Church's Roles in Poverty Alleviation and Its Effects on Environment and Human Health in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This paper discusses the complementary role of the church in support of the government in reducing the effects of poverty on the environment and its inhabitants. It is based on the premise that the federal government of Nigeria alone cannot fight the mayhem of poverty and its attendant effects especially on human health and environment. The methodology employed in this study is basically descriptive and analytic which is aimed at drawing out the role of the church in the task of addressing environmental and human health challenges. The findings reveal that poverty deepens environmental degradation and health hazards. The study recommends that the church should not rest on her oars in the area of social responsibility such as helping the poor and providing helpful information as regards good health and environment. In addition, the church can help educate the parishioners on the need to care for the environment.

Keywords: Church, Poverty, Health, Environment, Nigeria

Introduction

Most countries are focusing on health care and health maintenance, but African nations are busy grappling with disease care and few of them struggling to provide basic health services. According to a World Bank Report in 2017-2019, the African continent accounts for less than 2 percent of global health funding, even though Africans make up 16 percent of the global population and carry 26 percent of the global disease burden. Presently, African nations import about $17.3 billion worth of drugs each year (Kajang, 2020: 189)

To say that Nigeria is poorly rich is paradoxical. In view of the natural and human resources it may be said that Nigeria is extremely wealthy and the country does not have any excuse not to be wealthy. But in reality, many people in Nigeria still live under the poverty line. Some few people are living in luxury while some are in penury. It is a common saying that the gap between the wealthy and the poor is getting wider every now and then. There is critical connection between the environment and human beings. People

tend to be like their environment. At the same time people can take the right initiative to transform their environment. It is really expensive to create and sustain clean environments. It equally requires deliberate and strategic actions.

Conceptual Clarification

Church. The church is a community of Christians with a concern for the social/economic and spiritual/physical welfare of all its members. For the church members to be satisfied the church must not hesitate to cater for them holistically. Some of the church members are widows, orphans, aged, disabled and unemployed, who cannot fend for themselves and some live in a deplorable state. Therefore, the church has the mandate to cater for the needs of God's creation (environment) and his creatures (human beings).

Health. The simplest definition of health is a negative one which states that one is healthy if one is not ill. In this event, restoring someone to health simply involves removing the disease in a process that begins with a correct diagnosis followed by a correct treatment for the disease. This approach to health care is very popular in the health systems in African nations. On the contrary, a positive model of health does not focus merely on the absence of illness but on living in a way that actively promotes health. This approach to health care spurs people to take responsibility for their own present and future health and also addresses lifestyle issues and environmental factors affecting health (Kajang, 2020).

Poverty. There is no single, precise, standardised or usable definition of poverty (Orobator, 2005: 181). Nevertheless, poverty has often been defined in terms of deprivation of basic goods, or a low income that impedes people's access to basic goods. This concept of poverty is reflected in the statistics compiled by international organizations such as the World Bank, which speak of how many people in a region live on less than US $2.00 per person per day. Based on this measurement, there is mass poverty across sub-Saharan Africa. However, this concept of poverty has its shortcomings for the inability to factor the regional and household differences. On the other hand, the United Nations defines poverty differently considering the fact that poverty involves several factors, that poverty is a multidimensional reality that precludes the ability to flourish. In addition, poverty includes denial of the opportunities and choices most basic to human development and fulfilment (Banda, 2020).

Environment. The word *environment* means one's surroundings within one's domain. The environment includes plants, animals, soil, water, mountains, rivers, clouds and other people. Environment can be viewed from different dimensions. Land (biophysical environment) is regarded as a resource for growing food (economic environment) that

sustains communities (social environment), but growing food can also degrade the soil (biophysical environment) and influences families (social environment). Conflict can lead to further destruction of land (biophysical environment) (Conradie, 2020).

Theological Foundations on Environment and Human Health

1. God created the earth (Gen. 1:1). God is the sole owner of the universe. God has put human beings as his stewards to care for the environment. God gave man the mandate to fill the earth and govern it as a king might care for his subjects (Gen. 1:28).
2. Man was created in God's image. Every individual is God- image carrier regardless of gender, age, colour, ethnicity, and social class. The fall of man (man's sinful disobedience to God) brought about disruption, disaster and death. Poverty was part of the consequential result of the fall.
3. Jesus Christ the saviour. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ redefined the ecosystem. Ministry of Jesus Christ was not only spiritual but encompassing in nature. Jesus' ministry was geared towards liberating the entire man and his environment.
4. The church is the gathering of Christians. We are driven by God's love to reach out to people with love. The church is responsible to cater for and minister to the total man. The church should not only be concerned with the spiritual need at the expense of other needs such as physical, socio-economic, environmental and the likes. The danger of fragmentary approach to life is always counterintuitive.

Concepts of Poverty

Poverty is a relative term. "Poverty is a complex phenomenon. It is a value-loaded concept involving evaluative judgments regarding minimum, basic needs and desired levels of living" (Christian, 1999:17). World Bank posits that living in extreme poverty is living under $1.90 per day. In Nigerian currency this is equivalent to #687. Most Nigerians cannot afford this amount. Most times, children are the principal victims. Some parents give fifty naira (or less) to their children for breakfast, and for lunch they are asked to take 'garri', a tin-cup is around fifty naira and for dinner they are served 'amala' or 'eba'. Parents too are not exempted from this phenomenon.

Poverty is a multifarious factor which can be measured by several parameters such as health, nutrition, education, assets, housing, income or possession of certain rights (World bank 2005). Myers (1999b: 578) asserts that "Poverty results from lack of things. It is obvious that poor people do not have enough to eat, a place to sleep or clean water. We also recognize that some poor people lack knowledge and skills. Their land is poor, there

is no water for irrigation, the roads are poor and there are no schools for their children." From this standpoint, it is evident that poverty is connected to human health and environment. We can hardly discuss poverty without mentioning its attendant effects on the welfare of human beings and their abode.

Forms of Poverty

1. Economic/financial Poverty. This is when one does not have economic power to purchase
2. Intellectual Poverty. This is also tagged "poverty of mind". No access to knowledge or technology.
3. Physical Poverty. Living in harsh conditions and no or little access to health care.
4. Social Poverty. The inability to connect with others.
5. Cultural Poverty. Inability to come to together as a society.
6. Political Poverty. No or little understanding of the nature and dynamics of the system.
7. Information Poverty. Inability to gain access to needed data for sustainability.
8. Generational Poverty. This form of poverty is usually handed to posterity without clues or needed resources to get out of the scourge.
9. Situational Poverty. This form of poverty might be caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, flood, landslide, disease outbreak and the likes. People could eventually figure out the solutions sooner or later.
10. Poverty of Civic Involvement. Leadership, cooperation, and collaboration in a community are simply not part of the culture.
11. Spiritual Poverty. Lack of the knowledge of God and his plan for creation and creatures.

Causes of Poverty

1. Overpopulation. According to World Poverty Clock, Nigeria's challenge with overpopulation will not be a distant future, it will be now. to World Poverty Clock's data are drawn from International Monetary Fund, World Bank, United Nations, and the governments of these countries. It is documented that 44.4% of Nigeria's population live in extreme poverty (http://worldpoverty.io/2018). In many parts of the country, polygamy is a traditional marriage practice; many children are born as a result of this practice which contributed to the increase in the population (Adejuwon, 2014).
2. Poor infrastructures. Because of the government's failure in providing good road network many lives are being lost on daily basis. The consequential result of such

loss is poverty. There are many orphans and widows/widowers today as a result of road accidents.

3. Government Corruption and Mismanagement. This has been devastating for the people of Nigeria. Approximately 60 percent of the population live in poverty, and 70 percent live in rural areas away from the limited resources that are available to urban Nigerians. With an annual
4. Demography. It is predicted that in the next few decades one out of three persons in the world would be an African. Nigeria's population is quite increasing every now and then. As the number of citizens increases that also increases challenges and complexities in catering for their needs. If there are proper strategic plans to take care and empower this lot of people, they can become great assets that are more valuable than any amount of oil.
5. Natural Disaster. A common natural disaster is flood. Many people have been rendered homeless and jobless. We may think flood is totally a natural disaster but that is not true. People deliberately build houses on the water ways probably of the high cost of land in safe zones or as a result of their nonchalant attitude. Unfortunately, the government fails to restrict people from doing that.
6. Unemployment. Because of the rise in population that also increases the level of unemployment. Because of dysfunction in Nigeria's education and social structure, citizens are conditioned to look for government jobs and quest to share from the national cake. Nigeria government depends heavily and overtly on oil. The bottom line is "Like nation like its citizens."
7. Recession. Over time Nigeria's economic prowess has largely been dependent on petroleum. Not until in 2015 did Nigeria realize the scourge of economic meltdown. Most private and public organizations decided to downsize number of their employees.
8. Terrorism and vandalism. People live with grievances because they feel they have been unjustly treated. Terrorism and vandalism are used as deliberate weapons to fight their assumed antagonists.
9. Tribal and Ethnic Conflicts. Nigeria has 350 ethnic groups speaking 450 dialects, the nation has a long history of ethnic and religious tensions. One of the major reasons for tribal or ethnic conflicts is land.
10. Inequality. Unequal distribution of income is a major problem in Nigeria, with the poorest 20 percent sharing 1.6 percent of the nation's wealth, and the richest 20 percent claiming 50.6 percent. Nigeria is ranked 50.6 on the Gini Index of Human Inequality.
11. Over dependence on Foreign Aids. Trillions of dollars go into both Africa and Asia to help reduce poverty. Foreign aid is not the solution to poverty in Africa. There

is no first class country that depends on foreign aid. Many times charity can hurt the people. Because there may good intentions but such could birth unintended consequences. There are good aids which are meant to empower people and independent. On the other hand, bad aids are intended to create slave/master relationship.

Effects of Poverty in Relation to Environment and Human Health

1. Food. Many homes do not have choice than to feed on left-over foods such as rice, *semovita*, beans, yam, noodles and the likes. Some people do not bother to warm such food because of the cost of kerosene and gas. Preparing good food can be expensive for people especially in the urban areas. Food is essential for human survival. Nigeria is exporting food such as millet, wheat, sorghum, yam, rice yet many Nigerians are living in hunger.
2. Open Defecation. Nigeria is said to be second in open defecation globally. Many houses do not have toilet facilities. House owners and caretakers have excessive quest to make inordinate profits at the expense of the welfare of their tenants. There are few public toilets available for the masses.
3. Medicines. Many children die because of little or lack of money to procure expensive medicines. Women, by their nature, are vulnerable to several infections especially toilet diseases. Medicines that are usually recommended are expensive. Most people opt for low quality medicines because of poverty.
4. Water. The popular label to sachet water in Nigeria is "pure water" but in the actual sense such water is dirty. There is no need for much scientific engagement before one sees different particles moving around in the so called "pure water". Many sachet water producers are only obsessed with "get rich quickly" syndrome. Many Nigerians do not have access to clean water. Gnanakan (2013) noted that millions all over the world suffer from water-related diseases such as cholera and diarrhea.
5. Shelter. Some Nigerians still live under public bridges, shops, huts and the likes. They more agony especially during the raining season. Some families are outrageously overcrowded. A situation where twelve individuals in very small room. It is easy for contagious diseases to spread in such phenomenon.

An Overview of Poverty in Nigeria

Nigeria is a blessed nation. From all indications Nigeria is laced with a lot of fortunes. Despite the physical, natural and human resources latent in Nigeria, it is still a poor nation. Nigeria is an enormous oil-producing nation yet the citizens are living in abject poverty. The system is broken because of poor leadership, rulers who dominated the political

landscape for over several decades, weak institutions and a population that has lost a lot of hope.

It is stated in the *Encyclopedia of World Poverty* that 90.8 percent of Nigerians live on less than $2 a day and 70.2 percent subsist on less than $1 a day (2005:773). Poverty has enormous effect on the environment and human health. Nigeria has the highest incidence of disease in the entire world, but only 27 physicians for every 100,000 people. Medical practitioners are overstretched yet underpaid that is the reason many of them migrate to other countries in search of greener pasture.

The high mortality rate in Nigeria is a result of many factors including HIV/AIDS. In 2003 it was estimated that 3.6 million Nigerians were living with HIV/AIDS, which had killed 310,000 people. Poverty (and lack of moral discipline) played a significant role in such calamity. Beyond this, Nigerians also have a very high risk of contracting food and waterborne diseases, which include hepatitis A and typhoid fever, malaria and Lassa fever.

Four out of the ten wealthiest pastors in the world are from Nigeria. That list was topped by a Nigeria pastor. While few churches are committed to improving human conditions both at the rural and urban contexts, host of churches are driven by quest for fame, insatiable desire for exotic cars and extravagant lifestyle. Many churches have concentrated on the gospel's spiritual significance and ignored its physical and economic concerns.

The Role of the Church

The word that is translated "church" in the New Testament and in the Septuagint is *ekklesia*. And this is related to the verb *ekkaleo* which means 'to call out,' its biblical and ecclesiastical usage simply indicates an assembly or a body of people.

The Greek word, *ekklesia*, referred to an assembly and was used in a political, not a religious sense. It did not refer to the people but to the gathering. When the Greek word is used in the New Testament, it takes on a deeper and extensive basic secular meaning. By analogy, it is the people themselves, whether assembled or not, are the *ekklesia*. Nevertheless, the word as used in the New Testament still retains the basic meaning of an assembly, and does not take on a supposed theological meaning (based on the breakup of the word into its two parts, 'call' and 'out of') of a 'called out' people. If the word was going to be translated on the basis of etymology, then it should be translated 'called together,' not 'called out'" (Ryrie, 1986: 393–94).

1. Spiritual Role. The church is obliged to continually pray for those in the position of authority. The Church is encouraged to make requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness (1Ti 2:1-2 NIV). Principalities and spiritual forces of darkness do not want people to live in conducive environment or enjoy sound health. That is the reason the church must intercede in prayer and shun every form or impurity and ungodliness. The church must not add to the moral decadence and corruption in the society.
2. Moral Role. Many times, government and political leaders are discouraged and frustrated by the burden of their constituencies. The church should provide shoulders these leaders can rest on. Encouragements and guidance should be given with no strings attached. Churches should not make inordinate demands from politicians and government leaders. Church leaders should not 'tempt' politicians to spend government money.
3. Mentoring Role. Church leaders are spiritual fathers. God is calling church to higher standard of ethics, integrity and corporate. Church leaders should be models and pace setters especially in the areas of disposition towards wealth, position, influence and the likes. The society is fed up with so called "men of God" who compete with one another over exotic cars, supersonic jets, magnificent houses and the so on. Politicians and government leaders should trust pastors to share their burdens with them without fear of being asked for money or undue favour.
4. Developmental Role. It is high time for the church begin to map out new paradigms to make significant impact on the society. Some churches are bent on siphoning politicians and political office holders. In Nigeria, the traditional notion has been what people can benefit from the government. While the government may be blamed for a number of anomalies and systemic problems in the country but the church should have a different approach to addressing these issues. The church's approach must be rooted in biblical and Christian worldview. The church has a natural commitment to fighting poverty. A story was shared in one of the popular devotionals *Our Daily Bread* October 22, 2016: Several years ago when the Southern California economy took a downturn, Pastor Bob Johnson saw not only difficulty but also opportunity. So he scheduled a meeting with the mayor of his city and asked, "What can our church do to help you?" The mayor was astonished. People usually came to him for help. Here was a minister offering him the services of an entire congregation. The church in Nigeria must learn from this epochal incident.

5. Social Role. There are many people living in poverty-stricken conditions. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (Jam 1:27 NIV). Also in Acts 2:42–47 wealthy Christians were united and they cared for the basic needs of life, not excluding the poor. They were not just Christians who worshipped the same God, but they were Christians who cared to the needs of others. They would sell their property and possessions and distribute the money amongst all according to what each needed (Ac 2:45).

Recommendations

1. Church leaders should be committed to equipping and empowering their members to be emancipated from the shackles of poverty.
2. Christians should take decisive initiative to preserve and manage their environment.
3. The church should be committed to teaching practical development and social transformation.
4. The federal government of Nigeria should provide the basic infrastructures such as good roads, well-equipped health facilities especially in the rural areas and clean water. The government to step up its plans in providing sewage system especially in the cities.
5. Clean environment begins from the local levels as individuals take care of their immediate environment.
6. Ministry of urban and rural planning must ensure that every home has toilet in its building plan and ensure there is compliance to every component. Periodic house to house inspection should be carried out.
7. All hands must be on deck to ensure just and equitable distribution of amenities, unemployment, appointments and representations.
8. Churches should be more committed to capacity building rather than building magnificent cathedrals.
9. Churches can plan and dedicate a week for environment and human health activities. Rallies, community cleaning exercise and public awareness can be organized in the vicinity. Offerings and donations may be collected for this purpose.

Conclusion

The church cannot continue fold her arms in these sad and hopeless phenomena. As salt and light of the world (Matt. 5:13), the church must preserve the beauty of creation and resist all forces that are inimical to the survival of God's creatures. Nigeria is a blessed

nation. The church should help complement the government's efforts in providing safe and comfortable environment for her citizens. Christians should be encouraged to contribute their quota in making Nigeria a clean nation.

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