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Church and Community Development in Igbo Land: a Re-Visit

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Abstract

This study, a descriptive survey research, presents the concepts of church and community development in Igboland context. Church community development connotes creating conditions conducive to the growth of peoples

self esteem through the establishment of social, political, economic, human dignity and respect. It implies increasing peoples access to better life (improved welfare) and the freedom to choose by enlarging the range of choice available. The method of approach is based on review of related literature.

Introduction

In recent times, there have being much treatise on the issue of church community development in Igboland. Igbo church community development studies have generally been influenced by European evolutionary and functionalist writers whose eurocentric and racist characterization colour their use of such concepts as “community”, “traditionality”, “modern”, “social”, “social welfare” and development”. The obvious development implication is that “primitive” and “traditionality” are generally associated with non-western, pre-modern, low technology, agricultural societies, while western industrial societies are closely associated with modernity.

In the contemporary Igbo society, there are many challenges of unemployment, insecurity, corruption, godliness, and mal-administration. In this piece, the burden is to show how church community development can be in the service of the promotion of spiritual, moral, improved welfare and human civilization in Igboland. So there are really challenges the church should address which this study is also to investigate and proffer solutions.

In respect of this, we intend to reconsider Igbo traditional and contemporary “self help” orientation of church community development and social welfare. This is depended upon social- economic, political, religions and cultural forces. According to Eteng (2012), African community development studies have generally been influenced by Western European evolutionary and functionalist writers whose Eurocentric and racist characterization colour their use of such concepts as ‘community’, “traditionality”, “modern”, “social”, “social welfare”, and “development”. There are two ideal types of social systems, one representing the ideal “urban, modern community”. Social transformation and development is assumed to mean the transition from the former to the latter. The obvious development implication is that “primitive” and “traditionality” is generally associated with non-western, pre-modern, low technological agricultural societies, while western industrial societies are closely associated with modernity. Development and progress are thus erroneously conceived as ‘modernization’, ‘europeanization’ or ‘euro-americanisation’ (Fletcher, 1971),

Conceptual Framework

The church is a community of saints, a “*communio sanctorum*” (Uka, 1995). It is the holy presence of Christ in the world, whose fundamental task is to build communities of holy character. The church is not a building, steeple, resting place, but a people. The church is the called– out–people of God who constitute the holy presence of Christ in the world. Nowhere is the church referred to as a building except as a metaphor, which denotes God’s people.

In the African context, historical experience has incited a quest for the recovery of the concept of the Church as people – the people of God as Luke would say. The biblical roots are in two pairs of Hebrew and Greek words. *Edah* (Hebrew) and *kuriakon* (Greek) refer to the institution as an assembly of people, any people. But *qahal* (Hebrew) and *Ekklesia* (Greek) covenant terms move beyond to the people of God who have assembled. Indeed “*ecclesia*” (in theological parlance) refers to those who have been called out from among the people, out of the miry clay, out of Egypt or out of the *Kosmos* (world order) with her embellishments and allure (*Kosmetikos*) into the kingdom of God (Uka, 1995). Those are chosen, called and redeemed people, in the process of sanctification; a pilgrim people moving to the great banquet in the *eschaton*. Their warmest relationship with Christ is ultimate and constitutes the *raison d’ etre* of their existence.

To most of us, the Church refers to our denomination or the congregation where we worship on Sundays. But the Church universal is the vast invisible cloud of witnesses passing across the ages. It is universal since God calls men and women from all races, colours, cultures and corners of the globe. For this reason Christians, from the earliest creed have confessed being part of one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. This is the body of Christ in the world, the body whose mission is to gather believers into confessing communities, to administer the sacraments, preach the word and make disciples (Mtt.28: 19-20), The Church is one foundation, one Lord, one faith and One baptism (Eph. 5:23; A & M 255). Jesus described also the kingdom of God in the world – the church, as a dragnet (Mtt13:47-50). The idea that the church in the world is a mixed bag, tends to partly account for the tensions, rivalries, and the variety of expressions which the church has taken in its visible manifestation in the world. There is, however, some richness in the diversity of expressions that strengthen the overall witness of the church and enables it to get to people who might not otherwise hear the gospel.

Different confessions, because of their peculiar emphasis often as a result of culture, make different aspects of the spiritual reality visible.

The church is characterized by apostolic message (apostolic *kerygma*, the proclamation of the resurrected Christ himself), the apostolic *didache*, the teaching (Jesus' *didache*, the New Torah, centered in mercy, forgiveness and kindness), the apostolic experience, worship, and life, and community life (Schmitt, 1987). The definition that stated that the church is called –out – people of God who constitute the holy presence of Christ in the world and its most fundamental task is to build communities of holy character will serve as our working definition.

Warren (1966) defines the community as that combination of social units performing social functions of production, distribution and consumption, socialization and control, all of which have a locality reference. For the Biddles (1965), the definitive criterion of the community is basically functional and normative rather than structural, with the emphasis shifting to the citizen's awareness of the locality unit, be that a town, a self-contained rural hamlet, a planned settlement, or a trade centre. The community hitherto to them is whatever sense of the local common good citizens can be helped to achieve. Emphasized here is thus the concept of the community as an achievement, rather than something given by reason of residence or geographical location.

To Eteng (2012), in the first place, the “community concept” stresses a relatively small, integrated, autonomous and self-sufficient autochthonous locality where members, intimately related either by blood or marriage, reside in segmented patrilocalities more or less through out their lifetime. The close physical contact among members of this inclusive group, the pervasive and enduring character of their social contacts, the relative similarity of members' mode of thinking, feeling and acting as prescribed by a substantially homogeneous value system, and the relative fusion of the material and ideological interest of the members, all conspire to guarantee relative social integration and community stability.

According to Kee and Young (1981), 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. 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 settlement. To Nmah and Nwadiolor (2012),

membership of a community could also be based on shared interests and values, communities, customs and traditions. For instance, in one sense, we can talk of Umuahia, Isuikwuato, Awka, Enugu or Owerri community as embracing all the people (that is everyone) in such town 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 in Umuahia, Awka, Isuikwuato, Enugu or Owerri (traditional home land) 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.

Society vis-à-vis community can best be known and probably the most important meaning attaching self 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 collectively 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).

Chukwu (2011) citing Todaro and Smith, averred that development which is often refers to economic development is a process of improving the quality of the lives of the citizens through a combination of factors. The factors may include:

- a. Raising the citizens’ living standards through incomes and consumption levels of food, medical services, education and so forth, through economic processes;
- b. Creation of conditions favourable to the growth of the peoples self-esteem through the establishment of social, political and economic systems and institutions that engender human dignity and respect; and
- c. Increasing the people’s freedom by enlarging the range of their choice variables through an increase in variety of consumer goods

and services. Rodney (1981) defines development as implying increased skill, discipline, responsibility and material well-being.

The concept of development denotes 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 (improve welfare) and the freedom to choose by enlarging the range of choice available. It is the process of improving the quality of 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.

Ukpong (1990) opined that the concept of development has been discussed under various terms such as 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-à-vis cultural, economic, political, social, religious and so on operating in concert.

Perlman and Gurin (1972) defined church community development 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. Batten (1975) posits that community development (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 (1970) 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 programmed (of change);

- a. CD as 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 Igbo community.

United Nations (1971) 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 Igbo: a Sketchy Ethnograph

Igbo land is located between latitude 5 and 7 degrees north of the Equator, and longitude 6 and 8 degrees east the Greenwich (Nwaezeigbwe, 2007). As the dominant culture group in the east, they inhabit the five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. 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 parts, 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).

Traditional Igbo social welfare includes:

- (1) Those intended for the physical security of the community against external aggression, encroachment, wild animals impromptu physical and natural events, witchcraft and angry deities and spirits. Since the basic aim was to avoid and to counter forces constituting grave physical danger to the community and its citizens, instrumental actions undertaken usually involved constant surveillance by responsible age-grades, the local vigilante and hunters; engagement in feuds, reprisals and wars; placation of deities, spirits and supernatural forces; ablution from desecration of collective taboos; safeguarding and maintenance of community shrines and holy places and the sustenance of oracles, diviners and priests.
- (2) Services aimed at continuously securing and maintaining community-owned essential means of production and distribution for purposes of socializing members into age-sex based division of labour; to periodize farming activities and to intersperse market and farm days judiciously; to provide security for and encouragement of specialized craftsmen and other occupational groups of weavers, blacksmiths, potters, carvers, bonesetters, midwives, hunters, diviners, priests, rainmakers and herbalists; to replenish arable lands through shifting cultivation and fallowing; to maintain community springs and farm roads, to propitiate ala (earth goddess), Fijioku, Amadioha, and other notable deities and ancestor spirits; to collectively, maintain yam barns, and to proscribe stealing and destruction of farm tools and crops.
- (3) Other miscellaneous areas of CD or welfare services guaranteeing the material satisfaction of the socio-economic needs of the citizens include provision of food, clothing and shelter for all thus avoiding the ravages of hunger, famine and general sacrifices. It includes also the provision for the needy and the poor-orphans, old people, the

sick and the infirm, the widowed among others. There are also routine gifts of farm products, frequent organization of social occasions such as marriage, birth, naming, title taking, wrestling, new yam and other ceremonies and festivities. This reflects also the cultural identity of the people which is preserved through prescribed community values, norms and traditions, specific rites and ceremonies and other relevant oral traditions.

Objectives of Church Community Development

Christian missions were apparently the first to provide rudimentary but institutionalized social welfare services, notwithstanding their major handicaps which included their lack of professional expertise and, more importantly, the eurocentric and racialist orientation toward the Igbo natives. The missionaries targeted their competitive welfare dispensation mainly to the converts as part of their proselytizing activities. They built and managed schools, churches, theological colleges, clinics, maternity homes, dispensaries, leprosy settlements, hospitals and vocational and literacy centers for youths and adults in their respective areas of influence.

Modern Church institutional community social welfare consists of:

- a. Child care services which includes
 - i. Probation;
 - ii. Orphanages;
 - iii. Fostering.
- b. Family Welfare Services such as
 - i. Marriage counselling
 - ii. Economic empowerment through establishing cottage industries where unemployed parents and youths are engaged. There is also skill acquisition for parishioners.
 - iii. Settling conflicts in the family etc.
- c. Community welfare council services
- d. Social club welfare services.
- e. Special welfare services for the disabled.

Other areas of community service include marriage ceremony and funerals. The hallmark of church CD is the involvement of people through their participation in the process of improving the community by the execution of specific projects. Some organizations in Igboland such as the social workers, adult educators, economic planners, town and city planners, agricultural extension officers and local government officials and similar ones consider their professional as 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.

Beyond meeting the basic needs such as shelter (community hall, classroom blocks), food community (community farm, co-operative food and provision shop, market, rice, garri and palm fruit milling, poultry, animal husbandry and so on), water (well, bore hole, pipe borne water, maintenance of local stream etc); health (cottage hospitals, dispensary) drug store, sanitation etc); education (Day Care Centre, Nursery, School, Bursary Scholarship scheme, information communication technology center, school fence, teachers' quarters, teachers parents' association etc); social development (civic center, viewing center, recreational facilities, parks, etc) are 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 sectors in the improvement of the living conditions of communities.
7. To enhance community integration and encourage the spirit of participation.

To Iwe (1985), our developing country should tend, at least in aspiration, towards a more robust human condition of living. Such a favourable 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 diseases, 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 endeavour in both Church and state.

The above therefore, is the vision of the future Church CD towards which our developing Igbo 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.

Methods for Church Community Mobilization

1. According to Rowland (2007), church community development should be based on evangelism, worship characterized by baptism and Eucharist classes, prison visitation groups, planning and coordination, leadership training, Bible study, catechism, marriage groups, food and clothing cooperative, 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 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, civil servants, academia of higher institutions, students, the forced prostitution of women, and children drug addicts, human trafficking, ecological issues, corruption among civil servants, political leaders and politicians, kidnapping, terrorism, election rigging, unemployment, nepotism, insecurity,

denominational rivalry, political thuggery, political and ecclesiastical maladministration, care for the homeless, accident victims, the inmates of prison, the scourge of human immune virus and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), childlessness, spiritual bankrupt, agriculture, drunkenness among others.

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 entertaining 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.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Absolute magnitude of Church CD in Igboland shapes the living standard of the citizenry and introduced civilization in Igboland. This study reveals that

spiritual, intellectual, moral and the like empowerment in Igboland by way of Church CD cannot be isolated from socio-economic, cultural and political development. Mobilization is central to development activities. It is also one of the priorities for long term solutions that provide the necessary capacity and conditions for sustainable social development. In rural areas, the church should engage itself in health care service delivering such as in building hospitals and clinics, pit-latrines, dig wells and drains and keep them clean. It should promote education and cooperation with teaching about nutrition and family planning. In respect of culture, church should encourage the community to take part in art, science, music and drama. It should bring together different ethnic groups. For instance, it should be done by a society which enables them to showcase their own traditions, arts and dances. As regards to agriculture, the members should be taught how to plant fruit-trees, grow better food, learn to store and process food, look after poultry, fish and bees, and grow trees for timber. Church should work in conjunction with government extension workers about seeds, fertilizer, insecticides among others.

Haselbarth (1976) urges churches to always organize evangelistic campaigns of training of youth workers, Sunday school teachers, voluntary teachers of Bible knowledge in schools, Christian literature (via correspondence course), dialogue with Muslims, joint Bible studies with other churches, work-camps for the improvement of bridges and roads. Where possible, the Church should teach and provide the following: rice-milling, printing, tailoring, laundry, transport, assembly, brick-making, bread and cake bakery, candle manufacture, house-building, photography, carpentry, weaving, soap manufacturing and bicycle maintenance. This will help to provide jobs for the Igbo people especially the teeming unemployed youths.

The problem of unemployment can be very frustrating. One has to have a skill to survive in the city or one needs some capital to establish oneself. Church can be of assistance in this direction in conjunction with philanthropists, local, state and federal government. The church needs also to teach members about how to preserve the environment. Deforestation has caused a decrease in water levels due to excess exposure and global warming has also caused so much havoc in certain areas the resultant effects been much floods and erosion that destroy the landscape. Firewood is becoming scarce and people are resorting to the use of gas and coal even by the time they may not be within the reach of the common man (Nmah, 2012). But unfortunately, many people lived in cities such as they did in rural areas,

heaping up refuse on the streets like in Aba, Awka, Onitsha, Enugu, Owerri, Umuahia, Abakaliki, and other parts of Igboland. This habit shows how little consideration people have for health and life.

Again, denominational antagonism is another factor militating against the good influences of the church. In the spirit of Ecumenism, Christ should be the main theme. Church community development can and indeed should be at the service of the development of Igboland. But time has come for the erroneous impressions of development to be corrected. By and large, church community development has not only come along way, but has come of age.

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