Christianity and Community Development in Igboland, 1960-2000: a Reflection

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Abstract

The paper takes a look at the church and community in lgboland, 1950-2000. The paper sought to find out the extent to which the church has satisfied the needs of Igbo community in Nigeria. Primary and secondary means in the collection of data were used in the research procedure. Findings showed that

modern church in Igboland is doing well, but not well enough in curbing some Igbo community ills such as corruption, unemployment, moral decadence, spiritual barrenness, academic decadence, economic bankruptcy, maladministration and political apostasy that are endemic diseases prevalent in Igboland. Recommendations in the way of strategies capable of improving the situation were offered.

Introduction

One of the most important ingredients of religious, political, economic, cultural and social progress is community development. Development denotes creating conditions conducive to growth of people's self esteem through the establishment of spiritual, moral, social, political and economic systems and institutions which promote human dignity and respect. With respect to the issues raised above, a creative and resourceful living church will always be a force sensitive to issues, questions, problems and needs of the masses and the community at large.

It seems that the Christianity and civilization brought by the early missionaries in Igboland is waning and therefore needed to be resuscitated to enhance community development. In the light of the above challenges in community development vis-à-vis Christianity in Igboland, this paper seeks to examine the major issues in respect of the community development.

The Igbo: a sketchy ethnography

The Igbo occupy the south – eastern and a part of the south – western territories as well as the mainland section of the present Rivers State of Nigeria. They are among the single large ethnic groups in Nigeria. The River Niger, before it enters the Atlantic Ocean through its network of tributaries which characterize its Delta, divides the Igbo country into two unequal aparts, with the greater portion lying in South –Eastern Nigeria. The other triangular portion lies west of the Niger, now Delta State. The Igbo land area falls also within five main vegetation belts namely, mangrove forest, freshwater, swamp forest, rain forest, derived Savanna, and Guinea Savanna. Nwabara (1977) and Nwafor (1973) argue that the Igbo are a compendium of paradoxes, but their greater asset is a copious supply of versatile common-sense and the unique capacity for improvisation.

As regards their religion, occupation, and politics, African traditional religion, agriculture and *umunna* pattern of democracy constitute their way of

life. Much stress is laid on healing and purification from different kinds of contamination in the society. Hatred, dissension and frustrations within a group can bring about sickness (Haselbarth, 1976). *Oko nwanta onu, ojukwara chi ya ajuju?* (Before anyone blames someone of misfortune, he should first inquire from the person's guardian spirit). This proverb and similar ones in Igbo cosmology justify the fact that sometimes, individuals are not responsible for their poverty in any aspect whether economic, political, physical and the like. Some people are poor because of the activities of their guardian spirits or deities in charge of their societies or even as a result of forefathers' sins (cf. Amos 5; Gen. 3; Jer. 17:1; Jn 9:1-5 etc). Igbo people are industrious and they hate laziness. An Igbo proverb, "Onye kwe Chi ya kwe" (When a person agrees to do something his guardian spirit agrees too) illuminates how Igbo man disposes himself in his everyday activities to avoid this kind of poverty (2Thess.3:6-10).

Working definitions

One of the most important ingredients of political, economic, cultural, religious and social progress is community development (CD). A community, from a very simple perspective, refers to a body of persons in the same locality. It connotes people of common concerns, aspirations, and destiny and for a sense of belonging (Kee & Young, 1981). The concept is generally used to denote a collectivity or group of people living together in a specific geographical area such as hamlet, village or any other pattern of human settlement. As a form of social organization which embraces the entire round of life, a community could be urban or rural – hence the concepts urban community, and or rural community.

Membership of a community could also be based on shared interests and values, common ties, customs and traditions. Thus a group of people with shared way of life though not located together in a clearly defined geographical area, but observing common customs and a code of general behaviour with a background of common customs and tradition could be referred to as a community. In this sense, the community exists only in the mind, and connotes common interest, values, origins, feelings and sense of belongingness. A group of people need not live together in the same locality, yet the group constitutes a community in the psychic (mind) sense. Thus, although a community may be identified as a geographical area, it usually implies a degree of social coherence and the sense of having something in common.

In other words it can be said that we have:

   i.   a residence community- in the locality (i.e. geographical or ecological) sense, and

   ii.   a moral or psychic community- connoting communality of interest, values, beliefs etc.

For instance, in one sense, we can talk of Umuahia or Awka or Enugu community as embracing all the people (i.e. everyone) in such towns irrespective of cultural, ethnic and /or racial background. But in another sense, we can say Igbo community as embracing only people of Igbo tradition not only in Umuahia, Awka or Enugu (traditional homeland) but also elsewhere in Nigeria or beyond. The essence of community lies within the framework of common bond, the sharing of an identity and a feeling of belongings which can create or desire to do (or to want to do) "something" to improve life in the community, for members of the community. The concept of development connotes creating conditions conducive to the growth of people's self esteem through the establishment of social, political and economic systems and institutions which promote human dignity and respect. It implies increasing people's access to better life (improved welfare) and the freedom to choose by enlarging the range of choice available. It is the process of improving the quality of the all human lives. The aspects of such improvement include raising people's living level such as income, consumption, education, spirituality, medical services, security among others through relevant economic growth processes.

Society vis-à-vis community can best be known and probably the most important meaning attaching itself to these terms is derived from their use as the English equivalents of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft,* concepts of abiding significance *in sociology which were introduced by F. Tonnies. Gemeinschaft (community) is the ideal-type of a human collectivity in which all members "love and understand each other and dwell together and organize their common life" (Macquarrie, 1981). In contrast to Gesellschaft (society), in which relationships are contractual and interaction is "business-like", "community" relationships are based on sentiments of warmth and respect for tradition, and community interaction is characterized by organic unity (p.80).*

To Ukpong (1990), the concept of development has been discussed under various terms such evolution, change, progress, modernization among others

but summed under the generic term, "idea of progress'' (p.107). It is the growth in knowledge, essentially a legacy of the Enlightenment to structural transformation at societal level. In the most liberal way, development means social, economic, political, religious, cultural and economic changes in society leading to improvement in the quality of life for all. Although this concept is not ideological, it nonetheless depicts development as a normative enterprise. According to Meler (1976), from this view, development is considered to be qualitative "growth plus positive change'' applied to a particular .human end (p.6).   The central element of development is cumulative change which is high complex and can only be best achieved through different phases vis– a'- vis cultural, economic, political, social, religious and so on operating in concert.

Perlman and Gurin (1972) defined CD as a process designed to create conditions economic and social progress for the whole community with the active participation and fullest possible reliance on community initiative.

Battern (1965) posits that CD is a process through which a community organizes themselves for planning and action, defines their common and individual problems, and executes these with a maximum of reliance upon the resources of the community. Dunhan (1960) tends to view CD as organized efforts to improve the conditions of community life and the capacity for community integration and self- direction. There are four basic elements implied in Dunhan's approach viz: Community development is a planned progromme (of change);

   a.   CD is the encouragement of self-helps

   b.   The place of outside technical assistance (which may include funds, personnel, supplies and equipment) and

   c.   CD is the interjection of various specialists (experts) for the help of the Igbo community.

United Nations (1956) defines CD as the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of government authorities to improve the economic, social, spiritual and cultural conditions of communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them contribute fully to national progress.

The hallmark of CD is the involvement of the people through their participation in the process of improving the community by the execution of

specific projects. Some organizations in Igboland such as social workers, adult educators, economic planners, town and city planners, agricultural extension officers and local government officials and similar ones consider their professional fields the forerunner of CD. It was however, in the World War II period that much of pioneering efforts in CD among the rural populace came into focus notably in Egypt.

The goals of community development

It must be stated from the outset that when the missionaries came to Africa, their primary aim was to propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Africans. To Igbo people, their understanding and hermeneutic of salvation preached in the churches went beyond the ordinary salvation from sin. For them, the concept of salvation implies more than liberation from sin. It includes redemption from physical misfortune such as sickness, road accident, sudden death, poverty, court case, oppression of the enemy, socio- cultural, political, economic among others (Onunwa, 1991).Evangelization situates liberation in Christ to include a transformation of concrete historical and political conditions. The human beings to whom the gospel is proclaimed are not abstract, apolitical beings but members of a society characterized by injustice and human exploitation. On education, Fafunwa (1974) stated that in African educational set up, there were seven purposes before the advent of the West. These were to develop the child's latent physical skills; to develop character; to inculcate respect for elders and those in position of authority; to develop intellectual skills; to acquire specific vocational training and to develop a healthy attitude towards honest labour; to develop a healthy sense of belonging and to participate actively in family and community affairs and to understand, appreciate and promote the cultural heritage of the community at large. Therefore the missionaries did not only bring the gospel of Jesus Christ; they also taught the people. They opened schools wherever they established churches where young ones were, and those interested were taught how to read, write, sing hymns, psalms, choruses, recite catechism, pray, and even learnt how to read the scriptures. Some of the notable schools by the mission bodies include the Uzuakoli Methodist College built in 1923, Ihie High School built in 1945, Dennis Memorial Grammar School Onitsha built in 1925, the St. Paul College Awka, Bishop Lasbrey College Irete, St. Augustine, and Trinity Theological College, Umuahia. The missionaries helped in the unification of Igbo language by translating the Bible into Igbo version called Union Ibo by 1910. Christian missions helped also to preserve

the vernacular languages of the people as against the wishes of the colonial administrators who preferred the English language to the vernacular languages. This became one of the Christian Legacies to the people of Ibo even Yoruba, Efik, Nupe and Hausa (Ayandele, 1966). The translation of the Bible is a reflective interpretation of what the biblical God is doing to enhance Nigerian survival through the agency of the people who are informed by scripture and traditional concepts of the God who is revealed to us through the faith and life of Jesus Christ. Our future is found in the application of a peculiarly Igbo hermeneutic to Bible principles. For the people who could now read in their language, liberation is Christ mission to the world of those struggling for survival. Liberation in this context applies to those suffering, the poor, captive, and naked bound in political, economic and social structure.

At this juncture the following could be regarded as philosophy of the CD.

i. CD is seen as a universal goal in the context that development is considered   synonymous with progress, improvement and change.

ii. CD is necessary if the community is not to stagnate or seen in that context.

iii. CD is predicated on the principle of self-help.

iv. CD engenders the spirit of voluntarism and co- operation.

v. Satisfaction of basic needs- food, shelter (housing), potable water, light, good health, basic education, clean environment as well as access to satisfactory cultural, spiritual, social and political life;

vi. increase in the utilization of the resources of the community and increase in the productive capacity of the population;

vii. increase in per capital income;

viii. improvement in standard of living;

ix. mobilization of the people (members of the community) to ensure deep- rooted, self- sustaining development.

Objectives of church community development

Beyond meeting the basic needs such as shelter (community hall, classroom blocks); food (community farm, co-operative food and provision shop, market,

rice, garri and palm fruit milling, poultry, animal husbandry etc); water (well, bore hole, pipe borne water, maintenance of local stream etc); health (cottage hospital, dispensary, drug store, sanitation etc); education (Day Care Centre, Nursery, School, Bursary/ scholarship scheme, Information communication technology center, school fence, teachers' quarters, etc); social development (civic center, viewing center, recreational facilities, parks, etc) are the following objectives.

1. To encourage the spirit of communal self- help and initiative in the improvement of socio-economic conditions of the communities.

2. To assist the communities in organizing themselves to embark on self- help projects.

3. To educate community members on the need for co-operation and to foster active participation in community affairs.

4. To enhance self- awareness and promote the spirit of confidence.

5. To educate and stimulate individuals and groups to accept change for the improvement of their living standards.

6. To encourage co-operation between communities, government and private sector in the improvement of the living conditions of communities.

7. To enhance community integration and encourage the spirit of participation.

Church and community mobilization

It is a process or means of encouraging influencing and arousing the interest of the members of a community to put them in a state of readiness for action or service. It involves the church getting the members of a community together to act with concerted effort in finding solutions to some of their local problems in order to ensure self- reliance, and programme sustainability. Church community mobilization is an essential element of community work and practice for by the process people could be gathered together for a particular service of communal interest. Community social mobilization has become a household word in Nigeria in recent years notably with MAMSEB (Mass mobilization for social justice and economic recovery) and NOA (National Orientation Agency) by which the government reaches out to the society to mobilize communities at the grassroots. Church social mobilization

is an aspect of social engineering through which members of the community are sensitized to the problems of the community and instigated to find common solutions in the paramount interest of the community.

Church community mobilization increases the level of awareness and improves understanding. It involves the presentation of well prepared information education and communication (IEC – information, education and communication) materials to people in the communities in mobilization complain. It is therefore a veritable process of public enlightenment which heightens the level of knowledge of societal issues. CD demands a high level of co-operation, involvement, enthusiasm, voluntarism and patriotism among the members of the community. The spirit (attributes) and the resultants spirit de corps can be well cultivated among community members only through the process of effective community mobilization. Community mobilization promotes active mass participation community affairs. Since mass participation is a sine qua non for successful implementation of CD projects.

To Iwe (1985), our developing country should tend, at least in aspiration; towards a more robust human condition of living. Such a favorable condition would entail and witness for all our people an open and easy access to the material resources of modern civilization. It is a condition that would further engender victory over our physical and social scourges such as hunger, malnutrition, curable disease, selfishness, bribery, nepotism, tribalism, mammonism, greed for power and position. It would entail the emergence of a humane and sober social atmosphere wherein would flourish increased esteem and respect for the dignity and rights of man, creative cooperation for peace, stability and progress in various camps of human endeavor, in both Church and State.

The above, therefore, is the vision of the future towards which our developing community must tend, if its destiny is to escape the bleak, the grim and the gloomy. To meet constructively the challenge of such a dynamic future, and be equal to it, our forces, resources and potentials-economic, intellectual, moral, social, political and religious-must be totally mobilized and effectively harnessed to the urgent and pressing task of achieving a human order in our society and a future worthy of human dignity and the century achievements.

Strategies of church community mobilization

1. According to Rowland (2007), CD should based on worship characterized by baptism and communion classes, prison visitation groups, planning and coordination, leadership training, Bible study, catechism, marriage groups, food and clothing co-operative, workers' union, mothers' group, men's group, youth group, education and schooling association, health and sanitation movement, community center, among others. Many churches continue to play an influential role within local campaigns for improved sanitation and health facilities better educational and housing provision and other ongoing struggles towards the improvement of life chances at the base. Though African slavery is no longer an issue there is still much to be done about the exploitation of domestic workers, the forced prostitution of women and children drug addicts, human trafficking, ecological issues, kidnapping, terrorism, and election rigging, unemployment, insecurity, political thuggery, political and ecclesiastical maladministration, care for the homeless, the inmates of prison, the scourge of HIV/AIDS, agriculture, drunkenness, etc.

2. **Campaigns and rallies approach:** This strategy involves getting at the grassroots to "carry community members along". Public enlightenment lectures/ talks could be given to the "masses" (the public) at specially arranged (and even ad hoc) public gatherings. Campaign rally venues include community hall square, or playground, school and church premises, market place among others. Campaign ground and rallies could be richly enhanced if a short play or drama is made part and parcel of the outing package. A special mobilization talks could also be arranged for churches and schools in the community.

3. **Advertisement approach:** This involves the use of electronics and print media to reach out to the public. Through the radio and television community members could be reached with specially organized talks, discussion, notices, slots such as the community is ours and demands our unalloyed loyalty and service among others.

4. **Lyric approach:** The community could be mobilized through lyrics. This involves conveying sharp and very precise messages to

the public in lyrics in the local languages and dialects. Besides the enter training melody of the lyrics, the messages therein have services implications for community sensitization.

5. **Mass education approach:** The principle of community mobilization could be consciously incorporated into the general process of education. This involves paying special attention to social mobilization ethics and philosophy that promotes and integrates the spirit of oneness, co-operation, work and patriotism among others at various level of education from nursery to tertiary.

Basic qualifications of priest and lay community worker

Skidmore and Thakeray (1982) citing Barry suggested the following qualifications for community church workers.

1. Ability to relate to people and to facilitate positive relationships among individuals and groups.

2. Ability to analyze a problem and see its potentials (including its difficulties, relation to scheme of things, possibilities of solution).

3. Ability to locate and utilize resources effectively including human resources, studies, observations, and so on.

4. Ability to organize effective structure, such as a committee, and help it function.

5. Ability to understand and accept the reality of the situation and yet to see the potential change.

6. Ability to handle oneself professionally, in many different roles with various types of people, and to handle criticism and praise

7. Ability to organize one's job to work under pressure, to establish priorities in terms of time, intensiveness, and so on.

8. Ability to relate and differentiate the various situations within one's own job and likewise, within the agency and the community.

9. Ability to fulfill and facilitate the agency's purposes and functions and thus to perform skills necessary to the task (such as public relations, fact finding, budgeting, administration).

10. Ability and capacity to use knowledge, to apply theory to practice in an integrated way.

Some of the qualities of successful community Christian worker are one who identifies with the community and shows genuine involvement in its affairs. He should learn fast and adjust adequately to the norms and values of the community. Any element of chauvinism and ethnocentrism could cause estrangement. The community worker should be a simple, sociable person who is seen as a friend of the community.

Other useful qualities of a good community worker are those of punctuality and probity. The community worker (CW) should be a time conscious person in his dealings with the community. Appointments made and meetings arranged should be promptly honoured. It is disheartening in community work for the community to gather and wait for an officer who had fixed time with them; instead the people should arrive to meet the officer in a state of readiness. One of very touchy issues of CD is the management of funds. There has been so much in the society about misappropriation of funds and brazen embezzlement of the people's money. It is very necessary that those connected with community work should be seen as sincere, honest men of integrity indeed, probity should be the watchword of the community workers, because mistrust could be very damaging to the persons and devastating not only to the specific CD project in hand, but also to the whole course of community development.

Summary and conclusion

Marks of a creative church towards community development include the following. To Iwe (1985), a creative church must be possessed of the qualities of originality, openness to and fluency of ideas spontaneous flexibility, adaptive-resilience, awareness of and sensitivity to problems, and reformative ability.

a. A church must have marks of originality. In our developing Igbo society if the church is to be creative, it must be imbued with marks of originality. In this respect, we do not mean a morbid quest for novelty or any spirit of "quid novi". What is meant is that the church must be a thinking church, a church capable of thinking out new and if possible, original ways and means of meeting contemporary issues and problems. The church must not be complacent with medieval, pre – tridentine and tridentine formulae and arrangements,

especially when the latter have lost their relevance, validity or vitality.

b. Cultural adaptation/incarnation: It is not only in the sphere of problem solution and conflict revolution that creative originality should be brought to bear. Creative resourcefulness could also be shown in the processes of religious ecclesiastical and liturgical adaptation. The church must in all honesty and earnestness embarks on the incarnation or adaptation of Christianity to our people with a sound touch of originality.

c. Adapted and humane sense of authority: A creative church with adaptive capacity will avoid any adorn of authoritarianism, any nostalgic expression of feudal over lordship, any episcopal dictations, fiat and peremptory mysterious orders from the thrones on high would be entirely out of text and context, out of time and place, and disastrously prejudicial to the cause and interest of religion as a development. A creative church in a developing country will always seek and strive to keep under continual adaptive review her system of authority.

d. A creative church must be sensitive to problems and issues. A creative and resourceful church will always be a force sensitive to problems and issues, questions, problems and needs. It will be both introvert and extrovert, able to look into, examine and consolidate itself internally, and address itself to and face the world. As a creative institution, it must be a sensitive church, a perceptive church, a vigilant church, and a discerning church. The church will never constitute herself into a cultural oasis or an isolated castle or a sacrosanct preserve in the secular affairs of men, it is a church with a sincere and realistic sense of mission, concern and commitment to the stark realities, needs, hopes and anxieties of living and struggling humanity. As a sensitive church, it is not of politics, but in politic for justice in power.

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