



RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE OF POVERTY THROUGH CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: A CLARION CALL FOR CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

The paper elucidates poverty to be one of the challenges of the age. It highlights the efforts of various governments in Nigeria towards poverty eradication which seems not to have worked out well enough. The writer calls on churches to see poverty alleviation as part of their mission of evangelisation and be proactively involved in it. Salvation is holistic in the sense that it does not only concern the redemption of the spirit and soul but it also involves the enhancement of the physical status of an individual. The causes, effects and level of poverty in Nigeria are presented. The rationale for churches response to poverty is stated as well. The paper itemizes some possibilities through the corridors of Christian education which churches could adopt in the alleviation of poverty. Specifically, the emphasis of Christian education strategies for the church's involvement in poverty alleviation in the paper is illustrated with three practical and spectacular models/ patterns of ministry gained from an educational tour by the writer of the paper having visited sites of some individual church members who are ministering to the poor in their community. The paper concludes with some recommendations.

Keywords: poverty, Christian education, church, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Poverty is a global phenomenon which affects continents, nations, and people in different ways. It afflicts people in various depth and levels at different times and

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phases of human existence, as well as far-reaching consequences. There is no nation that has an absolute freedom from poverty. The United Nations described poverty as the denial of an individual or community of the choices and opportunities for living a tolerable life (United Nations, 1997).

The Central Bank of Nigeria (1999, p.1) views poverty as:

A state where an individual is not able to cater adequately for his or her basic needs of foods, clothing and shelter; unable to meet social and economic obligations, lacks gainful employment, skills, assets and self-esteem; and has limited access to social and economic infrastructure such as education, health, portable water, sanitation and consequently has limited chance of advancing his or her welfare to the limit of his or her capabilities. Nigeria gained its independence with a poverty level of barely 15% of its population in 1960. But today, the nation is struggling to downsize it from about 70% of its current teeming population, who are highly concentrated in the rural areas where illiteracy prevalence is high, potable water and health facilities are rarely available, road and electricity infrastructures are either unavailable or epileptic.

<http://www.stclements.edu/grad/gradoyem.pdf> br)

Several governments in Nigeria have always come and left one poverty reduction scheme or another, give hope and succour to the poor and, or bring about some sort of wealth creation initiative. Strategies, policies and plans have been articulated; programmes and projects have been formulated and executed over the years. For instance, at independence in 1960, efforts to eradicate poverty in Nigeria had been through education. Also, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green Revolution, War Against Indiscipline (WAI), People's Bank of Nigeria (PBN), Community Banks, Directorate of Food Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DIFFRI), Nigerian Agricultural Land Development Authority (NALDA), Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), Better Life for Rural Women, Family Support Programme (FSP) and National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) were put in place during the period. Though, successive governments have tried to address the issue of poverty as captured above, the effect of the strategies and programmes has been that of mixed feelings (<http://www.stclements.edu/grad/gradoyem.pdf> br).

In spite of all the efforts put into the implementation of several economic programmes, it seems that the level of poverty continues to increase and the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen while there are pronounced disparities in income distribution between rural and urban communities. Thus, there is the need for churches to be proactively involved in poverty alleviation as a part of their

mission of evangelisation, since spiritual salvation alone is not enough for human freedom but also material provision is crucial to human survival. It should be included in church's missionary activities. This paper aims at providing some avenues through which churches could be involved in the alleviation of poverty in Nigeria. This could be through the corridors of Christian education. Christian education has been defined as education "...which is Bible Based, Christ-centered, Holy Spirit controlled, pupil related, socially applied with the Scriptures being the authority in all things" (Walter, 1998, p. 16).

The social application of the Bible is vital in the emphasis of Christian education in this paper. Christian education is not socially centered, but it is socially applied. Human beings are social beings, who live, move, and work in the world. Contemporary social problems such as poverty (among others) are to be interpreted in the light of the Bible. Christian education applies biblical principles to Christians' social relationships so that they will live victoriously over the world. Hynson (2012, p. 6) stated that the purpose of Christian education is to "form, inform and transform". Christians are "formed and informed" through Christian teaching, for the purpose of transforming others in the society. Christians and the Church of God are transformed to transform lives, cities/places around them. Maggay (2004) in her book, *Transforming Society* writes on the church as an agent for societal transformation from her experience as a theologian and one who has ministered to address problems in Philippine society. The Church in Nigeria should therefore be a practical agent of transformation to the poor in the community and society at large.

2. Causes of Poverty in Nigeria

The causes of poverty in Nigeria are numerous and several literatures have categorized the causes of poverty into various perspectives. The National Bureau of Statistics (1996) itemized the main causes of poverty as unemployment, ignorance, inflation, illiteracy, and poor economic governance, and huge foreign debt, high incidence of disease, environmental degradation and large family size. According to Ajakayie and Adeyeye (2001), other causes of poverty include low economic growth performance, macro-economic shocks and policy failure; labour market deficiencies; unemployment and underemployment lag in human resources development, debt burden, ill health/diseases, governance and environmental degradation, crime and violence. In the opinion of Abubakar (2002) the major causes of poverty in Nigeria include macroeconomic distortions, corruption, bad governance, bad debt burden, socio-economic factors, unemployment, high population growth, and physical environment,

that is, the level of environmental destruction which affects national development. This corroborates Asante (1999, p. 83) statements that:

In Nigeria the continuous destruction of environment through bush burning, mining activities, sand winning, charcoal burning, improper disposal of waste be it liquid or solid all contribute greatly to the poverty situation, due to the level of destruction caused by pollution. The improper disposal of rubber bags and bush burning causes the soil to lose its fertility thereby depriving many farmers of their means of livelihood due to poor yield. This contributes greatly to the cost of production and level of poverty among farmers. There are many instances where river which should serve as means of drinking water have been destroyed by mining activities thereby denying many villagers access to potable water.

Nigeria Living Standard Survey-5 (2008, p.36) states that over dependence on climate conditions, especially rainfall, lack of adequate irrigation facilities, lack of feeder roads and good transportation system to farming communities for farmers to cart food to marketing centres are also major hindrances to food production and sufficiency, thereby leading to poor agricultural practices and ultimately poverty.

Annoh (2005, p. 20) comes from the dimension of unjust social structures some traditional and cultural practices which have retarded the progress of the nation while at the same time contributing to the poverty situation of the people. The widowhood rites of some communities deny the woman the opportunity to work for months. When that happens the woman is deprived of means of income to look after the children. Most of the street children in Nigeria are the result of the breakdown of the social values which derived its strength from the extended family system. The children of the poor are left with no choice but to find other means to make a living. Such children therefore become sex workers or engage in other social misfits as a means of living. *“The increasing economic demands on households as a result of microeconomic policies are borne disproportionately by women”* (Paris, 2009, p. 62).

Acha (2010, p. 52) emphasizes that while Nigeria’s poverty has been identified to be caused by many factors, Nigeria’s non diversification of the economy could be seen as a major factor. Going down the memory lane, Acha noted that before 1970, the Nigerian economy was driven by the agricultural sector. The oil sector which only constituted 1 percent of the country’s export revenue in 1958 rose to 97 percent by 1984 and has since then not gone below 90 percent. In Nigeria, those in power have practically ignored other sources of income, and today, Nigeria depends heavily on oil exportation. Acha (2010, p. 53) citing Oluwatayo (2008, pp. 1-2) elucidates that:

There was an increase in income disparity after the economic growth which Nigeria experienced between 1965-1975, and this income inequality has increased the dimension of poverty in the country. The income inequality between the people in rural and urban areas in Nigeria is remarkably high, as those who live in the rural areas base all their income on agriculture which is today not a thriving sector in Nigeria as oil has taken over the economy. They do not invest their money to acquire skills as people in the urban areas would and this makes them more vulnerable to poverty and leads to some social and economic problems such as violence, corruption and so on. Laziness and poor educational system are other factors mentioned by Acha as causes of poverty in Nigeria.

(p.54)

3. Effects of Poverty

The effect of poverty is multi-dimensional and poses a threat to national stability as well as social cohesion. It also serves as a threat to good health care, to education, to provision of housing, to acceptable income levels and access to basic utilities of life. The effect of poverty encompasses low levels of health and education, poor access to clean water and sanitation, inadequate physical security, lack of voice and insufficient capacity and opportunity to better one's life. Poverty therefore, degrades the human person and denies individual the capacity to participate meaningfully in all aspects of social life. It affects every aspect of a person's life, be it emotional, spiritual, physical and psychological. Africa's poverty is described as being an anthropological poverty, which encompasses the cultural and material loss brought about by colonial domination of Africa by the Western nations (Bujo Benezet cited by Parrat, 1996, p. 44).

Poverty brings about insecurity, powerlessness and the exclusion of individuals and communities. It is poverty which brings about unacceptable physiological and social deprivation. It brings about the denial of access to basic necessities of life. Poverty brings about the absence of amenities which are needed to sustain one's life and to promote the dignity of the human person. Psychological poverty hinders a person's ability to make sound judgment that informs one's action. It deprives a person of societal acceptance, care and love (Nwagwu, 2014, p.22).

Poverty undermines social justice and the right to life since it enslaves people by making them exposed to exploitation. Dike (2003) contended that poverty can also lead to human trafficking, prostitution and the spread of illness, child labour and abuse of human and civil rights. Poverty is therefore inimical to human and economic development as well as the general wellbeing of the individual. Poverty only become virtuous when it is self-inflicted by a person who want to do away with the riches of the

world by using his or her possessions to serve the needs of the poor in society out of religious conviction.

4. The Level of Poverty in Nigeria

Ayeetey *et al.*, (2008, p.2) states that, there are indications which show the significant movement of the nation's economy in and out of poverty, and the perception is that the state of poverty in Nigeria is worsening. The relationship that exists between economic growth and poverty in most cases is unclear, since there is the growing perception that the number of poor people living below the poverty line has not changed in relation to economic growth.

Poverty seems to be predominantly a rural phenomenon with almost all those suffering from hard core poverty living in the rural areas, though the incidence of poverty in urban areas has also increased (National Planning Commission (2009). Poverty is also prevalent in some parts of the country than others with the hardest hit areas of poverty being the mid-coast, the Volta basin and the northern savannah with more than fifty percent of the population being poor (National Planning Commission (2009). There are pockets of poverty in Southern Nigeria with high levels of economic deprivation which can predominantly be found in the central Region (Nigeria Living Standard Survey-5, 2008, p. 13). Poverty is therefore in most parts of Nigeria and as a result demands prompt action to remedy the situation.

There seems to be a gender dimension to poverty with most indications showing that women face higher level of deprivation compared with men, and with respect to income poverty is higher among household with higher dependency ratios (Nigeria Living Standard Survey-5, 2008, p. 13). There seems to be pronounced disparities in income distribution between rural and urban communities and these disparities reflect in the significant differences in expenditure patterns that exist between urban dwellers and that of rural inhabitants in different parts of the country (National Planning Commission, 2009). The different income levels between the rural and urban centres, has a resultant effect on the expenditure patterns which is higher in urban areas as compared to the rural areas.

It is estimated that over one-third of Nigeria's population lives in poverty and those in hard core poverty are estimated as seven out of every hundred who live on less than one-third of average income (National Planning Commission, 2009). Disparities in income levels between the urban and rural areas affect a person economically and deny access to basic social services. The rural poor have been found to be predominantly vulnerable; with children being most at risk. There is therefore the need for effective

solutions to eliminate the structural problems which have created this cycle of poverty, resulting in the growing poverty rate in the form of mass malnutrition and declining living standards in most villages and urban shanty towns in most African countries including Nigeria (Iliffe, 1992, p.1). In most instances the heroism in African history is found in the struggle of ordinary people against the forces of nature and the cruelty of poverty imposed by fellow human beings, but not in the deeds of kings. It is therefore no wonder that many political leaders that have administered the affairs of this nation when seeking the mandate of the people, have used their willingness to reduce poverty as part of their political campaign.

5. Rationale for the Response of the Churches in Nigeria to Poverty

The church as an agent of change is made up of people who have been called out of the world in response to the gospel. The church being the light and salt of the world has a responsibility towards its members and the society. The church should give an image of the Kingdom of God to those who seek refuge in it. The relevance of the gospel of Christ to the people should find expression in words and action of the people. Humanity has always strived to improve upon its situation in life since the days of creation, as was demonstrated in human desire to be like God (Genesis 2:6-7). This desire permeates through the life of both the rich and the poor alike, which can sometimes be borne out of genuine need for survival or sheer greed and selfishness. Even though the condition created by God was said to be good (Genesis 1:31), what exists now is a far cry from that due to some negative human actions. These negative human activities have left behind impoverishment and poverty for many. It is within this unjust situation that there are few who have so much and a larger population with very little to survive on. The church which is the light of the world and the salt of the earth is therefore being challenged to be proactive in bringing relief to the disadvantaged in the society and address the unjust situation (Matthew 5:13-17).

6. Christian Education Strategies for the Church's Involvement in Alleviating Poverty

In many parts of the world and particularly in Nigeria, issues of poverty cannot be effectively and successfully discussed and/or implemented without the involvement of the Church taking significant responsibility in addressing it. The church community and other host communities have large populations and a programme implementation framework that has the potential of contributing to the discourse and proffering solutions that are viable. The Bible and its teaching on poverty constitutes a profound

foundation for the Church to not only be motivated but compelled to get involved in efforts and initiatives to tackle the plague of poverty. In Galatians 2:9-10, Paul and Barnabas were given the right hand of fellowship with an admonition and charge not to forget the poor.

Yet, it is relevant to state that the church's involvement does not imply taking up issues of poverty alleviation from government completely. It also does not imply that the clergy should leave their pulpits and be engaged in some poverty eradication mission and campaign – not unless they feel clearly called to act in this way. Notwithstanding, individual church members can take up the responsibility of becoming God's ambassadors, with a mandate to transform societies and particularly minister to the needs of the poor in a way that poverty is eradicated or grossly minimized.

The emphasis of Christian education strategies for the church's involvement in poverty alleviation in this paper will be discussed with three practical and spectacular examples and experiences gained from an educational tour by the writer of this paper, who had the privilege (along with some other persons) of a city tour in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (from March 11 to 18, 2016). She visited sites of some individual church members who are ministering to the poor in their community. First, is a visit to the Institute of Urban Workers, a ministry project/ outfit of Dr Jember Tefera. She told her amazing story of how she came about the ministry 26 years ago, the sacrifices and imprisonment she suffered. Her ministry is to the poor. Her vision and focus is to change the mentality and attitude of the poor if poverty is to be eradicated. Her projects include: training of community workers, "yellow girls"; housing for the poor; establishment of schools for out of school children; listening to people to know what they need; raising funds which is quite difficult and challenging; built schools for children from the slums; built a youth centre where the young people can participate in sports and other activities like dancing; built a community library; built a community dining hall for the elderly, where they are fed three times daily for free . The writer of this paper was amazed to see a place formerly known as River Kanto meaning "*you will shout for help nobody will come*" but help actually came through Dr Jember Tefera for transformation of that place and persons who lives there. Below are a few pictures of her projects:



Figure 1: Dr. Jember Tefera



Figure 2: Dr Jember's Community School for Children of the Poor



Figure 3: Children at Meserete Ethiopia Primary School owned by Dr. Jember



Figure 4: Dr Jember's Community library



Figure 5: One of the housing projects of Dr. Jember

Dr. Jember's poverty alleviation projects are superb, greatly amazing and holistic in approach. It is from the cradle to adulthood. All age grades are being reached - children, youths, and adults. The three domains of education are demonstrated. Virtually the basic needs of human beings are being met. Jember identifies signs of needs and signs of hope- that God is really working in her community. The needs are not just needs but felt needs because she listens to the poor to say exactly what their needs are.

Second example is a visit to Mothers and Children Multi Sectorial Development Organization (MCMDO). Dr. Roman Kifle started this ministry. It was established in 1997. The headquarters is in Addis Ababa with branches in other parts of Ethiopia. The major programme of this ministry is Child space programme. Ministry to street children is also core. They have 118 projects, 14 are on-going, 99 completed. They have some in schools, rural areas providing wash (bathrooms and toilets) in several place for females .The ministry has impacted over 6 million people. The ministry is responsible for the sponsorship of 32 young girls in school (Roman Girls). Dr. Roman raises funds from three organizations in the US and other places for their sponsorship. MCMDO partners with the government, 26 local CSO (Civil Society Organization) and other private sectors (see www.mcmdo.org). Most of the funding is done by foreign partners. Dr. Roman's ministry is another educational age- graded ministry to children, teenagers and adults. Dr .Roman's ministry aspect of child spacing and ministry to street children

are good and interesting. Child spacing will help families to plan better and help reduce the rate of giving birth to children that cannot be catered for.



Figure 6: Dr Roman Kifle in action with Children at MCMDO Headquarters, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Third, is the visit to WISE (Women in Self Employment). WISE was established in 1997 by the Director of WISE, Dr. Tsigie Haile. The target is low income self-employed women and girls mainly engaged in home – based production and small scale trading activities; unemployed women and girls who wish to engage in micro enterprise .They are trained to be self- reliant and to improve the quality of their lives, their position and condition in the society. Women with disabilities, women living with HIV/AIDS, single mothers and young women are targeted particularly. The training is for 30hours. WISE engages in health training; leadership and skill training, self-development- life skill and literacy education. The women are taught at home and the organization pays the teachers; technical and vocational skills. Thirty two thousand women and girls are being reached (See, www.wise.org.et, WISE, 2015). Empowerment helps in alleviating poverty and creates employment opportunities.



Figure 7: Dr. Haile at WISE Headquarters, Addis Ababa

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Church as the body of Christ has been called to reflect the image of the kingdom of God and depict the life of Christ. She is to address current challenges in the society with the message of the gospel. Church members should be encouraged, sensitized and taught to engage in evangelism as a social action to the poor in the society, thus alleviating their plight and bring relief to them. The poor people are being confronted with a situation of hopelessness as they seek to provide themselves the basic needs of life. Churches in Nigeria should note the following recommendations towards transforming the poor in the society:

1. The living condition of the poor should be improved by providing the basic infrastructures most especially in the rural areas where majority of the poor people dwell.
2. Emphasis should be laid on skill acquisition in the educational system including the mission schools, so as to produce graduates / school leavers who are providers of employment or labour than seekers of employment.
3. Some of the billions that some churches have locked away in banks should be made available to members in form of loans and other poverty alleviation measures, and the churches should be able to build on their greatest strengths which are trust and commitment rather than dependency.

4. Churches should also motivate their members to work or to help create employment, since the lack of it is probably the greatest bane of Africa today.
5. Christian teaching and learning methodology should include the dimension of engaging learners in city tours. City tours are wonderful, insightful, educative and amazing learning experiences. Observational skills, analytical skills and skill of reflections comes into play. Learners can be moved into overt action for a transformation agenda.
6. Pastors should be sensitized to engage in leadership for collaboration with other people, including government parastatal for a sustainable development.

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