

The Impact of Public Relations on Church Growth in the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Cross River State

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Abstract

Church is the gathering, an assembly and a body of believers in Jesus Christ who are joined together for the purpose, goal and objective of praying, fellowshiping as well as worshipping, praising and serving God. A church can be growing, plateaued or declining. The Redeemed Christian Church of God, chosen for this study, had between 1981 and 2016 grown from 40 parishes in the South-western Nigeria to becoming the fastest growing Pentecostal church in the world with presence in 190 countries and more than 40,000 branches across Nigeria. The main objective of this study is to assess how Public Relations impacted on fostering this monumental growth. The survey method was used in the research with 400 questionnaires distributed to ministers, workers and members of only the four provinces in Cross River State out of which 394 or 98.5 percent were returned as valid. Everett Roger's Diffusion of innovations theory, as cited in McQuail (2010:487), was used as the theoretical framework for the study. From the research, it has been established that applying Public Relations strategies, which include identifying the problems, defining objectives and vision, drawing systematic plan, preparing budget, engaging human resources and evaluating the process as it progressed assisted in the phenomenal growth the church has recorded since Pastor Enoch Adeboye assumed its leadership in 1981. At the end, it was recommended that in order to continue in the growth stride, the church should always keep its Public Relations machinery active and functional while the Corporate Social Responsibility Department, operating at different levels of the church, should not relent in identifying and meeting the needs of the people living in the community where the church operates.

Keywords: church, growth, planning, public relations, publics.

1. Introduction

Church Growth is a concept that has taken firm roots within the evangelical Christian fold; and it places great emphasis on missionary work and sociological awareness of the target population. Its two main attributes are a passion for the "Great Commission" as enunciated in the Bible Gospel of Matthew 28:19-20 and the willingness to apply research, including quantitative methods, in attracting members. The latter part of these attributes relates with applying the principles of Public Relations, which involves, according to Weiner (1996:484), conceiving and executing of programmes "designed to activate objectives related to specific groups (publics), goals, and strategies, utilising publicity and other communication techniques."

The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) was founded in 1952 as "*Egbe Ogo Oluwa*" (literally translated in English as *The Glory of God* Group) by Reverend Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi. By March 1981 when the mantle of leadership of the mission fell on Dr Enoch Adejare Adeboye, there were only 40 parishes of the church located only in the western part of Nigeria. However, within 35 years of his leadership, the church grew phenomenally to become "the fastest growing Pentecostal church in the world" with presence in 190 countries of the world and more than 40,000 branches in Nigeria (The Guardian, 2017). To answer the question: What role did Public Relations play in this monumental growth of RCCG? forms the core objective of this paper.

The research was limited to Cross River State, which embraced RCCG in 1995 with the establishment of the first parish in Calabar, the State capital. As at December 2016 - about 21 years after - the number of parishes in the State had gone up to 681, with the State divided into four administrative provinces: Cross River Province 1 having 132 parishes, Cross River Province 2 with 145, Cross River Province 3 - 300, and Cross River Province 4 with 104 (Source: Provincial Administrative Offices, February 2017).

Survey was chosen as the research method for this study since, according to Wimmer and Dominick (2000:161), it is relevant when used to investigate problems in a realistic situation. The instrument chosen was the questionnaire - 400 in all which were distributed equally to the four provinces in the State, and oral interview. The population was the entire membership of the RCCG while the working population was the church membership in Cross River State - one of the 36 states in Nigeria. Only the ministers, workers and members of the church in the State were involved in the research. The sampling technique used was the cluster or multistage sampling method, with the population divided into 20 clusters (identified as blocks - five from each Province) and each block further divided into two cells each. This enabled every segment of the population to be reached. At the end, 394 questionnaires or 98.5 percent were returned as valid.

2. Relationship between Church Growth and Public Relations

The word, "church," derives its name from the Greek word, *ekklesia* (spelt *ecclesia* in Latin), meaning

"assembly" and from a Hebrew word, *qahal*, meaning "the called out." So, when these two words are considered together, we have a definition of church to be "the assembly of the called out" (Bolarinwa, 2010:27). It is the gathering, an assembly and a body of believers in Jesus Christ who are joined together for the purpose, goal and objective of worshipping, praying, praising, fellowshiping, and serving God.

Church Growth, as a concept, was pioneered by a third-generation Christian missionary in India, Donald McGavran, in his book, *The Bridges of God* (1955). Later, his observations in another book, *How Churches Grow*, went beyond typical theological debate to discern sociological issues that affected how non-Christians received the Word of God. He actually coined the phrase, "Church Growth."

What, therefore, is the meaning of Church Growth? According to the American Society for Church Growth, it is "a discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate to the effective implementation of Christ's commission to 'make disciples of all peoples'" (Townes, 2004:40-41). The biblical principles of Church Growth as enunciated by McGavran received strength from his understanding of the Great Commission as contained in Matthew 28:19-20. It emphasises that while principles, which are biblical, remain unchanged, strategy must be appropriate to context; and research, drawing on social science, is needed to determine what strategies work in which context (Bennett, 2007:25).

Generally, there are three types of church: the growing church, the "plateaued" church and the declining church. The church that is growing is healthy; the one that is "plateaued" is stunted and has stopped growing; while the declining one is moving gradually to extinction. One major way of addressing this sliding process is to apply the principle of Church Growth which, in concept and application, relates closely with the strategy of Public Relations campaign.

Public Relations practice in itself is a function of management and is defined by Sam Black (1998:3) as "the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics." This definition is an abridged adaptation of the one by the British Institute of Public Relations, which sees the practice as:

the deliberate, planned and sustained efforts to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. (Ajala, 1993:9)

Here, we have seen that Public Relations cannot be haphazardly executed. In fact,

- it is a practice that is **deliberate**, which means that a Public Relations activity is carefully considered at length before any decision is reached;
- it is a practice that is **planned** because Public Relations is done for a purpose and there must, therefore, be well laid-down scheme for the attainment of that purpose;
- it is a practice that is **sustained**, that is, there should not be any lapse in the execution of a Public Relations programme but rather, the tempo with which it was started must always be kept up; and
- it is a practice that seeks not just to **establish** but also to **maintain a mutual understanding** between an **organisation** and its **publics**.

The organisation in this definition is the initiator of the Public Relations message. It is, according to Adekunle Salu (1994:22),

a collective or aggregate of persons bound together in a formal setting to carry out agreed objectives, varying from politics, to business, philanthropy, religion and the like [It] is a legal person distinct from the individual human beings who created it.

The organisation, which may be a church, a government, an institution, a business venture, a political party, or any public/private establishment, cannot on its own establish a **mutual** understanding, except there is a receiver of its message. So, it needs the "publics" to communicate with. But the word, **publics**, does not refer to the "general public" because any Public Relations message, for it to be effective, must be directed at a target audience. The publics, therefore, may be the congregation, the employees, the community, the shareholders, the government, the media, or the customers.

In their report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, Sean MacBride et al (1981:195) exhaustively describe the "Public Relations public" thus:

The public is indeed more than a mathematical total of individuals. It means a collectivity, which exists because individuals share certain experiences, certain memories and traditions, certain conditions of life. This collectivity, however, is not a uniform whole, even in quite a small community. Under observations, it reveals many variations based on distinctions of social class, economic interest, religious belief, political and ideological attainment, and so forth. It is because this aspect of the matter is sometimes ignored that the power of the mass media to influence the public is exaggerated. If the public were in fact devoid of attitudes and qualities of its own, it would be possible to impose on it any kind of belief, prejudice, or pattern

of behaviour. The reality, however, is that the public tests and evaluates the messages offered to it by standards which it has inherited or adopted, and these standards govern its response of acceptance or rejection....

The publics of an organisation are a potent force for the success of any Public Relations activity. Identifying and feeding them with the relevant information help to satisfy "the need for constant endeavour to establish and maintain mutual understanding and keep a watch for possible causes of disharmony" (Black, 1989:9).

To eliminate these "possible causes of disharmony," a worthwhile Public Relations planning is crucial. As in the principle of Church Growth, planning in Public Relations practice is a very important ingredient in problem-solving. Thus, a good Public Relations planning, according to Salu (1994:112), involves the –

... arrangement of actions to be undertaken over a stipulated period, considered in advance of the period, taking into view factors such as the operating environment, the problems arising or existing, solutions to be adopted, the objectives to be achieved, the cost of doing what we want to do, and assessing whether or not we [have reached] the goals we set for ourselves or the organisation we work for.

All the components discussed above are found in both Church Growth and Public Relations planning. For instance, in enumerating the factors that help church growth, Ezekiel (2010:16) identifies what he refers to as the 10 M's:

- Man - the people involved in or spearheading the church growth activities;
- Mission - the activities of a sending-church through which it seeks to communicate the Gospel across cultural boundaries with a view to establishing church that will evangelise;
- Motive - the vision that drives the growth;
- Ministering - attending to the needs of the people;
- Message - the undiluted Word of Salvation;
- Manpower - the human resources;
- Material - the physical items, including finance, needed to enhance church growth activities;
- Marketing methodology - the systematic way of selling the Word of God to the hearts of men;
- Measurement and control - periodic assessment and monitoring of performance against plans.

Ezekiel's factors here can be compared to the following Public Relations planning models: Hebert Lloyd's three-point Public Relations planning model (1974:55) whose components are:

- i. Research
- ii. Plan
- iii. Action.

Or Ikechukwu Nwosu's "Public Relations planning process" (1994:12) in which he identifies a ten-stage process as follows:

- i. Stock-taking/Research: problem identification
- ii. Definition and setting of Public Relations objectives and goals
- iii. Definition of target audience or publics
- iv. Conceptualising and producing the appropriate message
- v. Performing specific activities
- vi. Selecting the specific activities
- vii. Identifying the human resources that will assist in implementing the plan
- viii. Preparation of the budget
- ix. Drawing up a time-table (this should take care of a possible crisis)
- x. Evaluating the results during and after the plan.

The above models are all identical. From Lloyd's concise model to Nwosu's elaborate process, they are identifiable with Ezekiel's Church Growth factors. Both the Church Growth and Public Relations models require the use of well-prepared people, having a well-defined vision (or objectives), using appropriately-couched messages, properly identifying the target audience, hosting specific events, meeting the yearnings of the people, applying sufficient finance, and systematically evaluating their activities.

3. Theoretical Framework:

The diffusion of innovations theory, made popular by Rogers (1962), sought to explain how the social members adopt new innovative ideas, why they make their decisions, and at what rate the new ideas and technology spread. He identified four elements that would influence the spread of new ideas, namely: the innovation itself, communication channels, time, and a social system to members of the social system. He saw human capital as a great determinant of the success of this process. Rogers, as cited in McQuail (2010:487), envisaged four stages in the theory: information, persuasion, decision or adoption, and confirmation.

At the first stage of the theory, innovation is first received by the individual who may lack *information* about it and also not inspired to seek for more information on the innovation. Then at the second stage of *persuasion*, the individual begins to develop interest about the innovation and to desire more detailed information about it. The third stage, which is *decision or adoption*, brings the individual to a point where he decides to adopt or reject the innovation; and where he adopts it, he searches for more facts that could help to further strengthen his decision. The last stage is *confirmation*, where the individual makes up his mind to continue putting the innovation into use.

Considering that the diffusion of innovations theory projects the process by which a new idea (an innovation) is conveyed and received over time, and the extent that such idea (or innovation) is adopted or rejected, among the participants in a social system, it is, therefore, very apt in this study on the spread of the Redeemed Christian Church of God since Pastor Adeboye became its leader in 1981.

4. Employing Public Relations Strategies for Growth in the R.C.C.G.

As already discussed, for a successful Public Relations effort to be recorded, the problems must be identified, a plan should be put in place on how to address them, financial and human resources would be required to execute the plan, and at the end or during the course of implementation, the entire process is evaluated in order to identify its strengths and weaknesses. Did RCCG use these processes to turn the tide in its favour?

4.1 Researching and Problem Identification: The First Step to Take:

In Public Relations strategic planning, research is an indispensable feature. Mish, et al (1998:995) define research as "studious inquiry or examination; investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws." Research helps to identify problems with the sole aim of providing solutions to them. It assists in providing the salient information that can be used in dealing with an intricate situation.

Between 1952 when RCCG was founded and the time a new leadership took over the mantle of leadership in 1981, there was something wrong that negatively affected its growth but which remained unnoticed or unattended to. It was through research findings that the facts were known and they became issues of concern to the new leadership. Firstly, RCCG was seen as a non-growing, plateaued church. After all, it had existed for 19 years and all it could show was only 40 parishes - that is about two parishes planted every year. Secondly, it was seen as a sectional church, which existed only in the South-western part of Nigeria. Church services were held in *Yoruba*, the indigenous language of the area and, where possible, preaching could be translated into English for the non-Yoruba-speaking audience. Thirdly, the level of academic attainment of its ministers was low. There is no record of any other minister with a doctorate degree until Pastor Enoch Adeboye, a Ph.D. holder in Applied Mathematics and senior university lecturer, took over as the general overseer. These issues, according to interviewees, constituted very huge problems for the church!

Identifying these problems facing the church was indeed the first stage. The next step to be taken was to plan on how to deal with them so that the church could be repositioned for growth.

4.2 Planning and Vision: The Keys to Meaningful Growth:

Behind every great leader, every successful organisation and every monumental breakthrough, there is a vision that grew out from an intensive planning. Bullon, et al (2003:1841) define vision as "the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom." This definition identifies "plan" as a major ally of vision. There is a common adage that says "those who fail to plan, plan to fail." So, when vision exists, the ability to succeed becomes inevitable. The general overseer of the RCCG, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, did not mince words when he addressed the issue of planning and the inevitability of goal-setting to success. He had copiously commented in the *Open Heavens* (2010: January 14):

Goal-setting is advantageous to the goal-setter. You must not take on any assignment - be it spiritual or secular without setting clearly defined goals. There are several benefits you can derive from setting goals: It gives the goal-setter a sense of purpose and direction. A goalless life is a purposeless life. Also, it gives you something to live for in the face of opposition and difficulties. Goals also act as the benchmarks against which performance or non-performance is measured. When you evaluate your activities over a period vis-a-vis the set goals, it will become easy to determine your level of performance. Measurement of performance is difficult and subjective if not done in relation with set goals. In addition, goals help to minimise waste and make you a better time manager. You will observe that the one without goals appears to have too much of time, while the goal-setter has too little time to achieve his goals. So, while the former is wasting time, the latter is effectively utilising his

time. More so, goal-setting helps you manage all your resources effectively - whether financial, intellectual or material resources.

Oluwole (2010:11) describes vision as the "ability to see more and farther than others. This includes foresight as well as insight, optimism and hope." Such visionary person or organisation would take time to properly visualise options that are available before choosing to adopt the best out of the lot. But when an organisation's preoccupation most of its times is to avoid change so as to maintain the *status quo* in its operations, there is bound to be stagnation, thus breeding dissatisfaction, discontentment and disillusionment within its fold, which vigorously alienates growth.

Warren (1995:77) says organisations, and he was specific about churches, that think and believe this way are often driven by tradition. Their favourite phrase is "We've always done it this way." Their goal is "to simply perpetuate the past." To them, "change is almost always seen as negative, and stagnation is interpreted as 'stability'." Fortunately, RCCG under Pastor Adebayo did not see things this way. For the church, the following completely fresh mission and vision statement was adopted, which helped in firing up the passion in its members to contribute towards the monumental growth it recorded:

1. To make Heaven.
2. To take as many people as possible with us.
3. To have a member of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in every family of all nations.
4. To accomplish No. 1 above, holiness will be our lifestyle.
5. To accomplish Nos. 2 and 3 above, we will plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries.

We will pursue these objectives until every nation in the world is reached for JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD.

The RCCG, therefore, had not only identified the problem of stunted growth but also developed plans on how to deal with the problem. It started with adopting the above sharp vision for growth, which Warren (1995:77), describes in these words:

Many people think "vision" as the ability to see the future. But in today's rapidly changing world, vision is also the ability to accurately assess current changes and take advantage of them. Vision is being alert to opportunities.

The instruments deliberately set up by the church to ensure the realisation of its vision and invariably to deal with the problem identified were quite enormous. As already seen in Nwosu's Public Relations model, performing specific activities is one of the many important Public Relations specialties. Bolarinwa (2009:44-45), as collaborated by interviewees, identify such special activities organised by the RCCG as:

- Establishment and inauguration in 1981 of a movement, Christ the Redeemer's Ministries, which has contributed immensely to the growth of the church;
- Emergence of model parishes in 1988, which combine the old beliefs and practices with new trends in churchmanship to help grow the church;
- Establishment of Redeemed Christian Bible College in 1980 to train ministers and would-be ministers in order to prepare them for pastoral responsibilities in the growing church;
- Establishment of the School of Disciples in 1985, which has become another notable outreach of the church;
- Establishment of Christ the Redeemer's Friendship Universal (CRFU), now renamed Christ the Redeemer's Friendship International (CRFI), to create a forum in which the highly placed persons can meet and discuss business of the Kingdom in the love of God;
- Launching of Operation JIM (Jesus in the Market) in 1990 to witness to traders in their places of business;
- Starting and later expanding in 1990 the Holy Ghost Service into a monthly programme and holding special programmes in some strategic towns in Nigeria and beyond as well as campuses of Nigerian tertiary institutions;
- Developing and hosting the Mission's internet site, www.rccg.org, in 1997;
- Conducting *Let's-Go-A-Fishing*, a special open-air evangelical programme during Christmas and Easter periods, with the aim of winning souls and eventually establishing a new parish at the event's location;
- Using *Operation Andrew*, a personal evangelism activity, to bring unbelievers to Christ;
- Creating House Fellowship Centres or House Care Cells as a veritable tool of reaching out to people; and
- Creating the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Department in 2005 at headquarters as well as the regional and provincial levels to coordinate all projects, programmes and services designed for the

benefit of the communities where the church operates.

All these activities were not accidental occurrences. They were systematically planned, articulated and executed to help in creating a favourable image about the RCCG in the minds of the people thus establishing a nexus between the church growth and Public Relations ideals. One major implication here, in line with the above description of vision by Warren, is that vision and the plan set up to fulfil it require people who can accurately take care of situations as they arise. Nevertheless, vision and people cannot work in a vacuum. They also require adequate finances to pay for services as and when needed.

4.3 *Human and Financial Resources: A Desideratum for Success:*

In Public Relations practice, knowledgeable, well-trained and capable people are used to analyse the different publics, prepare the right messages, choose effective media/channel, and effectively communicate such messages that are capable of favourably influencing the opinion and attitude of the target audience. The RCCG has a great amount of them (also referred to as human capital) – ministers (full- and part-time, ordained and those not ordained), church workers (including the ad-hoc volunteers), staff (national and local) as well as the members. All these categories of personnel are expected to be well trained, properly equipped and highly motivated to carry out every task assigned to them. With targets regularly set, they all should work hard enough to meet them. In addition to people, finance is also an important requirement needed to organise effective Public Relations programmes. Income of the church comes from sources as love offerings, tithes (personal and corporate), first fruits, faith seeds and donations. For its Public Relations programme, therefore, to produce reliable and valid results, the money allotted to it should be carefully applied. A cost analysis needs to be carried out beforehand. An itemised list and cost of the required materials, equipment, and facilities is necessary. Adequate provisions are made for salaries, stipends, honoraria and other remunerations of those who provide paid services. All these must be captured in the budget. It should be noted, however, that having a well-prepared and functional budget is good but to maintain a proper budgetary control is better.

It is true every person or organisation needs a good vision and an efficient plan to grow. It is also true that one needs people, equipped with adequate financial backing, to successfully catch the vision and run with it. It is equally true that one can be tempted to start with a blossoming vision and plan but then stray off the mark over a period of time. Therefore, for those involved in executing the Public Relations policy, it is important to periodically ask the question, "Where is this situation we are currently in leading us to?" That is where evaluation comes in.

4.4 *To Finish Well, Evaluation is a Necessity:*

To evaluate means to carefully and objectively appraise activities of a project, policy or programme, whether it is concluded or in progress, so as to help in determining its continued significance, relevance, effectiveness and efficiency. It helps the promoters of the project or programme to decide on the future of that endeavour. Such decision can result in the discontinuation, readjustment or complete endorsement of the initiative.

In evaluating a Public Relations activity, two things are paramount. First, it should be able to identify, highlight and further project those pieces of evidence that are capable of garnering more support for the activity. Second, it should help to expose and eliminate or readjust those areas that are not making great impact on the target audience.

According to responses from interviewees, the RCCG, as a matter of policy, has been reviewing the implementation of each of its programmes at regular basis. That is why there are fresh targets set for membership growth every year and adequate monitoring is put in place to ensure compliance at all administrative levels – national, regional, provincial, zone, area and parish.

5. **The Impact of P.R. Strategies on the Growth of R.C.C.G.**

Have the Public Relations strategies adopted in the RCCG, which included identifying the problems through research, setting objectives, identifying target audience, producing appropriate messages, organising special activities, engaging qualified people, drawing up a functional budget, properly following up the plan, and regularly reviewing outcomes, impacted positively on the church growth? A total of 378 respondents out of the 396 of those whose questionnaires were returned, representing 95.5 percent, answer in the affirmative. In 2010, RCCG was already in 130 countries and all the six continents of the world as follows:

- It had a firm foothold in the Middle East with a plan completed as at then to plant a parish in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia;
- There was already its presence in -
 - 49 independent countries of Africa;
 - 27 countries in Asia, including Pakistan, India and Indonesia;
 - 26 countries of Europe, with United Kingdom having 400 parishes spread across 68 percent of its major cities;

- 5 of the 22 countries of in Latin America, with a plan concluded 12 more within the six succeeding months;
- 14 countries in the Caribbean;
- 5 countries in the Pacific/Oceania; and
- 3 countries in North America.

Seven years later in 2016, this coverage had increased to 190 countries, representing 31.6 percent growth rate. Has the RCCG in Cross River State keyed into this vision of global growth? Even more respondents (388 or a whopping 98 percent) agree it has. The facts are clear to justify this position. The church, which had only one parish in Cross River State in 1995, had by 2010 – merely 15 years after, grown the number of parishes to 294, which necessitated the creation of two provinces – Cross River Provinces 1 and 2 (Okon, 2011:61). Still, by December 2016 – spanning a period of only six years, the State recorded additional 387 parishes, representing 131.2 percent growth rate. As a result, the State (with a total membership of 38,364) was this time around divided into four provinces - Cross River 1, 2, 3, and 4!

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has succeeded in establishing that applying the principles of Public Relations impacts positively on church growth. The monumental growth recorded by the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is a good testimony in this regard.

To, therefore, ensure that the RCCG continues in its growth stride, the church should always keep its Public Relations machinery active and functional. The Corporate Social Responsibility Department, operating at different levels of the church, should live up to its biddings by identifying the needs of the people living within the respective church communities and trying to meet them as often as possible.

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