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Trail Blazers in Women's Work Department, Methodist Church Nigeria 1969-2012

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Abstract

Ecclesiastical history has revealed that despite the preponderance of women in the church, historical narratives have frequently overlooked their contributions. Despite the array of literature on Methodist Church Nigeria (MCN) on areas like policy making, pastoral ministry, little attention has been given to Women's Work Department (WWD), despite it being the umbrella body for all female organization both globally and nationally. This research does an exposition on those women who pioneered the WWD in MCN, highlighting their various contributions to the development of the history and life of the church and society 1962-2012. The research utilises oral history as a methodology as oral interviews were used to elicit information from relevant persons. **Keywords:** African Philosophy of Family, Family, Postmodernism, Phenomenology, Dialectics.

Keywords: Women's history, Women's Work Department, Methodist Church Nigeria, Policy Making, Pastoral Ministry.

Introduction

The history of Methodism can never be complete without the mention of women who have contributed to the success of the Church from the earliest periods. The very beginnings of the Methodist movement is said to have been greatly influenced by the nurturing role of Susanna Wesley, the mother

of the Wesley brothers, Charles and John.

They were said to have been brought up in the strictest way possible in character and strict moral discipline, leading them to becoming

great as John Wesley founded Methodism¹ while Charles Wesley his brother became the famous hymnologist, composing such legendary hymns surviving centuries after him. The close rapport between John Wesley and his mother contributed to the admiration and respect he accorded women around him which was further responsible for the freedom he accorded to women in the Methodist movement. Some of these women like Mary Fletcher, Barbara Heck, Fanny Crosby and many others contributed immensely to shaping the history of the Methodist movement. These were recognized by John Wesley under the title of deaconesses and prophetesses in accordance to the apostolic examples².

In the course of writing the history of Methodist Church Nigeria, it has been discovered that although women have been instrumental in the development and spread of the Church, there were usually omissions

in historical narration pinpointing the specific contributory roles of women in the church, except in instances where they are referred to as companions to their husbands³. This gap has been heightened during the process of time by the preponderance of male authors writing the history of the Church⁴, Women in Missions⁵, Methodist Women's Fellowship⁶ but little attention has been paid to Women's Work Department (WWD) being the umbrella body for all female organisations in the Church both globally and locally. This has led to the contributions of women not been fully recognized. Thus, this research does an exposition on the women who pioneered WWD in Methodist Church Nigeria from 1969 which serves as the date when the first Women's Work Coordinator took office to 2012 which is the date of the 50th anniversary of Methodist Women's Fellowship, a major arm under the WWD, for

¹ Davies Rupert, *Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 39..

² Abel Stevens, *Women in Methodism : Its Three Foundresses, Susanna Wesley, The Countess of Huntingdon, and Barbara Heck* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866), 13.

³ See Report on the Minutes of meeting of District/Synod for the Western Nigeria District, 1940 (National Archives, Headquarters, Ibadan), where Sister Winifred Shovelton on the retirement of her husband, Mr Shovelton, was first praised to 'have seconded her husband', before her specific duty was reiterated as having being the first President and leader of the Methodist Women's Fellowship.

⁴ M.M.Familusi, *Methodism in Nigeria (1842-1992)* (Ibadan: NPS Educational Publishers, 1992). See also Jide Fatokun, *Methodist Witness in Nigeria* (Nigeria: Positive Press, 2009). See also Rt. Rev. A.

Ladigbolu, *The Roots of Methodism in Ibadan Diocese*, ed. (Ibadan. Akintayo Printers, 1996)

⁵ Mercy Oduyoye, *The Wesleyan Presence in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Sefer, 1992).

⁶ E.A. Makinde, *Women as Teachers and Character Moulders: A Handbook Commemorating the 8th Anniversary of Women's Fellowship in Methodist Nigeria 1932-2012*. See also D.M.Orekoya, *A short History of Methodist Women's Fellowship in Nigeria (Western Sector)*. (n/p , 1996).

the purpose of historical recognition for now and future works on WWD in time to come.

Writing Women's History

The need for the inclusion of women into accounts of significant events of historical narratives in the past with the sole responsibility of discovering those women that could be referred to as forgotten but have contributed immensely to history, specific history. Nan Sloane in her book tried to restore women into early foundation of the Labour party as well as putting into account the contributions and achievement of the women⁷. Weatherford also makes an exhaustive compilation of the women who through their efforts contributed to the establishment of the state of Florida⁸. Tracing the history from the original settlers of Florida, giving specific inferences to the women and their roles even those times when civilization was non-existent, gradual development and expansion of the state, Weatherford does an exhaustive historical analysis of the state combining each sector and historical accounts to bring to light the women who history had omitted in the

narrative, identifying and showing in explicit details specific achievement of specific women and the general contributions of women through the various stages in the forming of history of Florida state.

The inclusion of women into historical narratives cannot be over emphasised. It spans the various aspects of life, be it political, financial, religious, medical etc. this is gone past just the idea of writing but have even moved to the audio-visual as well. There have been in recent times the flooding of movies into the entertainment world bringing to life the very achievements of women in specific events, land mark events that have helped to shaped history. It was reported that despite the fact that women made up like 5% of the agency's workforce in the Apollo era, they played critical roles in getting the astronauts to the moon and back home safely. The names of these women were not as known as their male counterparts; their contributions were just as important to the success of the Apollo 11 mission that landed the first astronauts on the moon in 1969⁹. There was a movie patterned after the book written by Margot Lee Shetterly, titled

⁷ Nan Sloane, *Women in the Room: Labour's Forgotten History* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2018), 12.

⁸ Doris Weatherford, *They Dared to Dream: Florida Women Who Shaped History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015).

⁹ Hanneke Weitering, *These Amazing Women Made Nasa's Apollo Moon Missions Possible*, July 24th, 2019. <https://www.space.com/women-of-apollo.html> accessed 11th June, 2020.

Hidden Figures, about a group of women of African American origin who played a role in sending astronaut John Glenn into space, but were never recognized let alone celebrated¹⁰.

In Nigerian history as well, there have been attention given to placing women into history, Nigerian history. The works of Bolanle Awe¹¹, Oyeronke Olajubu¹² have made it as fore-writers. History of women in politics and leadership roles played by women especially in the success of a government political regime is also a subject for discussion. For instance in the Obasanjo's regime and howbeit the Jonathan regime in Nigeria, certain women were of indispensable virtue, their works and efforts aided the success of the administration¹³. History is being written every-day and women are making their impacts known despite the seemingly challenges posed by the patriarchal nature and culture of the world¹⁴.

The result of this paradigm shift is the increased body of knowledge in writings in the field of women's history done by women telling the experiences of women from their own perspectives. This writings encompass the various aspects of living especially historical accounts which have left women out of the narratives, this time including women in the narration. Doris Weatherford's exhaustive historical narration of the development of the state of Florida, taking into specific details the women and the roles they played from one century to the other¹⁵. Women's history came up as a major branch in history to deal with the contributions of women, the lived experiences of women in history, bringing to fore the hidden perspectives of women in history. It is difficult to place because history is different from place to place and the experiences of women are different from culture to culture, thus involving a diversity of opinions and perspectives. The inclusion of women into

¹⁰ <http://www-sciencefocus-com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.sciencefocus.com/space/ladies-who-launch-the-women-behind..>

¹¹ Bolanle Awe, *Nigerian Women: Historical Perspective* (Ibadan: Sankore, 1992).

¹² Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003).

¹³ These women were: Dr Okonjo-iweala who was the minister of finance during Obasanjo cum Jonathan's administration and helped in bringing Nigeria out of the debts. Late Dora Akunyili who played tremendous role as the director of the National

Agency for Food and Drugs Control (NAFDAC). Dr Obiageli Ezekweseli who was former senior special assistant to former President Obasanjo on Budgeting monitoring and price intelligent unit.

¹⁴ See also Jacinda Arden, New Zealand Prime Minister, https://amp-theatlantic-com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/amp.theatlantic.com/amp/article/610237/?amp_js_v=a3&_gsa=1&usqp=.. Accessed on the 27th July, 2020.

¹⁵ Doris Weatherford. *They Dared to Dream: Florida Women who Shaped History* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2015).

history came to prominence in the 1960s through the activities of feminists with the aim of fixing the role of women in American life and history. This it is said came about as a response to women liberation movement thus giving it more of a political outlook.

Oral History and Writing Women's History: a Methodological Perspective

Carr suggested two ways to carrying out women's history; first approach represents the discovery of a new subject matter: what were women doing in the past? Women have always been involved. One aspect of women's history searches for answers to the question, looking for new evidence and asking new questions of old sources, finding appropriate contexts and categories that will shed light on the lost or hidden history of women. The second approach is recovery. Recovery of women's history as it involves relationship with and relative status to men in any historical period. The integration of the history of women into "history"- "men's history" casts new light on that supposedly general history"¹⁶.

To investigate the past involves interactions with eye witnesses and those with detailed

information on events of historical significance not covered or yet to be covered in black and white. Oral history serves as a link for providing insights into history that are not available in documented forms. This comes in handy in the situation where there is need to elicit information about the past where there has been no documentation or scarce written details about issues on ground. Oral history refers to the process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past¹⁷. It is both a methodology (a means of conducting an investigation) and the result of the research process in other words both the act of recording and the record that is produced¹⁸.

This becomes a useful methodology to give insight into the history of the Women's Work Department, analysing the experience and specific contributions of the women who have pioneered the Department. The dearth of documented information on some of these women necessitates using interview method as a qualitative analytical tool to elicit information from the pioneering coordinators of the Women's Work Department aside

¹⁶ Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988). 66.

¹⁷ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (U.S.A: Routledge, 2010), 11. (U.S.A: Routledge

¹⁸ Abrams, *Oral History*, 11

other bibliographical and archival documents as sources for this study.

Brief History of the Methodist Church Nigeria

Methodist Church was part of the fore-runners in the evangelization of Nigeria. Methodist church owes its existence to its Founder, John Wesley an Anglican Priest. The need to stand for something different in the atmosphere of spiritual decadence became upmost in the heart of John Wesley and his friends as students of Oxford University. This made them start a 'Holy club'. The way and methodical manner by which they performed their various Christian practices and duties earned them the name 'Methodists' aside other names like the 'Bible Moths', 'Sacramentarians', by those around them. The name "Methodists", stuck more over time¹⁹. John Wesley had no intention of leaving the Church of England but as the Methodist movement grew, the moves he was making outside the church was raising contentions and thus there was need for him to either stop the movement or leave the Church. Throughout John Wesley's life, his close relationship with the Moravians was

of tremendous influence in shaping his understanding of Christ and even got him converted. After his conversion, he went with such enthusiasm and conviction, preaching everywhere and anywhere. He loved open air crusades such that over fifty years of his life was used as a travelling evangelist.

Methodism in Nigeria came in two forms, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the Society of Primitive Methodists. The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society came into Nigeria through the Western part pioneered by Thomas Birch Freeman, accompanied by the Fanti Couple, Mr and Mrs De-Graft on September, 1842²⁰. These first missionaries settled in Badagry, in the present Lagos State.

The second form of Methodism entered into Nigeria through the Eastern Nigeria was brought through the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society was introduced to West Africa about 51 years after the Wesleyans arrival in Badagry. In August 1869, 'Algiva', "a merchant ship trading between Liverpool and West Africa called at the Island of Fernando Po (subsequently known as

¹⁹ B. Onuagha, *John Wesley and Methodism: A basic Knowledge* (Nigeria: Perousia Reminder Gospel band, 1992) 4.

²⁰ M.Familusi, *Methodism in Nigeria 1842-1992* (Ibadan: NPS Educational Publishers, 1992), 11.

Bioko)"²¹. During the brief stay of the Ship, the Captain and the Carpenter of the Ship, William Robinson and James Hands respectively, who were local Preachers and Primitive Methodists, preached the gospel of Christ to a small group of leaderless African Christians who had been converted to Christianity by the Baptist Missionaries. When the ship was ready to sail, the little flock sent a letter through the Captain, addressed to the General Secretaries of the Primitive Methodist Society, London, asking for a Minister to be sent to them²². On the reception of the letter, the Primitive Methodist Society Committee in London saw the letter as a call from God for more evangelism in Africa.

The two forms of Methodism later got unified based on the clamour for unification which necessitated the need to call a conference. By 1932, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society eventually merged to become the Methodist Church Nigeria. Despite this merge, the church was still not autonomous. In 1962, Methodist Church

Nigeria became autonomous, but not until 1976 was the church recognized as an Autocephalous church with mature selfhood²³, this implied that the church could now be governed by indigenous leaders chosen cautiously from the midst of her.

The Women's Work Department of the Methodist Church Nigeria: an Overview

There are different committees of Conference in the Methodist Church, there are the Men's Work, Children and Youth Work committee and Women's Work. The Committee in-charge of women and girls and all their operations in the Church is the Women's work Department.

Since the beginning of the history of Methodism, women have always been useful in the dissemination of the gospel and exhibiting outmost devotion and commitment to the things of God. The history of Women's Work Western Nigeria can be traced back to 1928 when the responsibility for the Women's Work in West Africa was committed to the Women's Department of the Methodist Missionary Society. This

²¹ John Pritchard, *Methodists and their Missionary Societies 1760-1900* (USA: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 192.

²² M.M. Familusi, *Methodism in Nigeria 1842-1992* (Ibadan: NPS Educational Publishers, 1992), 48

²³ Church Document, Rt. Rev. Rogers O. Uwadi. (secretary of Conference) Methodist church document, "You shall know the Truth and the Truth Shall make you Free", with particular reference to John Wesley in relation to Olowogbowo and other relevant issues.

prompted the need for Mrs Duncan Leith, accompanied by M. V. Hunter to pay a visit to the district in the early 1930.²⁴

Consequence of the visit was the report in which the decision that workers would be sent from Britain to train Nigerian women and they would be paid. This brought the coming of Sister Winifred Shovelton. Sister Shovelton carried on with the job for a while alone until Sister Jessie Sharpe arrived in 1935 and was posted to Ibadan²⁵. In September 1934- April 1935, Miss Alice Walton and Rev. George Ayre visited the West African Districts. This report from the visitation brought about the establishment of the Department²⁶. All these geared up and in 1972, the Women's Work Department was established at the Headquarters in Lagos and Sister Helen Davie was the first Conference Coordinator²⁷.

Trail Blazers in Women's Work Department in Methodist Church Nigeria

Since the inception of the Women's Work Department, there were those who held forth

the torch for others to see and follow as Conference Coordinators. These can be called the pioneering Coordinators of Women's Work Department. This includes Sister Helen Davie, Deaconess Yetunde Gbadebo, Reverend Rhoda Ada-James, Deaconess Nancy Kennedy-Johnson, and Deaconess Anietie Akpan.

Helen Davie

She was the pioneering Conference women's work coordinator. Sister Helen Davie happens to be the first women's Work worker to take the position of Conference Women Work coordinator. She was a selfless woman given to the gospel and hard working. Although information about her personal life could not be gotten, the testimony of her students holds mighty.

Reports have it that she was trained as a deaconess and left Shieldmulr Methodist Church in the Autum of 1964 to spend a few years in an area where she served as the only white woman missionary in Gambia²⁸. In her open letter, she tells about how difficult it

²⁴ Report of *Foundation Conference, Methodist Church Nigeria, Lagos*: 28-9-1962. N.51.

²⁵ Report of the Foundation Conference, 51

²⁶ M.M.Familusi, *Methodism in Nigeria 1842-1992* (Ibadan: NPS Educational Publishers Limited, 1992) 117.

²⁷Report on Methodist Conference Resolutions and Decisions, 1963-1979. Lagos, Nigeria: The Patriarchate..41.

²⁸ N/A "Local women Missionary writes from Gambia," Wishaw Press and Advertiser, Friday, October 28, 1966, Country: Lanarkshire, Scotland. on <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> accessed 01/08/2020.5

was for her to record facets of her life and work in Gambia. She mentions the difficulties in language and observance of local customs, teaching and climate over the past months as a travelling missionary²⁹. Sister Helen was asked to come to Nigeria at the beginning of the Biafran war in 1967.

At that time, Sister Helen Davie who was serving in Gambia from 1964, was pulled out in 1968 and sent to Eastern Nigeria to work in rehabilitation, especially amongst the women³⁰. She was based in Otuorkpo during the civil war and she travelled as widely as she was permitted working with the women in rehabilitation. The outbreak of the war left a dearth of ministers. With insufficient ministers to work with, Sister Helen Davie had to combine the work of the minister with her own during this time. As the war was coming to an end, Sister Helen was able to travel freely and she took up gathering the women together who had been in refugee

camps as well as those who had lost their husbands and helped them establish villages as an organizational tool for survival. This she did under the auspices of the Women's fellowship and continuously held meetings and Bible studies with the women³¹.

It was after the war that she went to Lagos where she took up the responsibility of women's work throughout the country as Conference Women's Work Coordinator³². During her time in the position, she was instrumental in fighting for the training of deaconesses in the Nigerian Methodist Church. This project was met with serious resistance from the church on the grounds that it was not appropriate work for women. Sister Helen travelled the country trying to persuade people to join her project. In the course of campaigning for her course, she eventually got three Methodist bishops to support her at the third Conference, after been refused in two Conferences³³. It was then suggested that she would not be able to get

²⁹ ²⁹ Wishaw Press, Friday 10, April, 1959. Lanarkshire, Scotland. Pg.16.
<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> accessed 01/08/2020

³⁰ Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Philosophie Doctor in Church History and History of Dogma at the Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoer Onderwys by Ronald J. Aitchison on *Overseas Mission of the Wesley Deaconess Order: Theological Aberration or Inspiration?* 2003.p.93

https://repository.nwu.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10394/363/aitchison_rj.pdf?sequence=1&fbclid=IwAR2cLtL9mpG5iGR5G5N5UxxqMI4QusaYW1H06lNIIJv3p6hGJqtL6oLTU assessed 22/09/2020

³¹ Aitchison, *Overseas Mission of the Wesley Deaconess Order*, 93.

³² Aitchison, *Overseas Mission of the Wesley Deaconess Order*, 94

³³ Aitchison, *Overseas Mission of the Wesley Deaconess Order*, 94.

women to do the work, Sister Helen countering this point, brought in twelve women ready to offer them for training. Combined with the support of the three bishops, she was able to sway the vote and finally given permission to go to Sagamu to set up a training there, though with the clause that she would also have to train twelve men at the same time, despite the fact that these men had little or no education. She had to join the theological college as a staff of the Methodist Laymen Theological Institute Sagamu in 1977.

Based on this she had to leave the position of the Conference women's work coordinator in 1977. As fate would have it be, she was taken to her home country in 1978 as a result of ill health and she could not witness the first fruit of the ordination of the deaconesses³⁴. Her efforts paid off as since that time there has been the deaconess's order in Nigeria. This has produced numerous women into the ministry in Methodist Church.

Olori Yetunde Gbadebo JP (Nee Idowu)

Mama Olori Yetunde Gbadebo was born on the 28th of February in 1928 at Ikorodu in the

then colonial province of Lagos, now Lagos State. Her father's name was Idowu Ogunbanke an indigene of Ile Ife and mother princess Oke Bandele Idowu Ogunbanke an indigene of Iseyin. She had her primary education in Methodist School, Ikorodu from 1936-1938. By 1938 she followed her elder brother to Ogere where she continued her education in Wesley School from 1939 - 1941. From there she proceeded to Sagamu Girls School from 1942-1944. She then went on in 1945-1946 to Methodist Teacher's training college. She started to teach in Methodist Teacher's training College in 1947 where she taught the mother of the wife of the vice president Osibanjo. In 1948, she was transferred to Methodist school Ago-Iwoyi. She was the first head mistress of Tinubu Methodist School Afternoon session. In 1956, she went to further her education in Froebel Teaching College in England, an affiliate college in the University of London. She went further to obtain her Bachelor in Arts from the University of London as an external student, also in 1956. When she got back to Nigeria in 1959, she opted to teach in Methodist Training Institute, Sagamu³⁵.

³⁴ *Interview Respondent*, Reverend Rhoda Ada-James, aged 65, Clergy, Benue diocese. Reverend Rhoda Ada-James happened to be part of the first women who were trained in the deaconess order aside other women.

³⁵ *Interview Respondent*, Olori Yetunde Gbadebo, 90years, Conference Women's work coordinator MCN, Ogun state, interviewed 12/06/2018

She was called into government service and taught at government Teachers training in Ilesha in 1961. From 1964 till 1965, she was appointed special adviser to the Mid-western government on Education. She was later appointed an Inspector of school in –charge of Nursery and Primary school. She voluntarily retired in September 1974 at the age of 46^{1/2} years. In 1976, the Federal Electoral Commission appointed her as an electoral officer. In July 8, 1977, she became a resident Federal Electoral Commission to Rivers state. In January 1979, she got posted as the resident Federal Electoral Commission to Lagos State. She was later appointed commissioner for women in Ogun State on 1979.

Her journey in the ministry started in 1944, when she received her call as practically the only woman in the church in a time when there were few then. She became an exhorter³⁶, a position she stayed for 2years after which she became a Lay Preacher on trial before becoming a fully accredited Lay Preacher in 1949.

She voluntarily took the position of Conference Women's Work Coordinator after the position was left by Sister Helen Davie as the first black woman to occupy the position in 1977. She assumed the position in 1981. During her tenure as the Conference Women's Work coordinator, she made several outstanding achievements. As noted by her, the 1976 constitution which ushered in new systems helped bring the Women's Work Department to the fore³⁷. But during that time, it was Sister Helen Davie that was in position then. Subsequently after she took office, she did a tour to survey the dioceses within the conference area to enlighten the people. It was during this tour that it was discovered that the Eastern sector had a different anthem and uniform colour for their women's fellowship. The blue and white uniform was then introduced to them as well as the anthem. She also started the idea of organizing retreats for Deaconesses in the dioceses and conference areas at least once a year. Olori Yetunde Gbadebo championed the inclusion of the ladies and girls fellowship which she introduced in Ilesha to the then Bishop, Makindipe in 1982,

³⁶ An Exhorter is a person who though not having the status of a Local Preacher, is authorized by the Presbyter to preach and accepted as such by the Local Preachers' meeting or where is no Local Preachers'

Meeting, by the Quarterly Meeting. An Exhorter shall be able to read the Scriptures in the vernacular.

³⁷ *Interview Respondent*, Olori Yetunde Gbadebo, 90years, Conference Women's work coordinator MCN, Ogun state, interviewed 12/06/2018.

emphasizing that the women's fellowship was not for old women but was for every other women.

Through the knowledge gotten by travelling to countries, she helped to improve the Department as well as the departments under the women's work. She attended the convocation of the Wesley Deaconess on the platform of being the conference coordinator for women's work and learnt things she later entrenched in the women in Nigeria³⁸. In 1986, she also attended the World Federation of Methodist Women and also World Council of Methodist Churches held in Kenya as a representative of the women. This interaction between the Nigerian women and those of other countries aided interactions through exchange programmes where women were trained and participation encouraged. With knowledge gained, programmes were brought and developed for the women in the church.

She held the position of Conference Women's Work Coordinator for six years before resigning and went on into other church duties.

Reverend Rhoda Ada-James

Reverend Rhoda Ada-James was born on 16th March 1955 to parents Elder James Ogbeole (JP) and Martha James in Adum Aiona, Orkam in Ogbeabibo, Benue state. She was married to Edward Igbope, a Nigerian Solider. She got widowed when her husband died in a car accident in 1974. She has three children. She had her primary education in Methodist Primary school, Aiona from 1962-1968³⁹.

She got into the ministry in 1977 after the death of her husband in 1974, when the deaconess order was introduced to her through the then Deacon J.O. Job, now Most Reverend J.O. Job, the Arch-bishop of Abuja Methodist Church Nigeria. At that time she was a youth president in the old Odoba circuit in Enone, Benue.

Rev. Rhoda was opportune to benefit from the efforts of Sister Helen Davie in her fight for the introduction of women through the deaconess order into the ministry. As part of the first sets of women to be trained in Methodist Laymen Institute, Sagamu, she graduated in 1979 and was posted to Oturkpo, where she served in the old Benue

³⁸ *Interview Respondent*, Olori Yetunde Gbadebo.

³⁹ *Interview Respondent*, Reverend Rhoda Ada-James, aged 65years, Conference Women's work coordinator, Umuahia, Interviewed 16/06/2020.

diocese, coordinating the women there as a woman worker. In 1981 she travelled to Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation Zambia to do a six months certificate course in Pan-African Women Leadership. The same year she was ordained into the Diaconess Order by Conference and later became the Diocesan Women Worker for Benue Diocese. In 1983, she went to Gambia for a certificate course in Pan-African Women's work course and later on came back to her diocese to work. In 1986, she was opportune to travel to Canada for a diploma course in Social development at Coady International Institute and later on proceeded again in 1988 to Zambia to obtain an advanced diploma in Pan-African Women Leadership certificate. Before the time of her appointment as the Conference Coordinator, she was the Coordinator of Women's work Benue Diocese⁴⁰. She took the position of the Conference Women's Work Coordinator from 1989 to 1996.

The crisis that shook Methodist church to its roots also affected the women's work and the women's fellowship as everyone was scattered into divisive groups. The first task she had to face was uniting the women from all the sectors together under the national

fellowship body. She succeeded in doing that when she united the Northern part, Eastern and Western sectors together under the National Women's fellowship. As Conference Coordinator, she was able to develop the land owned by the Conference in Asaba. Later on, she helped build the first Methodist church on the Maraba land in Abuja, fully sponsored by the National Women's fellowship.

Through the contributions collected from women in the Conference area, Rev. Rhoda was able to judiciously make use of it with the safe keeping of Mrs Iyabo Stephen.

Around 1990, the Women's Work launched an ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women, invited the then president Major Gen I.D. Babangida who in response to such a laudable effort donated a sum of one million naira to the women's work Department. The money was banked in the name of the Women's Work Department by the then secretary of Conference, A.A. Omodunbi, being run as an independent committee under the Conference different from the women's fellowship. The interest on the money was used to buy a car in the name

⁴⁰ Methodist celebrates 250th Anniversary of John Wesley's Commission, *Methodist News*, April 1989. Vol.1 Num.1.9.

of the Women's work Department, while the rest of the money was used to maintain the account and the women's work department⁴¹.

She introduced the organisation of seminars at the National level for the ladies and girls fellowship, while also designing the National Women's fellowship uniform. She was called into full ministry of the Church in 2009 and graduated in 2011 and was ordained and posted in 2014.

Deaconess Nancy Kennedy Johnson

Deaconess Nancy Kennedy Johnson⁴² was born on October 2, 1942 to Mr Daniel O. and Mrs M.Abebi Kennedy of Lafiaji, Lagos State now East Island Lagos State. She had her primary education in Lagos Public School in 1950-1955 and proceeded for her Secondary School in Methodist Girls High School, Yaba Lagos in 1956-1962. She obtained Higher School Certificate (HSC) in Ibadan Grammar School in 1963-64. She then registered for a professional course in

transport in 1965. Deaconess, later joined the Lagos Municipal transport service which later metamorphosed first into Lagos City transport service then later to Lagos state transport cooperation in April 1965⁴³. She became a full corporate member of the London Chartered Institute of Transport in 1981 and became eligible to be given a fellowship after been chartered and attending international conferences in London as the only woman then, but she could not accept the fellowship because of ministry.

She entered the ministry in 1983 as Conference Assistant administrative secretary. She was later ordained into the tent making deaconess order with other deaconesses in 1985. Not long after, her tent was shedded⁴⁴ by the then Secretary of Conference Bishop Roger Uwadi (now Archbishop of Umuahia) and placed on full time.

The Church crisis⁴⁵ that hit Methodist Church Nigeria had serious impact on the church

⁴¹ Interview Respondent, Reverend Rhoda Ada-James, aged 65years, Conference Women's work coordinator, Umuahia, Interviewed 16/06/2020

⁴² Interview Respondent, Deaconess Nancy Kennedy Johnson, aged 77years, National Women's Work Coordinator, Tinubu Church, interviewed 16th June, 2019.

⁴³ Interview Respondent Deaconess Nancy Kennedy Johnson

⁴⁴ Shedded is a term used in Methodist Church to mean a transition from the tent making (part time ministry) to full time ministry.

⁴⁵ Methodist Church went through a crisis that shook the church in the year 1976. This schism lasted for a period of 14years with the Church divided into the Presidential and the Patriarchal sections. The Presidential was headed by Reverend E.A. Adegbola and the Patriarchal was headed by His Pre-Eminence Reverend Prof. Bolaji Idowu. Dissatisfaction with the 1976 constitution was one of causes of the schism

affecting all the areas of the church. The women fellowship was not left out in this and the fellowship became almost non-existent during the crisis. Mama Kennedy Johnson played a key role in the resuscitation of the women's fellowship after the crisis having been saddled with the responsibility to wake up the women's fellowship by the then Chaplin, now retired Prelate Makinde and the Patriarch, Patriarch Sunday Koffi Mbang. Deaconess Kennedy Johnson was relieved of her administrative duties so she could concentrate on bringing the women's fellowship back.

As a strategy to bring the women in the whole Conference area together, she immediately started making preparations for the National Women's Conference whose date was decided in the General Purpose Committee, where Deaconess called all the women leaders together in Tinubu. The venue for the first National women's fellowship was decided as Deaconess Rhoda Ada-James volunteered to host the first National Women's Conference in Oturkpo, Benue Diocese. During the Conference, the first ever women's fellowship constitution was drafted and the National officers were

elected. This marked the resuscitation of the women's fellowship which took about 3 years to achieve. She then after this went back to administrative duties in the church.

By 1997, the then Secretary of Conference Right Reverend Michael Kehinde Stephen asked Deaconess if she would take the position as the Conference women's work coordinator after Deaconess Rhoda Ada James left the position in 1996.

As Conference Coordinator she made tremendous impacts ranging from ecumenism to the empowerment of women within the conference area. During her tenure she took frequent travels around the conference areas in the East, the North which made her popular among the women as a lot knew her. When she went on visitations to the various dioceses, she brought awareness and enlightenment to the women about women liberation, empowerment in terms of cooperative society, building snail farm and fish farm for women which on one occasion, held in the Institute of Church and society in 1998 for other diocese to imbibe, she spoke against female genital mutilations, widowhood rites, women and child

aside other causes which led to a period of unrest and disunity in the Church, until reconciliatory measures began.

trafficking, depending on the culture and practices of those she was going to visit.

Deaconess Kennedy Johnson maintained ecumenical relations and attended the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women which brings together women from Methodist churches and uniting Church worldwide once in five years and once in three years in the areas of the world. The world was divided into nine areas and she was elected as the President of the West Africa area and she hosted the area Conference in Nigeria at Ibadan, Institute of Church and Society. She was elected as Area officer for West Africa from 2001-2006. She was also privileged to attend Area conference in Ghana and Sierra Leone and attended World Conference in England and Jeju in South Korea and World Methodist Council in South Korea.

Ecumenical relationships were kept with the women of the other Churches, like the Anglican, Baptists, and Catholic sisters, whom she had particularly close interactions with especially on various programs on women trafficking.

Deaconess Kennedy Johnson initiated that the ladies and girls fellowship should not mingle with the women's fellowship but should have their own facilitator and programs that would be beneficial to their ages. This move brought about the first ever ladies and girls Fellowship National conference which held in Sagamu and the eventual electing of the first national executives of the fellowship. The other dioceses were asked to replicate this, as Ifaki diocese, Ekiti state was the first to replicate this under the Bishop Omodunbi before other dioceses did.

Deaconess Anietie Akpan

Deaconess Anietie Akpan⁴⁶ was born 25th of May, 1964. She is married to Very Rev. Okon U.Obot. She was ordained into the deaconess order in 1986 and became the National Women's Work Coordinator in August 2004-October 2011, holding the post for 7years. During her tenure as the national women's work coordinator, she was able to achieve tremendous achievements during her tenure. She organised various skills acquisition programme in some Archdioceses which came with some financial support to some

⁴⁶ *Interview Respondent*, Deaconess Anietie Akpan, aged 56years, national women's work coordinator, Lagos, interviewed on 3rd March, 2020.

participants. She was also able to achieve a better organized order of Methodist Deaconesses. The Deaconess Order during this time gained prominence as it got connected with both the Regional/ World Diakonia World Federation that supports the Order of Deaconesses in the area of care and service (Social Work). To facilitate the operations in the Department, new computers, printer/scanning machine were bought.

The Ladies and Girls Fellowship became more self-reliant and sustainable. She was also elected the Regional Secretary of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women in 2008.

These women contributed to the history of the Department and then to the general history of the Methodist Church Nigeria to establish with historical records that women have indeed contributed to the growth and development of Methodist church Nigeria and also made impact in the society.

Recommendations

This research makes the following recommendation on two prongs; to Methodist Church Nigeria, to the Women's Work Department:

- i. The history of Methodist Church would not have been completed without the work of these women. The fact there is the problem of documentations makes it difficult to access information on women who have contributed immensely to the general history and specific areas in the Church. This is a call on the Church on the need for proper documentations and storage of historical materials for future use.
- ii. For Women's Work Department, those that can be said to be eye witness and primary participant in the history of the Department and the other arms of the Department are old and starting to die, in fact most of the pioneers of the Women's fellowship have died. This research recommends that a comprehensive work should be done to document their various accounts of events of historical importance to the Church through interview transcribed into writing (*via* oral interview) and even video documentary conducted accurately to avoid distortion of historical facts and record.

Deliberate efforts is the recognition of these women while they are alive, for the purpose of being celebrated should be implemented.

When these are done, information pertaining to the Women's Work Department can be readily available without distortion of facts.

Conclusion

This work does a brief history of Methodist Church Nigeria, laying emphasis on Women's work Department. It is undeniable that there have been works by women in the Methodist Church, South-West, Nigeria on the history of women and their works, but these works have not given enough attention to providing information about specific women who have over the years impacted the church. This research has thus done a historical exposition on women pioneers of the Women Work Department, Methodist church Nigeria, between 1969 -2012. This has been carried out using oral history as a methodology.

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