

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN YOUTH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Youth have been described as strength of society, simply because they are usually stronger and constitute about 65% of a society's population. They are expected to be backbones of society for their strength and agility. Every responsible society tries to educate, train, and equip its youths, who are referred to as "the future" of society. However, events in the last two decades show that most of the youth in Nigerian society are incapacitated due to massive impoverishment, collapsed economy, and financial imbalance caused by various acts of the ruling class and the privileged elites. Most of the youth that ought to be financially independent are not. Christian youth are not exemption from the economic hardship facing the nation. Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the umbrella body of Christian Churches in Nigeria (CAN), being a religious body which was formed to oversee the wellbeing of Christians in Nigeria has been at the forefront of ending the financial and economic incapacitations among Christian youth through its various programmes. This paper takes a critical look at the impact of CAN on the development of Christian youth in Nigeria. It also tries to assess the level to which these developmental programmes have helped the youth in solving most of their problems. Historical, descriptive and empirical methods were adopted for the paper. The findings of the paper showed that CAN has introduced various developmental programmes for Christian youth in Nigeria, but financial limitation has not made the efforts to yield much success.

Keywords: CAN, Youth, Development, Financially Indigent Students, Skill Acquisition

Introduction

Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the umbrella body of Churches in Nigeria was formed in 1976. Circumstances in political activities of Nigeria in the late 1950s and early 1960s, made it imperative

for Christians in the north to come together under the aegis of Northern Christian Association (NCA).¹The establishment of NCA in 1964 was the catalyst for the establishment of CAN in 1976.² The Churches saw the need to come together in order to have a united voice, against division and competition in the prevailing disunity of the Church. Only the Roman Catholic Church had a society which served as its mouth piece. Various attempts at uniting the Churches had failed earlier. Notable among the attempts was a meeting of the denominations that ought to take place in 1929, but was boycotted by the Roman Catholic Mission.³That put a wedge on the way of the ecumenism that was proposed to checkmate the imposition of an educational system on Nigeria by the colonial government.

In the 1950s, the fear that the Sardauna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello had a plan to Islamize the whole Nigeria, by empowering Muslims through recruitment into both the civil and military services, giving them all available positions, gingered Christians in the north to form a Christian organization.⁴ Christians and non-Fulani from the middle-belt were intimidated and victimized, while most of them were sacked, demoted and deprived of promotions, so as to frustrate them. In order to confront these acts of oppression and suppression by the Sardauna of Sokoto, Christians in northern Nigeria came together to form the NCA, in order to frustrate his influence and political agenda.⁵By the middle of the 1970s, Nigerians were increasingly discussing the future of the country's return to civilian rule. As a result of this a draft constitution was produced and required participation of all and sundry. This and others, like the takeover of missionaries' institutions, perceived hostilities from the government and fear of probable plan to Islamize Nigeria through the activities of the government led to the establishment of CAN in 1976.

Nigerian Youth and Economic Challenges

Youth are said to constitute about 65% percent of the total population of Nigeria. They are the heartbeat of any family and nation. The youth span from the age of seventeen to the age of forty-five.⁶The political and economic situations of Nigeria place the youth at the receiving end of the hardship which the ruling class has inflicted on the citizens. Consequently, many of the youth have become tools in the hands of various interests that use them negatively at any available opportunity. The youth have been fingered as the most notorious in all the vices in the society, including stealing, cultism, rape, fraud and others. And so, the society is said to be lawless and hopeless, due to the irresponsibility of the

rulers that is affecting the youth. Some of the youth who try to create viable and legitimate means of livelihood after their academic pursuits cannot secure empowerment in any of the government owned offices and establishments; loans are not accessible to most of them in any of the financial institutions. Most of the youth lack all the requirements of the financial institution, such as collaterals, guarantors and other stringent conditions. In the public service, large sums of money are more often than not demanded as bribe to get appointment, and sometimes the appointment is not forthcoming even after giving the bribe demanded. People in privileged positions use their influences to corner available opportunities to themselves in favour of their own children or cronies.

To this end, some youth resort to crime as a means of fending for themselves. As such, the level of criminality in Nigeria is rising and taking alarming dimension, daily. Many of the other youth who could not bear the hardship seek to travel to other countries in search of greener pastures. Some are fortunate to escape the hostilities being meted on them by host nations, while some of the unlucky ones pay with their lives. Records show that hundreds of Nigerians, mostly youth are languishing in various prisons across the globe with different penalties ranging from jail terms to death sentences. Not too long ago, some Nigerian youth were beheaded in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and some other Middle East nations.

Abuse of leadership has landed Nigeria in problems of insecurity, which have compounded economic hardships. Help seems to be far out of range for the citizens, especially the youth who lack parental backing due to widespread poverty. The question then is who would assist the youth? What type of assistance could be rendered for them? Who are those to impact on their lives? What are the popular religious bodies doing to improve and develop the youth?

The Impacts of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) on Youth's Development in Nigeria *Spiritual Development*

CAN has five blocks that work together to enhance and make it possible for the association to play its roles as the voice of the voiceless and conscience of the nation. These five blocks are Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (C.S.N.), Christian Council of Nigeria (C.C.N.), Evangelical Church Winning All/*Tarayar Ekklesiyoyin Kristi A Naijiria* (TEKAN/ECWA), Organization of African Instituted Churches (O.A.I.C.) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). The first impact of CAN is in the religious or spiritual sphere, as it creates a forum for Nigerian

Christian youths to have a solid spiritual foundation. In order to prepare its youth to be spiritually sound, the Youth Wing of CAN (YOWICAN) was inaugurated by the National Executive Committee of CAN in 1988.⁷ YOWICAN serves as an intermediary between the executive committee of CAN and Christian youth. Opoola, the immediate past Chairman of Kwara State branch of CAN while assessing the activities of YOWICAN, stated that:

We know the impacts and contributions of youths to national development, but we want to prepare our youths spiritually so that they will be able to play positive roles in the society without compromising their Christian faith and virtues. With the level of spiritual trainings given to our youths, it is expected that they will perform well in the society. Because we instill the fear of God into them.⁸

Opoola's view coincides with the views of some other leaders of CAN in all the six geo-political zones. Echioda, a former Chairman of CAN, Niger State and Vice-Chairman of North-Central Zone of CAN corroborated Opoola's view when he said that prayer and leadership submits were organized for youths in the North Central zone of CAN.⁹ Avwomakpa opined that if the youth are given solid spiritual foundations, social vices in the society would reduce drastically.¹⁰ In this endeavour, CAN would seem to have fared and still fares well,. It organizes various programs for the youth, including Bible quiz, revival, symposium, seminars and rallies.

Social Impacts of CAN on Christian Youth

CAN has at different times empowered Christian youth in various forms, including financial empowerment. The empowerment programmes are done directly by CAN or through any of its blocs. For instance in Kaduna, a northwest state, Bakare enumerates how CAN has been empowering Christian youth, stating that:

We have sent some youths to school through our scholarship scheme. Some were sent abroad for further studies, while others were sponsored on vocational trainings. Those who have completed their apprenticeship were given money to start various businesses. These have reduced our worries drastically as they were financially okay.¹¹

Akanmu also highlighted how CAN in Ibadan, southwest had helped some indigent students in paying their school fees.¹² Avwomakpa while showcasing the social impact of CAN on youth in the south-south axis, notes that it has empowered some militants that repented and decided to start new ways of life by buying motorcycles and tricycles for them.¹³

CAN has always empowered its youth in various locations across the nation through its various empowerment programmes. The youth are given money or equipment to make them financially independent. Schools were built to educate youths in different parts of Nigeria, with the belief that once people are educated, a burden has been lifted off their heads.¹⁴ Avwomakpa also gives credit to this when he stresses that once the youth are given proper education, leaders would have reduced the level of crime in society.¹⁵

The social impacts of CAN on the youth are not limited to the aforementioned. Some Churches also empower their youth through floating of various sporting activities, such as football, athletics and other sports. Among such Churches are the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Football Club, which is a division one team in Nigerian Professional League, and the Rhema Chapel Football Club, etc. Such endeavours have to a large extent empowered the youth and shifted their attention from crimes to worthwhile activities. Synagogue of All Nations also sponsored some footballers abroad for training.¹⁶

Some of the youth that were displaced due to the activities of the insurgents were resettled by CAN and some of its blocs. Kallah gives expression to this point when he states that some youth displaced in the northeast had been assisted through various empowerment programmes of CAN.¹⁷ Eze also notes that CAN in the southeast has been playing the roles of assisting youth to achieve various goals in the society.¹⁸ All of that shows that CAN has been at the forefront of empowering youth in Nigeria. Avwomakpa affirms that some youth in the Niger Delta have been empowered which helped them not to return to militancy.¹⁹ The YOWICAN coordinator in the south-south, Avwomakpa, also enumerates how youth were empowered in the zone through various empowerment programmes like skill acquisition, bursary and leadership training.²⁰

Political Impacts of CAN on Christian Youth

CAN has not limited its impacts to social and spiritual but it has also been playing its impact politically among Christian youth in Nigeria. Echioda, a Christian leader expresses the view, for instance, that there is need to prepare the youth for future political activities.²¹ This, he stressed,

was in order for “Christians not to be marginalized in daily political and social arrangements.”²² In the past, Christians have detached themselves from participating in politics. The new perception is that rather than distancing themselves from politics, Christians should prepare to play active roles in politics; which should include full participation of youth. And the bill of “Not too young to rule” passed into law recently by the Nigerian National Assembly has contributed to enabling the youth to participate in politics.

The national executive committee of CAN also organized lectures and trainings for youth aspiring to go into politics at the National Ecumenical Centre in Abuja.²³ Follow-up to this seminar also took place in all the states of the federation. The Kwara State branch of CAN, for instance, organized youth awareness programmes for candidates vying for different political offices, between 27th – 29th January, 2019, prior to the commencement of the 2019 general elections. It also promised to support Christian youth that aspired to contest for any position, as long as they abide by the Biblical principles of leadership.

Avwomakpa, Akanmu and Bakare share the perception that for a nation to have a peaceful and organized future, it must teach, train and nurture its youth and prepare them for leadership roles, as “eggs grow to become cocks”, and the young should grow to mature and responsible adults. All of that is in tandem with the position of Echioda who encourages Christians, especially youth, to go into active politics in order to instill sanity into the political terrain of Nigeria.²⁴

One would have expected that despite all the efforts put together by CAN, the youth should have been above board and independent of the challenges facing them financially, spiritually, socially and politically. The reverse is however the case, as they still face daunting challenges to contend with in their daily lives. When he was asked why CAN’s laudable programmes have not impacted many youth in Nigeria, Opoola said it depends on the reaction of the beneficiaries to the programmes.²⁵ He further said that there were some programmes that were given to various churches to implement among their youth. The implication is that if Christian youth do not attend church or become a member of any denomination, they may not access any of the empowerment programmes.

CAN also raised the issue of non availability of funds to prosecute its empowerment programmes for its youth as it would like. Paucity of funds has been hindering most of the programmes from being realized. CAN has to make do with the little fund at its disposal to solve some other pressing and financially demanding issues. Hence people hardly believe

that CAN has been impacting the life of Nigerian youth. The activities of various blocs of CAN in empowering youth are more open and visible to people than CAN's as an umbrella body. Avwomakpa nevertheless expresses the satisfaction that "CAN has been working through its blocs and some church leaders", and "as long as they deliver our messages, we are happy."²⁶ Of course, the branches are closest to the grassroots.

Conclusion

While CAN has been trying to impact positively on the lives of youth in Nigeria, it should encourage its members to improve on their activities in empowering at least Christian youth, so as to make them useful to the society. The youth on their parts should make themselves available to enable CAN impact positively on them. This would go a long way in helping the youth to prepare toward participating in developmental programmes in Nigeria. Other organizations should join CAN in promoting the lofty programmes, such as helping indigent students and skill acquisition for empowerment of youth, as these may reduce crime rate and boost progress.

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 18. Benjamin Eze, 55, Vice-Chairman southeast zone of CAN. The interview took place on Friday 16th March, 2018 at Godfrey Okoye University Enugu between 9:30-11:30 a.m.
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