The Anglican Church and issues of polygamy in the Niger Delta: A historical analysis

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Abstract
Marriage is a divine institution and a universal phenomenon that is expressed culturally. When missionaries reached the Niger Delta region of Nigeria through Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 186, the issue of Christian marriage as opposed to polygamy posed a challenge in the early years of the Anglican Church. The crux of this paper is an analysis of the problem of marriage in the Anglican Church and how the issues were handled. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources and the methods adopted were historical and descriptive. The primary sources included participant observation methods. Findings revealed that the dynamism in the teachings, persuasions, prayers, tolerance, and legislations adopted by the missionaries coupled with a great understanding of scriptural and social importance of monogamy, multiplicity of new groups, and modernism favoured the increase in Christian marriage in the Niger Delta mission. The paper therefore recommended that attention should be given to primary counseling and communities to be engaged in conversations about marriage for sustainability of the increase in marriage under the ordinance in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Polygamy, Christian marriage, ordinance, tolerance, synod.

Introduction
In response to the requests for personnel for enhancement of the economic, educational and religious prospects as an alternative to the trade-in slaves, Christian missionaries arrived at Calabar on April 10, 1846. Rev. Hope Masterton Waddel who led the team made three unsuccessful attempts to plant the church at Bonny. In October 1864, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), trained in evangelical doctrine, reached Bonny in the heart of the Niger Delta (ND) region of Nigeria. He opened negotiations with King William Dappa Pepple and his chiefs for the funding of both church and school. Consequently, on April 29, 1865, active missionary work commenced at Bonny. A fundamental goal of the CMS Mission in Africa “was not to establish itself but to establish a Church - a Church for the local people run by the local people”. The mission goal was rooted in the sustainability of the 3s principle of the promotion of “self-propagating, self-supporting and self-governing” church (Onu, 2020, p. 2). The Missionary policy of “self-support” that seemed to be synonymous with the ND mission originated from Rev. Henry Venn, CMS General Secretary. The effectiveness of Crowther’s missionary methods contributed to the penetration of Christianity in the ND area than anywhere else in Nigeria. The mission expanded from Bonny into other Delta coastal communities of Brass (1864), Opobo (1873), Kalabari (1874), and Okrika (1878). From these principal Delta communities, the church advanced into Ikwerreland in 1895 and other upland stations of Ekpeye (1898), Ogba (1907), Eleme (1910), and Etche (1914).

The foundation of Saint Stephen’s church, Bonny, was laid in 1888; and in 1889, the church was dedicated. The church made a humble request for Crowther, as Bishop of Niger Territory Diocese, to make the church his official residence. He consented to the request and the Bonny Church became the first Cathedral in Nigeria. In 1874, the Niger Territory diocese was divided into Upper Niger and Lower Niger Archdeaconries for effective
administration. In August 1890, the two Archdeaconries began to experience an unhealthy relationship, which eventually resulted to a rupture. On December 31, 1891, Bishop Samuel Crowther died. The London Committee (LC) changed the mission principle and declined to consecrate James Johnson as Crowther’s successor, because they considered him to be a nationalist who adhered to the slogan “Africa for Africans”. The Lower Niger Mission, under Archdeacon Dandeson Coates Crowther; in loyalty and respect for Bishop Crowther, severed their relationship with the CMS Upper Niger Mission. The area was declared Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP), and on April 29, 1892, it was formally inaugurated at Bonny with the declaration, “We are a self-supporting and self-governing Pastorate Institution, in full communion with the Church of England” (Onu, 2018, p.128).


This study focuses on critical historical analysis of the doctrinal stance of the Anglican Church on issues of polygamy and Christian marriage. The questions which the paper addresses include: what was the antecedent to the problem of marriage in early years of the church in the ND? How did the early converts in the ND respond to the demand of the church on marriage? What approaches did the church authorities adopt to the problem of polygamy in the ND? What factors favored the acceptance of Marriage under Ordinance in the ND church? To address these questions, data were collected from primary and secondary sources. The study adopted qualitative research using historical, descriptive and participant observation approaches.

**Concept of marriage**

Marriage is one of the oldest institutions that have existed in the human society. It is a socially recognized union between two or more individuals that typically involve sexual and economic rights and duties. The *New Encyclopedia Britannica* (2015) presents it as a legally, and socially sanctioned union between one or more husbands, and one or more wives that accords status to their offspring, and is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs and attitudes that prescribe the right and duties of the partners. Culturally, it is a phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners, and conferring legitimacy on their offsprings. For Africans, marriage is the focus of existence, the meeting point of a given community, the departed, the living and those yet to be born. It is an intimate union between man and woman of which mating is an essential (and sacred) expression, and establishing enforceable rights between them, making a change of status for them and their parents, giving the children of the union a higher status than extramarital ones, generating relationships of consanguinity and infirmity, implying that other forms of mating or intimacy are deviant or preparatory to marriage (Shorter, 1978, p.83).
The *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (2003, p.1082) defined Christian marriage as the “sacred, covenantal union of one man and one woman formed when the two swear before God an oath of lifelong loyalty and love to one another, the sign and seal of which is sexual intercourse”. Thus, marriage is a life-long covenant relationship between two persons, one man and one woman as husband and wife who are resolved to walk together as companions, friends and complimentary partners, exercising sexual and economic privileges and duties for the bringing into existence of other persons.

Marriage is intended for companionship and procreation for continuity of the human race. The primary purpose is the creation of new life, as every marriage sets the stage for the next generation of the community. It is prototypical of the human creation. The Talmud records that one who does not participate in ‘be fruitful and multiply’ causes God’s presence to vanish (Diamant, 1985, p.27). Marriage promotes morality in the society as through it, indiscriminate sexual behavior ought to be checked. It is for unity, support, love, warmth and care.

**Types of marriage in Nigeria**

Nigerian law envisages and recognizes three types of marriages; Customary/Traditional marriage, statutory marriage or marriage under the Act and Islamic marriage which is also a kind of statutory marriage or marriage under the Act. Customary marriage is the primary, foundational, principal and traditional form of marriage that is recognized in any society, country or religious group, at any given time. It requires families of the bride and the groom to engage in some ritual visits and exchange of gifts according to the customs of that culture. The *Black’s Law Dictionary* (1999) defined custom as a practice that its common adoption and long unvarying habit have come to have the force of law. It is a rule, which, in a particular district, has, from the long usage, obtained the force of law. It is “a mirror of long usage” which implies that a particular custom may be one which is autochthonous, instilled and has become part and parcel of the people as a result of long usage and practice of such people. Customary marriage is consummated by the exchange of drink between the groom and the bride amidst family members and friends. This exchange of drink is symbolic of the bond, unity and mutual trust that will exist henceforth between the two. This is at the point when they have been joined by the eldest man among the kinsmen or kindred or his representative. The joining takes place after all requirements have been met by the bridegroom such as carrying of wine, payment of dowry and pride price etc.

Statutory marriage in Nigeria has its origin from colonial rule. The first enactment was the Marriage Ordinance of 1863 that provided for the granting of a license for marriages, which enabled the parties to proceed to celebrate their marriage according to the rites of their church. Marriage Ordinance of 1884 repelled the former and made marriage under the Ordinance monogamous (Okpara (n. d, pp. 12-3). Thus, statutory marriage is the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. It is regulated by the Marriage Act and the Matrimonial Causes Act (2004). It is celebrated after the publication of notice for 21 days in the office of a Registrar of marriage (Ononye, 2019). The consent of the groom and bride or/and their parents is required. The Act, evidenced by a Marriage Certificate, confers jurisdiction of the Court to hear the petition for dissolution of marriage.

A marriage conducted by any religious institution falls under the category of statutory marriage, provided the religious institution is registered with the appropriate
government authorities that authorize it to conduct such marriages and issue certificates to that effect. Christian marriage is a divine institution of a life-long and exclusive union, and the relationship between one man and one woman as husband and wife contracted under the precepts of the Church after a period of preparation by the groom and the bride. One of the responsibilities of the Ministry of Interior concerning Statutory Marriage is to license places of worship for the conduct of statutory marriage. The license places church marriage under the Act. Pursuant to section 24 Marriage Act (2004), the Principal Marriage Registrar is to print and deliver to...recognized ministers of licensed places of worship, books of marriage certificates (Ononye, 2019). A Christian wedding conducted by an unregistered church is only conducting a ceremony that cannot pass as statutory marriage.

Christian marriage is celebrated as Solemnization of Holy Matrimony or Blessing of Marriage for those already married and living together under Native law and Custom. In both, the man and the woman as husband and wife make confession of their willingness to build their union according to Christian principles of love. The marriage is celebrated by a priest with open doors between the hours of 8am and 6pm in the presence of at least two witnesses. The ring is exchanged between the husband and wife as a seal of their union, and the officiating priest, parties and witnesses sign the certificate in duplicate. The distinctive unity in Christian marriage is that the two become “one flesh” which separates them from others as a distinct family unit. It emphasizes monogamous relationship, which involves wife and one husband.

**Conceptualizing marriage (polygamy) in the Niger Delta**

One area of significant difference between Western and African culture is marriage. In England, polygamy was a crime punishable by law. In Africa, marriage takes different forms based on the worldview of the culture and experiences of the family and persons involved. Polygamy is a compound word meaning plural marriages that “allow an individual to have several husbands or wives simultaneously” (Schaefer, 2003, p. 350). A woman legally marrying to more than one husband at a time is polyandry. Where a woman marries two brothers, it is Adelphic. Polyandry devalues the social worth of women, and is not favoured in male-dominated societies. Polygyny is the marriage of a man to two or more wives concurrently. This is found all over Africa, though less common in some cultures.

There are two forms of polygamy, “limited” and “unlimited”. The former is where a man is allowed to marry up to a certain number of multiple wives as applicable to the Muslims. Qur’an, 4:3 says, “Marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or that which your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice”. Unlimited polygamy is where there is no prohibiting law to the number of wives a man can marry at a time (Enamali, 2012, p.267). This practice is found in almost all African society. Unlimited polygamy could be sororal, where the co-wives are sisters, which is often preferred form because sisters are thought to be more mutually supportive, and less argumentative than non-siblings. A typical rule as was practiced in at least 40 Native American cultures in the 19th century was that the eldest girl in a family marries first, and as her younger sisters come of age, they join her as co-wives. Mono-polygamy is where concubinage leads to successive polygamy; while clandestine polygamy is where co-wives are kept in ignorance of
each other. Bigamy is the “act of marrying one person while legally married to another” (Black’s Law Dictionary, 1999, p. 254). Cohabitation is a system where a man and a woman live together (cohabit) and raise children without full sanctions of legal marriage.

The economic, social, and health advantages of classical polygamy made it gain the approval of African women and people. It is an asset in rural communities as well as modern re-settlement schemes where larger shares are allotted to polygamous households. It ensures prosperity in labour intensive (agricultural) economies. Women contribute significantly to the wealth of the household and can materially benefit from the labour of an additional spouse. It makes domestic chores easier since the work is shared (Lewis, 1982, p.95).

Socially, co-wives and their children may accrue enhanced status and prestige as members of a large household and inherently prosperous. It implies a superior position and raises the status of the first wife. In Ikwerre for instance, the first wife is called Ogbotu, while others are referred to as Achama. Polygamy increases friendship between co-wives as some of them are often “sisters” who are expected to hold similar values and had already experienced sharing a household. If one wife is ill or dies, there are others to carry on the family. Through levirate and widow inheritance, polygamy caters for unsupported women. In societies that provide no institutionalized role for unmarried women, the status of a co-wife may be preferable to that of a single woman. Again, it confers stability through multiple alliances.

In maternal and child health, during postpartum recovery, for instance, co-wives can usually rely upon each other to perform the most strenuous work of the household. By creating opportunities for sexual companionship among the other members of the marriage, it also supports the once common expectation that women will remain sexually abstinent for two or more years beginning in the last months of pregnancy (or upon parturition). It fosters adequate birth spacing for the mother to recover from the physiological and emotional stresses associated with pregnancy, lactation, and the care of a little child. It caters for the sexual and procreative needs of the male. If one wife is indisposed, the husband can find a substitute. It minimizes prostitution and promiscuity. It keeps the female fertility rate low and caters for childless marriage by providing the kindest solution to the infertility of the first wife. Where mortality rates of men consistently exceed those of women, polygamy can be seen as a solution to the “deficit” of males and the “surplus” of females. It ensures more children into the family thereby increasing family size. It is claimed that through polygamy all women in a community can be married and so be materially supported (Shorter, 1973, 173-4; Beatie, 1980, p.118).

However, polygamy generates tensions, bickering, sexual jealousy between co-wives, and divorce. Quarrels and fights among the wives and among their children are not infrequent. There is poor discipline and up-bringing of the children as the father has less time for his children. It is uncongenial to modern women, does not favour social companionship in marriage and creates a “widow problem” on the death of the husband. It is husband centered with less care for the wives and their children, thereby making the wives and their children, prone to immorality and other social vices. According to Shorter (1973, p. 174), “Polygamy, creates a family of considerable legal complexity. lessens the educative influence of the father over his children, and is irreconcilable with the educational and economic emancipation of women, and the desire of women to play independent roles in society”.

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Missionaries and the challenge of marriage in Niger Delta mission

The early church was challenged by welfare and cultural identity (circumcision). In Africa, the church faced the problem of polygamy, marriage and divorce in the early years of missionary work. The experience was the same in the Niger Delta (ND) mission where the greatest percentage of supporters of the church in her vision of “self-support” was polygamists. The poor attitude of converts to the marriage under ordinance caused missionaries to lament for several years. Archdeacon Crowther in his letter of December, 1884, to Mrs. Pelly, an auxiliary helper, about the mission at Brass said: “The prevailing sin has been this matter of polygamy… these remarks apply more to the church at Nembe, where the majority of the Chiefs who embraced Christianity and were baptized have fallen into the sin of polygamy” (Epelle, 1955, p.25).

The superintendent of Southern Ijaw district reported that, “The majority of the members prefer a polygamous life” (Synod report, 1975). Another source at Okrika (Ogu) said that there was no Christian marriage for two years, 1976-1977 because many young men and women did not accept the Christian marriage; and so the spiritual part of the work is still lacking very much in the District (Synod report, 1984, p.144). Hence it appeared surprising to record marriage blessing of two couples, in addition to an Agent at Ogu in 1979. Marriage remained the main problem in Andoni (Obolo) district as Christians in the area did not value church marriage. Even at St. Stephen’s cathedral Bonny, there was no church marriage in 1979, as that holy institutional aspect of the work was not given its due regard. In 1987, the Provost of the cathedral expressed thanks to God for the two marriages that were blessed in the Cathedral as against none for several years, in the past (Synod report, p. 121). The vicar of Ekpetiama parish reported that since 1981 when the church was recognized as an autonomous parish, there was no single Christian marriage. Another at Northern Ijaw added that for the five years they had first blessing of marriage in 1984 (Synod report, 1984). In 1995, vicar of Amassoma said, only one couple blessed their marriage, and it was the first of its kind in the history of the church.

Writing on Ikwerre mission, Epelle (1955) stated that “Marriage under the ordinance sometimes regarded as ‘Church or Christian marriage’ has been problematic as in the Church of its origin,-the Niger Delta”. In 1926, the superintendent of Isiokpo district noted that “The question of Christian marriage has been a matter of absurdity to many a member in connection with our Church throughout Ikwerre region”. The Superintendent of another district wrote quite a quarter century later that “Marriage is the gloomy side of the whole work in the district”. Another confirmed that, “marriage under the ordinance is a dry bone in this district as polygamy has for long years been the order of the day” (Epelle, 1955:74). Ogbakiri District superintendent reported in 1964, that, “People here found it difficult to marry under the marriage ordinance”. Ten years later, another said, “Marriage under Ordinance is considered as an abomination, and those who contracted their marriages under Registrar, could not see their way clear to seek for the blessing of the Church” (Synod report, 1975). Superintendent of Ndele district decried in 1979, that, “Counselling members at this part of the world nowadays about [a] wedding, sounds as invoking juju or evil spirits against them...some prefer heathenism to Christianity instead of marrying in the Church. For the period of my three years stay here, I only blessed one marriage” (Synod report, p.190). There were many members with only one wife who dread the altar at Elele. Isiokpo district superintendent
expressed in 1984, that, “Marriage is becoming a thing of the past in the district” (Synod report, p.128).

The district superintendent of Ahoada declared in 1995, that, “It was still a problem to convince the average African that Christian marriage is the only ideal marriage. Unfortunately, the educated ones have also fallen victim of African traditional marriage. Another at Ihuowo, Ahoada area, said, Church marriage was still not embraced by young ones in the area as men find it difficult to take their wives to the altar (Synod report, 1995, p.103, 256).

The prime factor for the low ebb in the marriage under the ordinance in the ND was the social structure that promoted multiple wives and large family size for economic and social security. Concubinage in the area was regarded as a normal and legitimate practice and many saw monogamy as a curse. Among the Ibba people of Ikwerre, the monogamous men were regarded as “still eating their mother’s food”, and Eleotu nwere (people of a single wife). Secondly, marrying in the Church after customary rites was considered expensive for low income earners. Again, the people respected Church rules and regulations, especially on marriage, “one-man one-wife”. To them, contravening such laws could lead to premature death, and no family wished to lose any of their progressive sons to such “preventable death”.

Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther on marriage

It will be recalled that the Presbyterian missionaries celebrated the first Christian marriage in Nigeria in 1848 at Creek Town between two Jamaican assistants, Henry Hamilton and Mary Brown (Onu, 2018, p.119, citing Fleck, 2013:91). On May 3, 1874, the first marriage solemnization took place at Bonny. The attitude of Bishop Crowther to the social problem was quite uncompromising as he considered it as the most common to the natives in embracing the gospel message. Though Captain Burton in his book, *Abeokuta and the Cameroons* maintained that the opposition of the missionaries was a stumbling block and an obstacle to the conversion of the heathen to the Christian faith; Crowther discussed polygamy as “slavery of the female population of the countries where it prevailed”, as it could not check the evils of sensuality (Epelle, 1955, p.20). He taught missionaries “Do not destroy the culture of the Africans”. Again, “Respect the customs, the laws, and the traditions of your hearers”. Someone then remarked, but some customs such as polygamy, slavery and human sacrifice are cruel and revolting. He replied, “But we shall aim to use persuasion”.

The question bothered on whether the polygamists after being converted with their numerous wives should be accepted in the church and whether they should all be baptized when they are accepted. These concerns were presented to the London Committee (LC) thus: would it be best to ask a polygamist to send away all his wives except one? What would become of those sent away? In African society, there was no place for single women. The LC finally decided to refuse baptism to polygamists and received the wives and their children into the church (Decovert & Oladipo, 2006).

Early approaches to church marriage in Niger Delta mission

In 1907, Bishop Tugwell appointed the then Pastor of Opobo, Rev. J. A. Pratt as sole Commissioner of a Commission of Inquiry which was charged to investigate and determine the position of church members on the question of marriage. The commission revealed the recognition of the necessity for and the obligation of Christians to marry in the Christian tradition or according to the prescribed form of the Anglican Church (Epelle, 1955, p.46). One
of the important issues discussed at the inaugural Synod of the Diocese on the Niger, constituted in March 1931, at Onitsha after the reunion of the CMS Niger mission and the Niger Delta was “Church Marriage”. The marriage statistics of the ND mission was significantly lower than those of the Niger Mission, because many Christians in the ND had not conformed to “Marriage under the Ordinance” as a Christian obligation. The Niger Diocesan Board held in June, 1943, under the leadership of Bishop Lasbrey made some resolutions favoring the blessing of the native marriage of a Christian character. They resolved to consult authorities of Lagos Diocese in exploring the possibilities of safeguarding the principles of Christian marriage while avoiding the necessity of “Marriage under the Ordinance”.

Another common problem to the churches both in the Niger Mission and the ND was Divorce among persons married under the Marriage Ordinance. Representations to the Nigerian Government on the matter were made as the agreed opinion of a corporate body, and covered in proposals submitted to the Synod by Bishop Lasbrey. The proposals entailed the following:

i. To consider the possibility of changing the Marriage Ordinance to the effect of putting it within the reach of the ordinary man in any province of the Protectorate to obtain a divorce for the cause of infidelity.

ii. To consider the possibility of placing some check on the facility with which divorces are obtained under the Native Law and Custom, seeing that it causes much distress and leads to grievous immortality” (Epelle, 1955, p. 93).

Though the Civil Authorities had not taken any action on the line of the proposals, yet they represented an agreement of the African public view on a vexed question. In 1949, a subcommittee was instituted in the Diocese on the Niger to deal with the issue. However, before the Committee came out with its findings, the NDD had been carved out of the Niger Diocese, and the Committee automatically ceased to function. A joint committee was later set up and in 1953 which gave the basis for acceptance of Native Marriage. One of such is that Native Marriage should be life-long, indissoluble and exclusive. Furthermore, any marriage which destroys any of these is unchristian.

The Committee’s findings were presented to the Synod by the Honourable Chancellor of the Diocese on the Niger, Sir Louis Mbanefo. Bishop E. T. Dimieari appealed to the Synod to accept the report as the Methodists and Presbyterians had acknowledged Native Marriage in the church. After deliberations, the Synod resolved to acknowledge Marriage Blessing thus: That the Synod accepts the principle of Native Marriage of which the parties to it would accept the principle of a life-long indissoluble and exclusive union and make it the basis of their married or proposed married life. this was considered not unchristian and the Synod approved the drafting of new marriage regulations accepting Native Marriage based on the above principle.

Where the members of the Church have married or proposed to marry according to the law of the land which is not idolatrous and have shown proof by affidavit in the form to be approved by the Diocesan of acceptance of the principle of a life-long indissoluble and exclusive union, their marriage may be blessed or solemnized in the Church, for the member of the Church, the marriage is deemed in complete until it is solemnized in the Church.

It was the desire of the Synod that the Diocesan Resolutions of this Diocese and those of the Niger Diocese on the question of Native Marriage should be the
same (Obuoforibo, 1990, p. 52-3). The resolution was adopted on April 28, 1954, at the Third Session of the First Synod of NDD held at Port Harcourt. It stressed that marriage should be regarded as proper when the Church has blessed such marriage. The rule of “no marriage, no confirmation” favored the mission work in the ND. Rev. D. I. Okechukwu of Isiokpo district said in 1963, that 23 couples were married in the church (blessing) to every body’s surprise. The marriage helped to qualify many to receive the rite of confirmation during the dedication of St Peter’s church (Synod report, p.92). The superintendent of Kalabari district in 1975 affirmed that the insistence on Church marriage before confirmation, which made many confirmation candidates to get married properly as there were a handful of candidates for church marriage every year (Synod report, p. 51).

In addition to the teachings and persuasions, a compromise was also adopted by the authorities of the church. Polygamists who expressed willingness to bless their marriage with one of their wives (mainly first) in the early years were tolerated. It was for the purpose of raising local church principal officers like pastor’s and people’s wardens.

However, the Delta Church authority in 1932 refused ordination training to a Church teacher, Mr. T. A. Assor of Elele-Alimini, because he was married to more than one wife. He withdrew and joined the African Church with some sympathizers (Onu, 2020, p.5). Men whose native marriages were monogamous but not blessed in Church were excluded from Holy Communion. Also, women in native monogamous marriages were not freely presented for confirmation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Marriages</th>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Evo district</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>St Cyprian’s church Port Harcourt</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Evo group of churches</td>
<td>132</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>St Paul’s Cathedral, Diobu Port Harcourt</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>St Paul’s Cathedral, Diobu Port Harcourt</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Evo group of churches</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>Ikwerre Diocese churches</td>
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<td>2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Port Harcourt North Archdeaconry</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data of marriage under ordinance in some ND churches

The above table shows the number of Marriages under Ordinance from the 1980s. The superintendent of Evo district in 1975 held that despite the common urges from every corner for the revival of our forgotten cultures, including polygamy; six couples blessed their marriage. In 1979, he added that members have developed a high regard for Christian marriage (Synod report, 1979, p. 183). In the same year, Archdeacon of Port Harcourt and superintendent of Apara District, Venerable Samuel Chukuigwe reported that number of couples joined in Holy matrimony rose from nil to twelve as a few young men and women have begun to realize the importance of Church marriage (Synod report, 1975, p.61, 71). Five years later, he declared that three of out the seven
registered marriages were natives. The most interesting was a young graduate and a civil commissioner (Synod report, 1980, p.108). In 1981, the Superintendent of Omudioga district said: “It is a joy to report that in a community where almost every man vows to marry more than one wife, we had been able to bless marriages of four couples during the year” (Synod report, p.186).

Factors for revival in marriage under ordinance in Niger Delta mission
Revival of Christian marriage in the ND churches was favoured by the understanding of the scriptural and social importance of the monogamous marriage. The Scripture says: “The unfolding of thy words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119:130). The systematic study of the word of God through adult Sunday school teachings exposed members to the secrets of scriptural blessings in honoring God in their marriage. Pastoral persuasions and prayers served a good purpose. Archdeacon Chukuigwe in 1979 stated: “We pray that time will soon come when members would embrace this Church rite with due enthusiasm” (Synod report, 1975, p.71). The superintendent of Eleme in 1993 affirmed that “Christians over here are seriously realizing the security and stability Church blessing of marriage brings to their marital homes (Synod report, p.185).

The next is an increase in ecclesiastical groups and offices. As new autonomous Districts, Parishes, Archdeaconries and Dioceses are created, qualified men and women were needed to serve in the attendant new opportunities. They included membership of Parish Church Council, Archdeaconry and Diocesan Boards, Nominees of Bishop to Synod, Knighthood and Diocesan officials. Necessity was placed on members, especially financiers of the church, to marry under the ordinance as to fit into some of the new leadership and honorific positions. Consequently, whenever there was an Episcopal function, the number of marriage blessings naturally increased. Another aspect of the revival is in welfare, wherein some churches in conjunction with an arm or unit sponsored the blessing of marriage of some couples who had married according to Native law and custom, but could not fulfill the church marriage rites on financial grounds.

Expansion of Port Harcourt city into adjoining towns and villages was another favour. The urbanization was followed with an influx of migrants from neighbouring regions within and outside Nigeria. The migrants became a great asset to the growth and prosperity of the church in the ND through participation in the churches within. The response of “strangers” to the call for Christian marriage positively increased church records and challenged native converts. Out of the 94 marriages recorded in Port Harcourt West Archdeaconry in 2011, migrants accounted for 98%. Commitment of these migrants in mission, evangelism and church planting remains a reference point in ND Anglicanism.

Modernism with an increased economic status occasioned by industrialization proved helpful. Some Christians in political, economic and socio-cultural organizations where financial contributions were made for members during marriage ceremonies were challenged to accept Christian marriage. This was to enable them share in the welfare provisions of such organizations as well as receive the magnanimity of friends and well-wishers. Increased modern church buildings attracted some people to celebrate their marriages in city churches. The Vicar of St. Cyprian’s in Port Harcourt reported in 1987 that wedding was a regular feature in the Church and has become evangelistic, as young men and ladies came forward to enroll as members of the Church in order to have their wedding
Marriage policies in Niger Delta mission
The church as a dynamic institution; has continued to make rules on marriage. The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) defined issues of marriage in Canon XVIII of the Constitution and Canons (2002) as amended. That, “Solemnization of Holy Matrimony by the Rites of the Church is reserved to those who are baptized” (2:1). Again, “Where two persons living together as man and wife under native customary law or any other generally accepted law and without other partners, are admitted to Holy Baptism, their marriage is ipso facto raised to the status of Christian Marriage. The Church shall formally recognize this fact by bestowing upon it a form of blessing” (3:2).

Of polygamists, it maintained that “Unless under exceptional circumstances and with the direct permission of the Bishop given in writing, no man living as a polygamist shall be admitted to Holy Baptism; a baptized person who becomes a polygamist shall not be admitted to Confirmation or Holy Communion” (4:1). Secondly, “The wives of a polygamist may... be admitted to Holy Baptism and shall not be precluded from Confirmation and Holy Communion solely on account of such marital circumstances” (4:2). Again, “A baptized member of the Church who married a polygamist shall not be eligible for Confirmation; a communicant who married a polygamist shall be suspended from Holy Communion as long as such a union shall exist unless under exceptional circumstances the permission of the Bishop in writing shall have first been obtained for Confirmation or restoration to Holy Communion as the case may be” (5:5).

Archbishop Ignatius C. O. Kattey, in his first address as the Bishop of Diocese of Niger Delta North (DNDN) on August 5, 2000, created the Family Life Resources Ministry (FLRM) to co-ordinate activities of Marriage Counseling Committees of churches in the Diocese, provide pre-marital counseling for intending couples and promote family education (values) in the Diocese. In 2001, DNDN Synod resolved “That every clergyman in the DNDN shall marry. And that those Deacons who were not married were to do so within one year from the date of their ordination and that married clergymen shall reside with their wives in their stations” (Onu, 2014, p. 150). Since then, clergymen who are not married are excluded from priesthood. Again, married priests who are not residing with their wives on the basis of “marital disagreement” are termed to have willfully withdrawn their services from the diocese and are not posted to minister in any church. No fewer than three priests have “willfully withdrawn their services from the diocese” in this regard.

In 2008, Synod ruled “That the recent practice among some newly married couples in celebrating their traditional marriage rite during the reception after church wedding is un-Anglican and will no longer be acceptable in the DNDN. And consequently, all traditional marriage swearing of affidavits or Court marriage must precede the Church wedding” (Onu, 2014, p. 151). Bishop Blessing C. Enyindah of Diocese of Ikwerre, in his Episcopal policy at Synod 2008 declared thus: “We will not allow wedding of pregnant women in our churches. Priests are warned not to engage in that. They can come for a marriage blessing after delivery and we will not allow traditional marriage ceremony after church wedding” (Synod report, p.67).

The rule on a pregnancy test is intended to teach young people self-control, for as Gal 5:22-23 stated, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. However, some persons whose tests are positive rather than wait for
marriage blessing after child birth would decide to engage some Independent Church clergies to celebrate their marriage. Presently, some of them prefer going to the Christian Ecumenical Centre, Port Harcourt, where a pregnancy test is not a condition for solemnization of marriage.

Conclusion
Active missionary work commenced in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria from Bonny through the ministry of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the CMS in 1864. The church expanded to other coastal and upland communities as missionaries and converts witnessed to the love of God. In 1952, the mission gained Diocesan status and in 2009 the number of Dioceses rose to thirteen.

The mission confronted a lot of challenges. One of the challenges was the issues of polygamous marriage which was unchristian. In early years of Anglican Church in the Niger Delta, Christian marriage was rare as the area was deeply rooted in polygamy, a common cultural practice in the African society. The economic and social security of polygamy, cost of financing customary and church marriages and fear of the consequences of not obeying church rule of “one-man, one-wife” kept many converts away from the altar with their wives. This posed great challenge to the Church in the Niger Delta.

Authorities of the church approached the problem through systematic teachings of biblical truth, pastoral persuasions and consistent prayers to win the hearts of converts. Polygamists who expressed willingness to bless their marriage with one of their wives were tolerated. The regulation of “no marriage, no confirmation” proved useful in challenging many converts to marry according to the Church ordinance. Christian marriage received significant acceptance from the 1980s as a result of the understanding of the scriptural and social importance of marriage under ordinance, increase in ecclesiastical bodies and offices, urbanization and modernism.

In conclusion, the dynamism of the Anglican Church as a “living entity and not an ossified institution” (Onu, 2019, p. 173 citing Neil, 1977, p. 388) is revealed in her response to the common social problem of polygamy and marriage in the ND. Converts including polygamists were tolerated; through Biblical teachings, pastoral persuasions, prayers, revival and modernism Marriage under Ordinance has become a common feature. The new policies on marriage are geared towards sustainability of godly marriages in the church and promotion of healthy family life in the society.

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. The church should continue with teachings on marriage and family values.
2. That Family Life Resources Ministry should be established in all dioceses to co-ordinate activities of church marriage counseling committees and implementation of marriage polices.
3. Attention should be given to primary marriage counseling to provide good foundation for godly marriages. Thus far, emphasis has been on secondary (on-marriage) counseling.
4. There should be instructive Christian programmes to orientate couples on the ways to bring up a Christian child in such a culture where polygamy is a normative practice.

Work cited


