

Discipleship, mentorship and training which empowers African women for ministry in the diaspora

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ABSTRACT

VARIOUS FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO people migrating from the global south to the west. In addition to factors like war, economics and education, some migrate because they feel called to engage in ministry in the west. At the heart of mission in the diaspora are women who either start ministries on their own or with their spouses. This paper is informed by narratives provided by these

women collected through interviews to outline the challenges of engaging in ministry in the diaspora and the type of discipleship, mentorship and training they would require to enable their ministries to flourish. It also shows how in addition to reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide their ministries, these women adopt an entrepreneurial approach in accessing mentorship from local diaspora networks. This paper contributes to the broader discussion around discipleship and mentorship which prepares missionaries for mission in diaspora contexts, also referred to as Reverse Mission.

Keywords: Discipleship, Mentorship, Diaspora, Mission, Reverse Mission

INTRODUCTION

Various factors contribute to people migrating from the global south to the west. According to Wan and Sadiri (2010: 46), “urbanisation, international migration, and displacement by war and famine are some of the contributing factors that have increased the diaspora population around the world”. The global migration pattern follows people moving from “south to north, and from east to west” (Marsella and Ring, 2003: 16). With migration comes mission. The UK church is diverse and churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America continue to send missionaries to the west to preach the word of God (Cueva, 2015). Roswith Gerloff’s extensive work on black Pentecostalism in Britain provided great insight into how this branch of Christianity has contributed to the Christian faith, mission and socio-cultural issues in the UK (Gerloff, 2010). At the heart of mission in the diaspora are women who either start ministries on their own or with their spouses. In addition to running these ministries, they encounter challenges trying to navigate the socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural nuances of life in the diaspora. The term diaspora in this paper will refer to “people living outside their place of origin” (Lausanne Movement, 2009), especially focusing on the global north.

In this paper, I use the term “discipleship” synonymously with Christian mentorship and training. “Discipleship” is a theological and biblical term and “mentorship” and “training” are sociological ones, drawn from leadership and educational literature. I also recognize that the term has a broader meaning and includes elements of catechesis, formation and pedagogy in the literature. In light of this, this paper contributes to the broader discussion around discipleship, mentorship and training which prepares people for mission in diaspora contexts, also referred to as Reverse Mission, and how this contributes to the

development of Christianity in the west. It also aims to paint a picture of what ministry looks like for African women in the diaspora.

“Reverse Mission” is a term that has been used to describe the trend where missionaries from the global south engage in missions in the west. Matthews A. Ojo defines Reverse Mission as “the sending of missionaries to Europe and North America by churches and Christians from the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia, Latin America, which were at the receiving end of Catholic and Protestant missions as mission fields from the sixteenth century to the late twentieth century” (2007: 380). Reverse Mission demonstrates how the centre of Christianity has shifted from the global north to the south (Wambua, 2009: 45). This is a “remapping of religious landscapes” (Adogame, 2013: viii) whereby it is now the global south sending missionaries to the north. It is important to note “the extent to which religious, social, cultural and economic realities of host contexts impact and shape their world views” and the way in which they operate their ministries in the diaspora (2013: x). Without a doubt, these churches from the global south have not only helped to reconfigure Christianity in the west, but they have also played a part in the diversification of the religious landscape of western societies.

Harvey Kwiyani (2013) on the other hand finds the term problematic. While he acknowledges that migration trends have reversed, “mission continues to move forward”. He argues that the non-western Christian presence in the west will have some missionary impact on western culture, but “this is not reversal of mission. It is mission just being itself, no matter where it originates.” Despite the different terminology used to describe this missional trend, a common theme running through these definitions is that migration is key in mission.

This paper is a reflection on the experiences of eight African female pastors who are engaged in ministry in the UK. It intends to outline the challenges of engaging in ministry in the diaspora and the type of discipleship, mentorship and training they require to enable their ministries to flourish. It also incorporates voices of those who started independent ministries (with no links to churches in Africa) whilst living in the UK and describes what type of discipleship and mentorship those who started their ministries whilst living in the UK received. This paper will answer questions surrounding: what type of discipleship they received in preparation for ministry in the UK, how adequate this was, how long they were discipled for and what challenges they faced and continue to experience while engaging in ministry in the UK. The responses will allow for generalizations to be made in order to begin understanding the role of discipleship, mentorship and training for mission in the diaspora.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main methodological tradition used for this paper was qualitative research. It adopts an inductive approach, starting with the voices of those whose stories the author sought to listen to in order to draw conclusions. Creswell states that it is from inductive observations that a researcher can convey “emerging themes and patterns and formulate tentative hypotheses which can be explored to provide for general conclusions or theories” (Creswell, 1994: 58). According to van der Laan, this approach “takes ordinary people’s views and oral forms of history more seriously” (2010: 203). The author’s approach to finding participants was mainly snowball sampling, a process that ‘yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who share the same characteristics that are of research interest,’(Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981: 141) or simply “contacting one participant via another”(Browne, 2007: 48). Creswell argues that the researcher’s task revolves around “looking at the larger structure to explain the interviewee’s meanings of social interactions, cultural issues, ideologies, historical contexts and interpretation of life experiences” (Creswell, 1994: 50). Therefore, categories were created from the findings which were then compared to themes within the qualitative literature written on Reverse Mission and Diaspora Mission to find correlations.

The primary source of data was collected through semi-structured phone interviews held with eight women from the Southern African region who are currently in ministry in the UK. Participants were recruited into the research by invitation from me via “informed consent”.¹ The interviews were conducted in May 2021. None of the participants was a vulnerable person and they received no monetary compensation for participating in the research. The names of their ministries have been anonymized and pseudonyms have been used to disguise their names.² The original sample was narrowed down to eight as some cancelled the scheduled interviews due to other commitments they had. The countries of origin represented were Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi. The women were all born and raised in their home countries and came to the UK in their adult years. Six of the women are ordained ministers and two are not but are actively engaged in ministry and are referred to as Pastors. Six are in ministry

1. A copy of the survey form with both the questions and the informed consent statement is available on request from the author.

2. Names of the institutions where these women received training in the UK have not been anonymized.

with their spouses and two are single women in ministry. One is a minister in a mainline church while the rest are ministers in Pentecostal churches. Two were in full-time ministry with their spouses before they moved to the UK and the rest served in various lay ministry roles in their home countries as well as in churches they attended while in the UK before starting their own ministries. These women have been in ministry in the UK for between 3 and 19 years. While there were a few claims of engaging with white British Christians, these ministries are monoethnic, serving especially black African and Caribbean immigrants. In response to this, Olofinjana argues that “despite the limitations that the term Reverse Mission conjures and the fact that we still have many African congregations, which are very mono-ethnic, Reverse Mission is still taking place in certain church contexts. This is in places such as historic churches that now have many African Christians and ministers” (2020: 65). Such is the case for one of the women interviewed, as she is a minister in the Church of England.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Ministry in the UK

The respondents stated that they started their ministries in the UK because they felt called by God to do so. While some initially came for economic reasons or to study, their calling was so strong that they could not ignore it. This is supported by their responses which stated:

I felt the call of God on my life while here in the UK and started a prayer ministry with women and married a pastor. (BN, 2021)

I left my country to serve in the diaspora under a prophetic word. When I arrived, I started going to a certain church. I tried to hide my calling, but God used me to perform miracles within that church; for example, I prayed for someone, and they were healed of arthritis which they had had since childhood. I prayed for someone's child who was dying in ICU they got healed. The pastors at that church released me, and I started my ministry and got ordained. I started the church in my basement, and as more people were experiencing miracles, we outgrew it and moved to a building that was packed to capacity. The Trans-Atlantic and

Pacific Alliance of Churches (TAPAC) helped me legalize my ministry in the UK. (GM, 2021)

I came for economic reasons and was planted in a church. God made me stay in that church, and he told me to wait for His instruction. A bishop from my home country passed through the UK and stayed with us. We had clarity during his and his wife's time with us, and started a branch here under his blessing. (JM, 2021)

I came through a youth programme and was chosen among the many youths to stay and consider ordination. Then I went to Bible School. (CN, 2021)

I married a pastor who already had his ministry and joined him. (TM, 2021)

The calling started back home when I was widowed. When I came here I went to Bible School to learn more about the Bible but got ordained and I am now involved in widows' ministry within my church. (PH, 2021)

I felt the calling of God on my life and started an independent church which I run for six years. (PE, 2021)

I was running a cell group which turned into a church for six years. I then moved to another part of London and I now lead a prayer ministry. (PE, 2021)

Me and my husband were sent over by our main church back home to train and support pastors in ministry here in the UK. (LM, 2021)

Discipleship, mentorship and training for ministry

In the limited way I am discussing it in this paper, discipleship is a process by which a follower of Jesus learns from the one they chose to follow. The person they chose to follow assumes the role of a mentor to an extent. According to

Hull, “mentoring is a personal one-to-one way of being and making disciples” (Hull, 2006: 209). The Bible is also clear on the role that Jesus played as a mentor to his disciples (Freeks and Lotter, 2014; Roldan, 2018: 162). The respondents experienced several challenges living and starting ministries in the UK. These legitimized the need for guides or mentors to disciple and train these missionaries in a foreign context. When asked about the type of discipleship they received in preparation for ministry in the UK, the two that started branches linked to founding churches in Africa stated they hadn't. Those that started independent ministries also stated they sought discipleship within their diasporic communities. Their responses were;

When we got here from Africa we were one of the senior leaders in our denomination and everyone was under us so everyone was looking to us for discipleship. We had no spiritual parents, so we had to fully depend on God for direction. (LM, 2021)

None, my husband who is also a pastor disciples me and I watch YouTube videos from other ministers. Other African female pastors also mentored me in the process and involved me in their ministries. Being part of women's networks who have experience helped me know where to reach out for grants especially during Covid-19. When I eventually went to Bible School here in the UK, I received training. TAPAC helped us come up to speed with rules and regulations for ministry in this country.³ (BN, 2021)

“None except through TAPAC who helped us and gave us certification, training and information on Gift Aid and the Charity Commission. We were also trained on people skills.” (GM, 2021)

I received training as part of Bible school here in the UK. I was given placements to gain exposure to various ministry contexts in the UK and what discipleship looks like in other churches. Through training I have had opportunities to preach, visit

3. “Founded in 1993 the charity is an umbrella organisation of independent Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches aiming to foster unity and co-operation in the Body of Christ, giving proper recognition, authenticity and power to member churches and ministries in North and south America, the Caribbean, Europe (including UK) Africa and the Pacific regions.” <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/4004637>

hospitals, work in drug recovery homes and how to do mission in deprived areas. (CN, 2021)

I met other women who taught me a lot about ministry in the UK. (TM, 2021)

Because the church was growing so fast I didn't get a chance to be mentored or disciple. (PE, 2021)

The three who went to Bible School in the UK received classroom training and discipleship through placements. It is evident that although some of these women had some form of mentorship, it was inadequate as it did not equip them for ministry in the diaspora. Others have registered with organizations like TAPAC which have helped them come up to speed with regulations regarding ministry in the UK. At the same time, others have made use of YouTube to learn from others in ministry. Even though organizations like TAPAC play an important role in preparing people from other countries for ministry in the UK, these women have had to adopt an entrepreneurial approach to accessing discipleship and mentorship for themselves. They have mainly sought out mentors from networks with other women in ministry from Africa and Asia. Above all else, these women cite divine intervention which continues to enable them to navigate areas in ministry where they feel inadequate. The role of the Holy Spirit cannot be minimized in empowering people for ministry. However, just like Jesus' relationship with his disciples, being disciplined and guided by someone who has more experience is vital in any ministerial context be it in a local context or the diaspora.

When respondents were asked to comment on the adequacy of some of the discipleship and ministerial training they received, they mostly said they could have done with more personalized training.

It wasn't very adequate because there were gaps in the training. For example, I was never taught how to do baby dedications. (JM, 2021)

It was not very adequate because where I was a co-pastor there was no training. I just had to fulfil the tasks I was assigned to do by the senior pastor. (PH, 2021)

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The place of African women in places of power and church ministry has been contested for many years. Several feminists and womanists have reflected on this. The works of African feminists like Mercy A. Oduyoye, Isabel A. Phiri, Nyengeny R. M. Ajambo, Bolaji Bateye, to mention but a few, have critiqued how the location of African women has been problematized because African women are mostly silenced (e.g. Oluwatomisin, 2016: 160; Ajambo, 2012). In some African contexts, women are not complete unless attached to a man. For example, “a woman who manages her affairs successfully without a man is an affront to patriarchy and a direct challenge to the so-called masculinity of men who want to possess her” (Oduyoye, 1995: 4-5). The fact that some women are now able to engage in full-time ministry as ordained ministers in their own right on the African continent is revolutionary as some churches still disallow it. Even more ground-breaking is how some of these women have successfully started their own ministries in the west thereby contributing to Reverse Mission. Oduyoye refers to Jesus who saw women as human beings in a society where they were dehumanized. This is why he took the time to “teach, heal and save them from victimization” (Oduyoye, 2008: 83). Therefore, just like men, they too “should enjoy the privilege of being members of the family of God” (Ajambo, 2012: xii) as they are participants in God’s mission wherever they are (Phiri, 2004: 422) despite the hurdles and challenges they experience by virtue of being women in ministry.

When asked about their experiences in engaging in ministry in their home countries, they stated the difference between there and in the UK. They mentioned how easy it was to proselytize within the African context. On the flip side, in some cases, they found that some men within the African context failed to acknowledge the leadership of women in ministry (BN, 2021). GM’s experience within the UK context was that “people are more sceptical about the gospel and very dependent on the State. Even when they are healed, they worry that they might not continue to receive benefits from the State which means losing their income” (GM, 2021). Two of the women suggested that the spirituality of Africans can be both cultural and religious which makes it difficult to disciple them effectively as they seem to know the religious vocabulary and can articulate their faith in ways that are convincing when in actual fact their faith is shallow (CN and JM, 2021). Furthermore, another stated, “because people mainly come to the diaspora for economic reasons, they struggle to commit to church and discipleship because their priority is working and are more likely to pick up extra shifts at work than come to church” (JM, 2021). These differences

are linked to some of the challenges which the respondents have faced while engaging in ministry in the diaspora.

One of the questions asked in the interviews was around some of the challenges that these women have faced while engaging in ministry in the UK. Many challenges presented were socio-economic, issues of prejudice, cultural and language barriers, and challenges in balancing running a ministry as well as working in order to not only support families in their home countries, but their ministries as well in the UK. Their experiences are far from those which European missionaries to Africa experienced. This challenges the assertions made by Paul Freston (2010: 155), who suggests that Reverse Mission can be deemed reverse colonialism. The term “colonialism” itself is entrenched in power and privilege, which none of the women interviewed have. Their influence resides within the parameters of their ministries and other diaspora ministries. These pastors who are mostly economic migrants from majority world countries have to navigate issues of immigration and other challenges that come with being an immigrant which grant them no privileges whatsoever in comparison to historical missionaries who had finances, power, and influence. The immigrant pastors I interviewed fall under what Samuel Escobar calls “missionaries from below” (2003: 18). In addition, the mission that happened in Africa, unfortunately, had close affinities with land dispossession of African people, due to the privilege that white missionaries had. This is what makes it different to Reverse Mission in the west (Kumalo, 2020: 2; Lephakga, 2015: 145).

The respondents stated that they navigated these challenges mainly through prayer and with the help of the Holy Spirit. It appeared that having connections with friends and other women in ministry helped them deal with the challenges of ministry in the diaspora. Those that had links with TAPAC mentioned how invaluable the knowledge they gained through that organization was. Some of the women who suffered burnout and issues of self-identity benefited from mentors who guided them through these challenges. For example, JN stated:

I experienced burnout in 2017 and stopped our ministry. My husband and I joined another church because we needed to rest. We eventually started to participate in the ministry there in order to make up where we were deficient and see how things are done. We got the exposure we needed. We needed the experience of ministering in a diverse church with young people which is what we were lacking. (JN, 2021)

The respondents outlined several things that would have been helpful to know prior to starting ministry in the UK. These included training about the culture, information about the spiritual strongholds in the country, how to present yourself as a missionary and some guidance on how to run a ministry in the diaspora. All the women believed that mentorship is important prior to starting ministry in the UK as it prepares people for things they might not expect. They also believed that an aspect of discipleship or mentorship which would be helpful to African women starting ministry in the UK would be that which helps them understand their purpose and who they are (LM, BN, GM and JM). This is because it is easy to lose one's purpose and identity because of various experiences of UK culture and the challenges that come about as a result of being an immigrant in the UK.

They also emphasized the importance of discipleship provided by mentors who have been in ministry in the UK for many years and from diverse church leaders who would provide opportunities to learn from observation and practice. Other examples of the type of discipleship they would require included the following:

Discipleship which helps people understand what their purpose and call is. This discipleship should be done by leaders and prayer partners. Also discipleship which helps black women with their identity in the UK. (LM, 2021)

Discipleship from women's support networks and courses for self-improvement. (BN, 2021)

Discipleship from people who are ministering to the people you want to attract. (JM, 2021)

Discipleship from both male and female mentors. You need someone who speaks into aspects of the culture and has networks that are diverse. Also mentoring which helps you with your identity. (CN, 2021)

Being disciplined by people who provide spiritual covering and help you know who you are and your purpose. (PE, 2021)

From their experiences, these women have been able to articulate what type and level of discipleship and training they believe would be helpful for African

women who have the calling to engage in ministry in the UK. Despite the respondents being African women, their challenges and needs have a universal feel as other women in different ministerial contexts, whether in the diaspora or not can relate to this. The respondents also referred to the need to receive discipleship which helps them with their identity. This has implications for their African identity within Western contexts.

I struggled with issues of identity as a young person being trained in a predominantly white college. I was struggling with self-acceptance. I kept asking myself why I'm I here? What is my voice since I am taught by white people? When I write my assignments, who am I. I felt like I was losing myself. (CN, 2021)

After much personal reflection on her identity, CN said she is on a journey of self-acceptance and endeavours to have her authentic African voice to be heard despite being a minister in a predominantly white denomination. She was able to make links with another African minister who has served in the same main-line denomination in which she is serving. He has been her mentor and has helped her work through her identity issues based on her experience and she is on a journey to use her African voice in her ministry. On articulating one's identity, Joe Aldred professed to being a "male Caribbean British Christian, a bishop in a Black-led Pentecostal church who currently works in the field of intercultural ecumenism and as a local pastor" (2005: 28). Israel Olofinjana responds to this: "Aldred understands that we cannot divorce theology and the practice of ministry from our cultural background and experiences" (Olofinjana, 2020: 53). While Olofinjana's assertion holds some truth, it appears some of the respondents would like to create ministries that do not represent the countries they are from. This is to attract people from other cultures and backgrounds. While trying to maintain their identity, it is interesting that some of the challenges these female pastors have faced in their ministries are based on the expectations of congregants from their home country. Some of the congregants joined their churches because they wanted to have a sense of belonging. Therefore, they expected church services to operate in indigenous languages.

Some congregants wanted us to do ministry like back home. They wanted us to speak the local languages and sing songs from back home. Some left the church because they were frustrated as they wanted a Zambian church. (GM, 2021)

A challenge we faced when we started our own ministry was people wanting our church to be a typical Zambian church speaking local languages. There was an expectation for us to be there for people all hours of the day but we were working too and people took offence. Now I am afraid to ask people from my country to come to our church. (JM, 2021)

What is evident is a sense of nostalgia when people join these churches and the need to feel a sense of belonging from a church that is led by an African from their country of origin.

It was apparent from the interviews that there are attempts for the pastors to reach indigenous white British people with the gospel, however their ministries are generally monocultural except for the pastor in ministry within a white British church.

These women have experienced some level of success in their ministries and use social media platforms to showcase their ministries, advertise their ministries, and to interact with a wide range of Christians within and outside the UK. For example, Pastor BN through her ministry has been invited to other countries in Asia and Africa to preach the gospel. This is an interesting dynamic because while their ministry in the UK falls under the term Reverse Mission, these pastors have created other networks that enable them to travel to other parts of the global south in order to preach the gospel and are considered as coming from the UK.

One thing that was not evident in the interviews was focus on integral mission or mission which “focuses on contextualization and integrating evangelism with social concern” (Wan and Sadiri, 2010: 48). Except for one pastor who spoke about getting a grant in order to supply foodstuffs to people in their neighbourhood during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the rest did not refer to that at all. This could be due to limited financial resources, as one stated “doing ministry in this country is a struggle because people don't give finances easily as compared to back home” (LM). There are some wealthier West African-led newer Pentecostal Churches in the UK like Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) in Kent, New Wine Church in Woolwich and Jesus House in Brentwood with substantial human and financial capital who engage in social action and evangelistic initiatives that benefit the wider society (Bremner, 2013: 2). However, the ministries run by the women interviewed have not gone beyond providing spiritual nourishment and a place to call home for their congregants. They are also yet to begin to address and speak into structures that are responsible for change.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have provided some insights into the discipleship, mentorship and training needed for African women in ministry in the diaspora. I have also outlined what type of discipleship or mentorship would empower African women for ministry in the UK by investigating the type of discipleship attained as they prepared to start ministry in the UK. The findings suggest that out of the eight women, only one received some form of intentional discipleship and training. Two sought it out from Bible Colleges they attended in the UK and the rest sought mentors from the women's networks they belong to in the UK. It is evident that it takes a calling and courage to navigate ministry within the diaspora. Many of the women came for economic reasons and it was therefore a big challenge having to juggle working, going to Bible College and then running a ministry. In addition, "many pastors and missionaries from Africa, Asia and Latin America lack intercultural training and are therefore not well prepared to deal with the complexities of the context of mission in postmodern Britain" (Olofinjana, 2020: 56). Despite these challenges, these women have remained resilient in pursuing their ministerial calling. These ministries whether large or small have also demonstrated how important local networks are with other diaspora churches. Their quest driven by a vision of winning converts offers a unique opportunity to analyse its impact on local levels (Adogame, 2013: xi).

It is also clear that those that start independent ministries while already in the diaspora need to find experienced guides to mentor them adequately as they embark on ministry in the diaspora context. These ministries are relevant especially "within the locus of changing, more complex migration trends and policies, these collective religious representations will continue to assume immense meaning and relevance particularly for African immigrants as well as the avenues for adapting into the host social, cultural and religious milieu" (Adogame, 2013: x-xi). There is no doubt that many ministries started and led by missionaries from the majority world are thriving and contributing massively to Christianity in the UK. In addition to organizations like TAPAC, I believe these women and others who fall within this category would benefit from organizations like Centre for Missionaries from the Majority World (CMMW)⁴, an organization that trains pastors and missionaries from the Majority World in Britain, in order that they are able to contextualize their mission.

4. <https://cmmw.org.uk/>.

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