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(43) UNITED ALADURA CHURCHES (UAC) – WHITE GARMENT CHURCHES IN AFRICA

Rufus Okikiola Ositelu

Introduction

The United Aladura Churches (White Garment Churches) form the largest movement among the African-Initiated Churches. It was established in 1930. The members always wear white and no shoes in the temples (church buildings). It has about five thousand (5,000) churches all over the world and three thousand (3,000) in Nigeria alone. The Aladura Communion has an estimated population of fifty million members worldwide. Within this communion is found United Aladura Churches (UAC), an ecumenical umbrella organisation, founded in 2004 with its headquarters in Nigeria and branches all over the world. It has about 35 million members, 15,000 pastors and 12,000 parishes (congregations).

The Self-Understanding of the United Aladura Churches

In the Preamble of the UAC Constitution, the United Aladura Churches' motto is stated: 'The true light now shines' (1 John 2:8). Its vision is to encourage growth, purity, identity and unity of the White Garment/Aladura Churches. Its mission is stated as to facilitate and build the capacity of member churches towards living and sustaining a Christian lifestyle, thus upholding the status of White Garment/Aladura Churches in the African continent and beyond. According to its value statements, the UAC promote visible unification of White Garment/Aladura Churches, transparency of action, accountability and open-mindedness, culminating in living exemplary lives. It is governed by the Board of Trustees (BOT) of the United Aladura Churches (UAC) which includes seven senior church leaders. These include Most Elder Apostle Solomon Alao (C&S), The Most Rev. Dr Rufus Ositelu (TCLAW), Archbishop John Ogunsile (TCLAW), Pastor Emmanuel Oschoffa (CCC), Superior Evangelist S.O. Banjo (CCC), Bishop S.A. Ademosu (FCDM) and Bishop C.O. Kaiyewu (FCDM).

The Background and Self-Understanding of Cherubim and Seraphim Churches (C&S)

There are over 350 stand-alone church organizations within the Cherubim and Seraphim Church Movement (C&S) group of churches. In a bid to fortify its unity, the Cherubim and Seraphim Unification Church has ratified the election of its fourth supreme head, Prophet Solomon Adegboyega Alao. Before, he was the General Superintendent of Sacred Cherubim and Seraphim Church, the position he has held since 1995 after the demise of Prophet Jacob Adeolegan Omole, who became the fourth General Superintendent of the church in 1982.

The Background and Self-Understanding of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide (TCLAW)

The Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide (TCLAW) has its international and spiritual headquarters in Nigeria, West Africa, with parishes in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Ghana, Togo, Republic of Benin, UK, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. TCLAW has about 3,600,000 members in Nigeria and 8,200,000 members worldwide. It has about 4,000 pastors, twelve provinces, 100 dioceses and 3,800 parishes. The church is a member of diverse organizations, including the World

Council of Churches, All Africa Conference of Churches, the Christian Council of Nigeria, and United Aladura Churches.

The Yoruba word ‘Aladura’ means ‘Prayer Fellowship’ or ‘The Praying People’. The members of the Aladura churches believe in the power of praying and fasting (Yoruba is a major language of the south-western region of Nigeria). The founder of the Church of the Lord (Aladura), the late Prophet Dr Josiah Olunowo Ositelu (also written as Oshitelu), received his calling in 1925 and founded the Church the same year, and the independent church was inaugurated in 1930, in Ogere. Prophet General Dr Josiah Olunowo Ositelu (1900-1966) was the founder and first primate of the ‘Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide’, one of the first-generation African Initiated and Independent Churches. The current Pope is His Eminence, the Most Reverend Dr Rufus Okikiolaolu Olubiyi Ositelu. He is the Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Arch-Province of Nigeria, and the incumbent and the Fourth Primate of the ‘Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide (TCLAW)’ organization. He is also the Pope of the Aladura Communion Worldwide (ACW) consisting of all White Garment churches (Aladura Churches). Primate Ositelu is the son of the late Prophet General Dr Josiah Olunowo Ositelu and Archbishop (Mrs) Susannah Adewunmi Ositelu, popularly called ‘Mama Aladura or Mama Kekere’.

The six tenets of the church as explained by the incumbent Primate – The Most Reverend Dr Rufus Ositelu – are:

Biblical-in-Pattern – in the sense that, in all matters of faith, conduct and doctrine, our Supreme Court of Appeal should always be the Holy Bible, and whenever we come to a crossroads or at a road-block in our deliberations, our next reaction must be: ‘Let us read/hear what the Bible says on this.’ Thus, the Holy Bible is our Spiritual Constitution.

Pentecostal-in-Power – in the sense that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is the Guide and Administrator of the Church through which the Church is guided, directed, filled, influenced, administered and managed. The Spirit of Jesus Christ shall quicken, inspire and stir everyone up, always to glorious and godly deeds.

Evangelical-in-Mission – in the sense that we carry the gospel of Christ to the nooks and crannies of the world, and to preach, witness and propagate the Good News to all, and to make disciples of all nations unto the Lord Jesus Christ, irrespective of background, race or gender.

Ecumenical-in-Outlook – in the sense that we embrace and encourage brotherly and sisterly love among believers, and not to forsake the assembly of the saints.

Prophetic-in-Ministry – in the sense that this is the genesis and pillar on which The Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide (TCLAW) is anchored. The gifts of prophecy, dream, vision, revelation, speaking in tongues, healing, signs and wonder, teaching and administration are bestowed on the Church.

Social-in-Responsibility – in the sense that we believe that the Church should be a blessing to the communities where it is situated and the inhabitants of the state in general.

The major concerns of the church in the 21st century are to train more efficient church workers, and to expand its social contributions to the society at large. The church’s seminary – Aladura Theological Institute (ATI) – has now been affiliated with Lagos State University (LASU) and offers diploma, graduate and postgraduate degree courses in Theology and Christian Education.

The Background and Self-Understanding of Celestial Church of Christ (CCC)

The Celestial Church of Christ is a spiritual, worldwide, united, indivisible Holy Church which came into the world from heaven by DIVINE ORDER on 29th September 1947 in Porto Novo, Republic of Benin, through the founder of the church, the Late Reverend Pastor Prophet Samuel Bilehou (sometimes written as Bilewu) Joseph Oshoffa (sometimes written as Oschoffa, Osofa) who, in addition to being the founder,

was also the first Pastor (Head) of the church. The church is well known with parishes and dioceses all over the world, with its international headquarters in Nigeria. The movement has continued to grow since Oshoffa's death, but has also suffered setbacks, the most immediate being severe difficulties related to the matter of succession.

Some elements in the self-understanding and some challenges of the Celestial Church of Christ will be described in the following six points:

a) Schism in the Leadership of the Church – Several individuals have been claiming the leadership of the church since the death of its founder. Among them are Josiah Kayode Owodunni, Alexander Abiodun Bada (late), Paul Suru Maforikan, G. Bolanle Shonekan, just to mention a few.

b) Re-unification Effort – Efforts are being made to unify all the different factions of the church. Following the evidently negative and less progressive effects which partnership has had and is still having on the intractable leadership crisis in Celestial Church of Christ worldwide, through family-related loyalties and allegiance of shepherds and parishioners to human leaders (pastors), it became expedient for shepherds and parishioners to hold their total loyalty and allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ alone and evolve a project that will bring us together in the same vineyard under ONE shepherd.

This development became necessary in order for such shepherds and parishioners to avail themselves of the opportunity to come together as an independent and unbiased body to fight on a common ground termed GLOBAL UNIFICATION OF THE CELESTIAL CHURCH OF CHRIST.

This project started with a clear mission to do the utmost to reconcile whatever differences that might be existing amongst the leadership of the church and unify the various factions so as to enable the church to properly promote the divine mission of winning souls for Christ. The project is not unmindful of the serious lacuna existing in the church constitution and the discretion of the spiritual tenets of the church by those who may not wish the church well; it is hoped that these shortcomings would be addressed as the project progresses.

The Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) unification and reform group, Nigeria and the Diaspora, consists of the universal unification group under Prophet Johnson Shodipe; the CCC northern elders' forum under Evangelist Akin Arikawe; the administration group under Michael Akinsoji; the CCC unification and renaissance mission under Prophet Emmanuel Asebiomo expressly to chart a new course of unity under one pastor (leader). Debo Oladimeji in a caption, 'CCC set to vanquish demon of disunity', reported on the situation of leadership in the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) and efforts so far made to move the church forward. Excerpt:

On April 30, 2013 the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) unification and reform group, Nigeria and the Diaspora, published an advert in the Guardian Newspaper which made many members of the church eager to know more about CCC which has been without a true Pastor (Head) since the demise of the Pastor and Founder of the church, Rev. Samuel Oschoffa, 27 years ago... Emmanuel Asebiomo added that the effort they are making now is to bring the church together and that God has made it possible for them to formulate a new administrative structure, recommended a financial guideline, and drafted a new Nigerian Constitution to replace the Constitution Oschoffa left behind. Another member of the unification committee, Evangelist TundeAbai of CCC Igbekeleolu Parish, who has been a member of the church for over 35 years said that the Supreme Court, Nigeria held in the case of A.A. Bada and Owodunni that the present Constitution did not give room for easy succession of the late Pastor and Founder. And since he did not name a particular person who was to succeed him in that Constitution, the next step was that the spirit appoint his successor... He added that people are now tired of 'hooliganism' within the church. We are working towards a situation where the Spirit of God will descend to appoint a Pastor (Leader) for us...

c) Beliefs – Although the church takes elements from Yoruba thought, it also has strong similarities to the 'purification movements' against paganism that are relatively common in African Christianity and

Islam. Oshoffa believed he had a mission to combat ‘Satan’, ‘fetish priests’ and other ‘powers of darkness’. The name of the group comes from the Bible, Deuteronomy 26:15: ‘Look down from thy Holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Celestial and the land which thou hast given us, as thou didst swear to our father, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ The name signifies that they deem themselves as celestial or a representative of the heavenly on Earth.

d) Tenet and Mode of Worship – The church under the absolute dictatorship of the Holy Spirit is hereby emphasized: the name of the church ‘Celestial Church of Christ’ was revealed by the Holy Spirit through a prophet who was held in trance for seven days. The rules and regulations are written in the booklet of ‘Tenets and Admission into the membership of Celestial Church of Christ’. The mode of worship includes the setting of the altar, and the seat therein, the number of candles used for various types of services and the seating arrangement in particular. It should be noted that the seating arrangements were revealed through a prophetess who under the influence of the Holy Spirit in the wilderness on Friday 5th October 1947, sketched the seating arrangement using oranges.

The Services of the Church – There are different orders of service laid down in the Celestial Church of Christ for different occasions such as Marriage, Funeral, Naming Ceremony, Mass in Remembrance of the dead, etc. The order for the respective occasion is strictly as revealed by the Holy Spirit and as set out in the booklet entitled ‘Order of Service’.

e) Holy Rites or Sacraments – There are a number of Holy Rites or Sacraments within the form of worship in Celestial Church of Christ that are of utmost importance. Members shall avail themselves of the opportunity to partake in these rites or sacraments: Baptism, Holy Communion, Annual Washing of Feet, Annual Pilgrimage to Imeko in Ogun State, Nigeria, at Christmas Eve, Annual Harvest Thanksgiving Service, and Holy Mary’s Day.

f) Membership – All persons who earnestly, sincerely desire to be saved looking for salvation and therefore accept Jesus Christ as the son of God and Holy conversion by taking up such duties and privileges as entailed in the fellowship and the Ten Commandments are welcome into the fold. Celestial Church of Christ is an inclusive congregation, anyone with the desire to observe the Tenets and Mode of Worship is welcome.

g) Lingering Fractionalization – According to Superior Evangelist Lagun Adesanya who is the Shepherd-in-Charge of the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) Valley of El-Bereka Parish, Mushin, Lagos, in an interview to the Guardian newspaper, spoke on the obstacles to unification in Celestial Church and lingering fractionalization of the CCC worldwide, the impediments to the unification and the way forward, and said: ‘Declaring anyone “Pastor” (Head of the CCC) is contempt of court... Judgement of the Supreme Court has to be respected... Problems in the church are caused by selfishness and love of money (the root of all evils)... The solution is for us to follow the guidance of the Supreme Court, which said: “Sit down, formulate a new constitution.” That is what we should have done since June 2000 when judgement was given. They put it aside and are doing their own will... You see, to them the word pastor means money. But they misread the constitution. It says, “The pastor shall hold in trust the income on behalf of the workers.” The money does not belong to the pastor. Now, it is winner takes all. Once you are pastor, all the money is yours. That is why there is no progress in the church...’ The church unfortunately is also known for having suffered from all kinds of allegations of fraud within its own ranks.

The Background and Self-Understanding of Fellowship of Christ Disciples Ministry (FCDM)

The Independent Group Churches (FCDM) are diverse small churches whose founders were former members of the C&S, TCLAW or CCC groups. The United Aladura Churches (UAC) has been a blessing to this group. The UAC has also been the motivating factor in bringing them together under a new group name: ‘Fellowship of Christ Disciples Ministry (FCDM)’.

This 'Independent' group is not a registered name but an adopted name. The churches under this group were not working together as a group prior to their membership in the UAC. But through the 'Love, Unity and Administration' existing within the UAC, they were motivated and encouraged to take a new group name: 'FCDM', which has now been registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) in Abuja, Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria. The membership of this group within the United Aladura Churches (UAC) actually brought the member churches of this group out of their obscurity, for none of them was known nationally before their membership in UAC. And their membership as a group within UAC actually brought them together and encouraged them to work with one another and got them to register their group with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) in Abuja, Nigeria as 'Fellowship of Christ Disciples Ministry (FCDM)'. Before the registration of this group as FCDM, the group was known as 'Independent Group' with the acronym 'Ind'.

Two prominent leaders of the Disciples of Christ (Independent Aladura Churches) are:

Bishop S.A. Ademosu of the 'Mount Jieawowrrar All Saints Church Aladura Worldwide', situated in Odogbolu, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Bishop C.O. Kaiyewu of the 'Universal Church of God's Anointing', situated at 53, Balogun Street, Shomolu, Lagos, Nigeria.

Concern for Education

The African Initiatives in Christianity have diverse concerns for education. Some of them have seminaries or theological institutions of diverse standards. Their greatest challenge is funding, particularly for books and infrastructure. Some of them do not have theological institutions and their Ministers of Religion learn by observation. Help in these areas would highly be appreciated.

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