

Redeeming America: Exploring a Nigerian Church and Its Presence in the United States  
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In the 1950s, outside the Nigerian city of Lagos, a Yoruba man named Josiah Akindayomi founded a small house fellowship called *Egbe Ogo-Oluwa* (Glory of God). Akindayomi had spent much of his forty or so years of life engaged in complicated relationships with area religious organizations and had recently left (or, according to some versions of the story, been asked to leave) the local branch of a powerful indigenous church. In the early days of the *Egbe Ogo-Oluwa*, there were fewer than twelve regular members, most of whom were women and members of the lower classes who brought with them fairly little social capital. Beyond his claims to divine revelation and purpose, there was nothing in particular about Akindayomi or the fellowship that suggested it would flourish, or that it would even necessarily make it beyond its first year.

Seventy years later, the church that Akindayomi founded boasts parishioners in the millions, including some of Nigeria's highest ranking and most wealthy citizens. Now called The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), it has built an ecclesiastical empire worth billions of dollars, with parishes spread across the globe. The United States is home to many of those parishes and to a great many of the church's most well-known and well-respected leaders, as well as a massive building project that will feature a stadium capable of holding a million celebrants.

The case study of the RCCG is an ideal offers an opportunity to explore a number of fascinating questions and ideas. What are the conditions under which religious organizations grow and thrive? What role do personalities or "prophets" play in such growth (especially compared with factors like policies or doctrines)? How does transnational expansion affect not just an organization's mission and character, but the lives of members who move along with it? And how have the people and politics of the United States, as the receiving country, shaped and been shaped by the arrival and establishment of religious groups from places that are ostensibly quite different from it?

It is precisely these questions and concepts I consider in the project I have begun with the support of the Lived Religion in the Digital Age Research Grant. At its most broad, that project, which I have entitled "Redeeming America: Nigerian Pentecostalism in Chicago," explores the phenomenon of contemporary African immigrant religions in the United States, a rich and fascinating topic that has received relatively little consideration from scholars in Religious Studies. It does so through the example of the RCCG, particularly its churches in the Chicagoland area. The site, which is currently under construction, will feature four major area of data:

- 1: layered mapping that traces the growth of the church around the globe and the journey of selected parishioners from Nigeria to the United States
- 2: narrative histories of the church, including features on major figures like Akindayomi and the church's current General Overseer, Enoch Adeboye
- 3: written and audio oral histories of current members of Chicago's congregations

#### 4: images, sound, and video from a typical church service

The ultimate goal of the project is to welcome scholars, practitioners, and interested non-academics into the rich material and theological worlds of Nigerian Pentecostal immigrants who reside in Chicago, demonstrating the ways that life in diaspora has inspired profound and creative re-imaginings of the religious ideas and traditions that traveled with my interlocutors from their homelands. More generally, I hope to offer a contribution to the ongoing attempts made by scholars of religions of the African diaspora to demonstrate the manner ways in which African immigrant religions have shaped and will continue to shape the broader landscape of religion in the United States.