93). The quest for fame has led many preachers into preaching about their church, miracles and not about "Christ" himself and his salvific work. In connection to this ugly trend in the church in the society, Nmah (2008: 94) observes that today, many of our church leaders consciously or unconsciously measure success in life in terms of wealth, prestige and power: the three key principles of stratification, and social mobility in secular society. What become the common trend today in many societies at large, are bill boards, fliers, banners and posters reflecting the images of founders and their wives. Seeing all these, the questions we need to raise are: Was this practice found among the early disciples? Was it part of the early doctrines preached by Jesus himself? Where did this trend come from and how did it find its way into Christendom? Without any doubt, we can see that, selfish interest cannot be separated from such developments. The problem of the church went deeper owing to the fact that, the gospel as preached on the radio, Television and as well as the Newspapers appears to have become more of "celebrity-driven" and focused on what is "tangible and material". In relation to this, Ndiokwere (2002:7) argued that some of the new church founders are those who could not submit to the leadership and instruction of other church leaders, for which reason they broke out to establish control. For such people, leadership is always seen as a threat to self-realization and fulfilment.

Socio-religious Implications of Commercialization of Prayer Houses and Healing Homes in Onna LGA

From the sociological stand point, the astronomical commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes in recent time has created a wrong image for the church in the society. The majority of people see the church as a “commercial venture”. By this act, these houses and homes have been turned into business ventures with different names, missions, ideas and general overseeing (GOs) without any positive impact on the society. According to Hundu and Azembah (2018: 12), this trend has reached an unprecedented height with the commercialization of miracles by charging people who ask for special prayers, healing or miracles, very high prices. All these are flagrant disregard of the divine injunction by Christ that “freely you received and freely you give” (Nmah, 2008: 17). Furthermore, there are many clear cases of situations where the founders and purveyors of prayer houses are taking advantages of these prayer houses and their positions to amass wealth and exploit their innocent members. There are many other cases too in which ministers desecrate the sanctuary with jesting and other disdainful behaviours. Most founders of prayer houses and healing homes are noted for various nefarious acts ranging from extortion of money from members and abuse of position hereby turning prayer houses into their business. This act has dented the image of the church most especially the images of these houses and homes in the society. This is because many people in the society are seeing them as a lucrative business avenue to maximize profit.

It is an indisputable fact that a common notion for the emergence of these houses and homes is commercial reason. Religion has been largely seen as a source of making money. Religion has also been twisted as it were to suit the intents and purposes of the users. Commercialization of religion according to Obiora, is described as “Holy Deceit”- the art of trading in God’s name (Obiora, 1998:97). Thus, in the context of commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes, no service is free of charge including salvation. One must pay for it. Ndiokwere (2002:7) recorded how a man whose wife was barren for 12 years, was asked to pay the prophet a sum of two hundred and fifty thousand (N250,000) for the purchase of spiritual items to end the bareness. Again, it was gathered that some prayer house and healing homes are fond of asking people to pay a sum for their healing and deliverance. Moreover, many founders of prayer houses and healing homes are selling religious tokens acclaimed to possess powers capable of bringing solutions to the problems of the users. Such items include oil, salt, handkerchiefs, water among others. Miracles are also fabricated in some of these houses and homes in order to attract crowds and raise money (Ndiokwere, 2002:7). One of the damaging effects is unhealthy competition. There is a high level of competition and envy among founders and purveyors of prayer houses and healing homes in African society as a result of quest for fame, title consciousness and positions. The level of unhealthy competition by these houses and homes’ founders is radically embarrassing and inimical to the core values of Christianity. In order to avoid the error of this unhealthy competition or division in the church, Paul warned about this among the believers in 2 Corinthians 10:12, where he admonished that: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise” (NIV).

Again, it is worthy to note that emphasis of some ministers nowadays is more on the quantitative increase and not the qualitative aspect which should be the main focus. Since everyone wants to be seen and heard, and not being so much bothered about the souls of men that are wallowing in iniquities. The reigning thing now as the result of competition is who is the most eloquent prophet or healer. This has led to clashes between prayer houses and personalities. There have been a lot of controversies/disagreements and contention between

founders. There is also an unhealthy competition for client as each of the prayer houses and healing homes struggle to get their member. Moreover, there have been several cases of fraud, embezzlements and the likes by the founders. In fact, some prayer houses and healing homes are not accountable to their members on how the church money is being used. Similarly, there have been seeming contradictions to what the bible is teaching and what some prayer houses and healing homes are teaching today. There are different doctrinal beliefs, different approaches to the name of God. Members also believe that the healer (prophet and evangelist) are impeccable. Members equally believe everything they say. Sequel to this, some pastors do oppress their members by asking them to eat grass, some are to eat dead rat, ants, snakes etc., just to heal them from various diseases and to set them free from their bondages. Commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes has brought more chaos and disadvantages than the expected gains that religion is expected to offer, this is because one of the purposes of religion is to bring succor to mankind but in the contemporary worldview it is relatively subjective (Madu, 2003: 94). That is why recently through the media, some African preachers are seen as opportunists because “it is believed that most of the founders of prayer houses and healing homes established them not because of any divine mandate, but because they see Church opening as a business venture”

Most of these prayer houses and healing homes founders are not interested in salvaging the ugly situation at hand as the good shepherd, but rather, they go on extorting money from the members both from the rich and the poor, those who are ignorant of the business of the so called men of God. However, there is no gainsaying that prayer houses and healing homes could be a blessing to the people in the society, if properly managed and guided because they provide succor to the spiritual needs of people. For instance, many people have been thronged to them for healing with incurable diseases of all descriptions, especially cancer, HIV, infertility, lack of success in businesses among others. What is required now from the founders of these houses and homes is to operate them in a way that will be able to change moral decadence of the people in order to reduce the corruption and atrocities that are prominent in the society. This is because a situation, where by Bible teaching is used to emphasize material wealth as some of the founders do today, can easily abolish the Christian values or interest in the Bible. But sound teaching of the Bible can promote faith, hope, trust and sound doctrine.

Conclusion

From the forgoing, it is pertinent to note that Commercialization of prayer houses and healing homes in Onna LGA has brought more chaos and disadvantages than the expected gains that religion is expected to offer, this is because one of the purposes of religion is to bring succor to mankind but in our own idea and worldview it is relatively subjective. Most of these prayer houses and healing homes’ founders are not interested in salvaging the ugly situation at hand as the good shepherd, but rather, they go on extorting money from the members, both the rich and the poor, those who are ignorant of the business of the so called men of God. However, there is no gainsaying the fact that prayer houses and healing homes could be a blessing to the people of Onna, if properly managed and guided because they provide succor to the spiritual needs of people. For instance, Onna people have thronged to them for healing with incurable diseases of all descriptions, especially madness, misfortune, infertility, lack of success in businesses among others. What is required now from the founders of these houses and homes is to operate them in a way that will be able to change moral decadence of the people in order to reduce the corruption and atrocities that are prominent in Onna LGA. This is because a situation, where by Bible teaching is used to emphasize material wealth as some of the

founders do today, can easily abolish the Christian values or interest in the Bible. But sound teaching of the Bible can promote faith, hope, trust and sound doctrine.

Recommendations

- i. Government should establish a laid down criteria for the establishment of prayer houses and healing homes in Onna LGA.
- ii. The Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Christian association of Nigeria (CAN) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) should establish a registration centre for all the prayer houses and healing homes in Onna LGA and also issue guidelines to them on the modus operandi before their operation. They should equally monitor the activities of all the prayer houses and healing homes to avoid abuse of their activities.
- iii. Founders of prayer houses and healing homes should guide against commercialization of healing and prayer. They should heed to Jesus' teaching of "freely you received, freely, you must give".
- iv. Government should help to salvage the ugly situation. There is no doubt that poverty and harsh economic conditions foster the trend of prayer houses and healing homes in Onna. Hence, the need to reduce hardship and poverty; boost educational standards and create more opportunities for employment. This will go a long way to reduce the multiplication of prayer houses and healing homes and their attendant consequences in Onna LGA

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