

A Brief History of the Church in Nigeria

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Modern church history in Nigeria takes the form of a series of waves dating from 1833.

Britain banned the North Atlantic slave trade in 1807 and in 1833 it became illegal to own slaves in the British Empire. Around the coast of Africa, the Royal Navy were kept busy attempting to enforce the anti-slavery laws. The West Africa Squadron of warships was station in Fernando Po (now Bioko, part of Equatorial Guinea) to capture the slave ships of other nations and liberate their slaves or “recaptives.”

Many of the 150,000 “recaptives” joined other freed slaves from Europe, North America and the West Indies in the British colony of Sierra Leone where they were educated or trained and then released to make a living for themselves in the colony. Many converted to Christianity as Anglican and Methodist missionaries evangelised among them.

Inevitably some freed slaves, originally from Abeokuta, commenced trading along the West African coast, and soon were moving back to southern Nigeria and appealed for missionaries to come and help them in their evangelistic work. One of those early missionaries was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first indigenous Nigerian Anglican Bishop (from 1864–1891). Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic missionaries began evangelising along Nigeria’s coast.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, a second wave brought the “interior” missions, further inland. From 1858 to 1862 the Third Great Awakening religious revival had swept the English-speaking world. Many became Christians, new churches were built, and interest grew in missionary work, especially reaching people groups where Christ was unknown.

A key figure in this movement was Hudson Taylor, the English founder of the China Inland Mission (CIM). These interdenominational faith missions, as the name suggests, operated on the principal of faith, depending on donations from individuals and church congregations, and trusting God to move their supporters to donate. The Qua Iboe Mission started in 1887 in southeast Nigeria. The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) arrived in 1893, although it was not established properly until 1902. Under Rowland Bingham’s leadership the goal was to evangelise northern Hausa Muslims but SIM found more success

among central Nigeria's traditionalists.

The Sudan United Mission (SUM) arrived in 1904, and the United Missionary Society in 1905. SUM's founder Karl Kumm envisioned a line of mission stations across Africa holding back Islam's advance. They focused on evangelising traditionalist people groups with medical work, preaching, Bible translation and literacy.

However, as Western missionaries were not permitted in Muslim emirates, the first actual Christian "missionaries" in Muslim areas were southern Nigerian Christian traders and civil servants who had planted churches and then requested to have pastors for these churches they had planted. Evangelists from the Middle Belt region were also more effective than Western missionaries.

After World War I, African Instituted Churches—churches that were founded and led by Africans—began to appear. Many of these were in response to the Spanish flu pandemic which was sweeping the world, for which medicine at that time had no answer. Churches like the Cherubim & Seraphim, Christ Apostolic Church and Church of the Lord Aladura were early forms of Pentecostal churches, often rejecting Western medicine in favour of faith healing. They spread particularly during a period of religious revival in the 1930s.

Moving forward to the 1960s and a period of anticipating independence, missions raced to establish indigenous church structures and leadership. For example, SIM churches formed ECWA in 1954, and through its Evangelical Missionary Society (EMS) mission's department, Nigerians evangelised across Nigeria and in neighbouring countries. In 1963 the New Life for All evangelistic programme was launched across a wide range of Protestant denominations. This revolutionised Nigeria's religious landscape with hundreds of thousands following Jesus Christ.

After the Civil War (1967-1970) came the charismatic movement. Building on earlier Pentecostalism, the charismatics widened Christians' exposure to Pentecostal doctrines, especially in missionary founded churches and among younger urban populations. Since the 1990s the new charismatics have grown, in many cases preaching the prosperity gospel. These churches include the Redeemed Christian Church of God, The Lord's Chosen Church, Mountain of Fire and Miracles, Christ Embassy, which have gained prominence in the ecclesiastical landscape in Nigeria.

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