THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of the church in meeting the challenges of national transformation. It is premised in the fact that the country's attempt at achieving national transformation has not been an easy task. Some of the challenges hampering transformation relate to issues of the corruption, ineffective leadership, religious and ethnic crises. This paper is basically descriptive in approach and aimed at examining the roles of the church in the task of national transformation. It recommends among others that church leaders use their preachings and teachings to build morally upright leaders that can resist the temptation to abuse their mandate denounce vices and abuses within the political leadership that will be detrimental to national transformation.

Key Words: Church, National Transformation, Ineffective Leadership, Religious Intolerance, Ethnic Crises.

Introduction

Since the attainment of political independence in 1960, the country has continued to contend with many challenges in nation building. Okam and Chukwu (2005) submitted that the country is plagued with multidimensional problems which are antithetical to peaceful co-existence, such as socio-economic in-balance, instability and inequality Park (2012) also opined that despite the country's oil wealth, it is still one of the poorest countries in the world where seven (7) million children of primary school age are not in school, youths have no access to quality education and majority are unemployed; educational institutions are without enough infrastructure and no access to safe water, good roads and health services. Also, insecurity, kidnapping, armed robbery as well as unsteady electricity supply have crippled the country.

Many have attributed the cause of these challenges to lack of good governance at all levels whether in the military or democratic dispensation. Okpanachi (2011) maintained that the several structures and institutions through which effective government can be entranced are heavily compromised from the beginning to the end. This is why Achebe (1985) observed that the failure of Nigeria as a nation is not in the system but rather in the calibre of persons entrusted with the management of the nation's vast human and material resources. It is in the face of these challenges and quest for

solution that many have called for national transformation, hence the national transformation agenda of President Goodluck Jonathan. Though the policies are well packaged, there are still some challenges which may hinder the effective performance of the policies.

It is in this light that this paper attempts to examine the challenges of national transformation in Nigeria and the central role of the church in meeting them.

The Concept of the Church

The church is one of the social and religious institutions in the society that has both the divine mandate and the social responsibility to preach the good news and make disciples of all people (Ononogbu, 2005). The church through the ages sees its social role as that of guiding the society into all truth. This makes it incumbent upon the church to concern itself with the problems of social behaviour as well as social justice. Owoh (1985) posited that because the church possesses the total truth, it could be applied at any given time as its influence interpenetrates society at all levels. According to him, the role of the church is bound to influence man's ideas politically, socially and economically. To Ikani (2009), the church has the aim of initiating social change and maintaining it. As an agent of social change, the church brings light to the dark corners of the society.

The role of the church in national transformation cannot be over emphasized. They can be instrumental to social change by providing the idea or the moral cement for nation building. Imaekhai (2010) asserted that historically, religious institutions through their leaders have played critical roles in social transformation or revolution. He cited the puritan preaching of Jonathan Edwards as providing a spiritual and moral compass for the American Revolution. The teachings of protestant Calvinist leaders which emphasized hard work, saving money, financial discipline and the rejection of frivolous pursuit brought about industrialization based on capitalism in Britain (Odiba, 2009). The challenge for the Nigerian church today is how to effect transformation among the citizenry of the country especially among the political leaders. This is a great task given the pitiable political and social economic situation of the country. The question is what should be the role of the church in meeting the challenges of national transformation? This is what the paper will be addressing.

Concept of National Transformation

To transform means to change. It is a process that is concerned with fostering changes. In other words, there should be a movement from our present location to somewhere in the future. National transformation therefore could refer to a complete turnaround of a nation's system or institutions for the better (Philip-Ogah& Josephine, 2013).

In realization of the need to correct the flaws in the country's drive for development after years of stalling in terms of perspective, continuity, consistency and commitment to policies, the Goodluck administration decided to initiate a four year transformation agenda (Akinola, 2013). The program is abased on a set of priority policies which when implemented will make life better for Nigerians. The policies are in the areas of macroeconomic framework and economic direction, job creation, public

expenditure management, governance, justice and judiciary, foreign policies and economic diplomacy, legislature, education, health sector, labour and productivity, infrastructure policies, programmes and projects, power, information and communication technology, Niger Delta and transportation (Usigbe, 2011). However, the programme faced a lot of challenges. Imaekhai (2010) remarked that the national transformation of the country seemed impossible because people's concept and expectation of it is intrinsically flawed. Also, while government position about it is promising, the threats of corruption, religious and ethnic crises are threats to its success.

Challenges of National Transformation

Many believe that the Nigerian society needs massive re-organization, redirection, rebirth, reconstruction and repositioning. However, this task has always been hampered by many challenges. The areas of challenges among others are: ineffective leadership, corruption, inter religious intolerance and ethnic crises.

Ineffective leadership and corruption: Leadership challenges have always been a dominant concept in Nigeria polity. This is because more than fifty years after independence, the country still lags behinds in her quest for economic, political and social transformation. The reason is that its history has been bedevilled by bad leadership. Political analysts and commentators like Rinji (2001) and Achebe (1985) observed that the cause or failure of Nigeria as a nation is not in the system but in the calibre of political leader entrusted with the management of our vast human and material resources. Nwaneri (2014) believes that with few exceptions the country has been ruled by incompetent leaders at various levels of governance who are gradually running the country aground while less endowed nations that had their independence the same time as Nigeria continue to make appreciable progress. The Nigerian leadership has proven on many occasions that it is unable to inspire and motivate positive productive impact on the nation's citizens. Many of them lack leadership quality and attribute of good governance like the rule of law, transparency, effectiveness, efficiency, equity and accountability which are essential for the development of the society. They often abuse the mandate and trust of the electorates and become the public's enemies as they assume positions of authority. Many political leaders are neither in office for national interest nor are they there with the view to making a difference but are in office to enrich themselves, siblings, kins, tribesmen etc. The resultant effects of these poor leaders on the nation are sectionalism, tribalism, nepotism, election rigging, violence and insecurity (Shamija, Alachi and Moji, 2013).

There is also an alarming rate of corruption among the political class in the government. Corrupt practices take many forms like embezzlement of public fund, theft illegal use of public property, bribery of officials and influence on procurement decisions. (Osaretin, 2009). The issue of corruption at every level of government (past and present) is often seen on the pages of newspapers every day. It is evident in the political settings, the police force, the judiciary, the business world, in the academic and even in religious institutions. Instances of corruption include the fuel scarcity scam; a member of the house of representative – FaruokLawan – facing a seven count charge bordering on obtaining 620,000 dollars from an oil magnate Femi Otedola in order to doctor the committee's

report in favour of Zenon oil and Gas Ltd (Ikechukwu, 2014), the reckless spending of ten billion Naira by the Minister of Petroleum Resource – Mrs.Diezani Allison Madueke etc.

Bodies and organizations like the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) that are put in place to check accountability are being manipulated by the government in power. Findings and recommendations of most panels and commissions on corrupt practices are neither made public nor implemented. The phenomenon of corruption has been a major factor in Nigeria's underdevelopment. It undermines the effective implementation of government policies that would translate into development. There is a general notion in Nigeria that politics is only formidable on paper but very poor on the ground. This is because corruption impinged on the policy formulation process resulting to unsteadiness and inconsistency in the nature and character of government policies and programmes (Ogenyi, 2008). Most policies initiated are not achieved or are observed to benefit a particular set of minority – the ruling class. Foreigners are reluctant to invest in a country with unstable political climate rife with corruption.

Inter Religious Intolerance: Religious crises and fanaticism have no doubt become a trend and threat to the nation's political development or transformation. Religions crises have become a threat to the nation's security. Religion in Nigeria is a concept deeply interwoven with the life of the people. One would therefore be quick to ask why has religion that plays a very significant role becomes a source of sorrow to the people of Nigeria judging from the number of religious conflicts and destructions in the past decade. The two major religions are Christianity and Islam. Islam in particular has left a legacy of mutual suspicion and aggression while seeking to impose their respective ways on the lives life of the people (Mason, 1980). Several reasons have been advanced for the regular occurrence of these conflicts. One is the socio-economic factor. It is said that poverty, wide spread unemployment and biting inflation are conditions that can aggravate people's tension and make people restless. At the slightest provocation therefore, the people could riot.

Williams (1987) posited that events in the country show that religion has been systematically manipulated by some forces for specific purposes which are clearly opposed to the unity of the country. These crises are engineered by politicians to achieve a particular political goal or interest. He further stated that because the political class lack national acceptance or spearhead a national mobilizing ideology, it resorts increasingly to the politicization of religion. From the Northern part of Nigeria between 1980 and 2010, there were over twenty five religious crises (Osasona, 2011). We saw the havoc caused by the Maitatsine sect in Kano in 1980, the religions violence at Bulunkutu in Bornu and Kaduna in (1982), Bauchi and Jimeta also suffered from religious riot in 1984. The Boko Haram sect has caused and is still causing a lot of havoc in the North eastern part of Nigeria. It is estimated that a total of five hundred and twenty three (523) Christians were killed, fifty four (54) churches burnt and ninety thousand (90,000) people displaced following various attacks in the three states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa between 2009 and 2014 (Olanrewaju, 2014); public buildings schools, banks, army and police barracks

have also been razed and the sect was responsible for the kidnapping of over two hundred (200) girls from Government Secondary School, Chibok in Borno State (Tell, 2014).

Persistent insecurity resulting from religious crises imparts negatively on the economy and development prospects. The tempo of economic activities in the northern part of the country has declined. The Lagos State Chamber of Commerce and Industry noted that as a result of the long drawn battle by the insurgency on the nation, investors confidence have been hampered, thereby limiting the realization of the tremendous potential that the economy presents (Adekoya, 2014). Religions conflict, if not handled with the requisite tact and urgency is capable of tearing the country apart and destabilizing the whole sub-regional West African as the Boko Haram is doing now.

Ethnic Crises: Ethnic tension and crises have also become worrisome for many in Nigeria and a threat to its fragile federation (Yusuf, 2010). Nigeria is a country with different cultural as well as human and natural diversities. Unfortunately according to Mujil (2006) instead of finding strength in these diversities it has been exploited to create ethnic rivalries and intolerance as is exhibited in the numerous ethnics' violence across the country. Instances of such violence from ethnic clashes in the past include the crisis between the Andonis-Ogonis/Okirika, Jukuns/Tivs, Ife/Modeko-OmuleriAgweri, Ijaw/Itsekeri etc. Also, conflicts between pastoralists and cultivators of farmlands in the country are pandemic more especially between the Fulani herdsmen and the natives. Struggle for ownership and access to the land in communities found along the border areas of Nasarawa and Benue State by the Fulani herdsmen which started 2001 is still on till date. This struggle is one of the major causes of communal clashes in the said areas (Donatus, 2013).

The peace of this country has come under several threats as some militant ethnic groups are up in arms either against themselves, neighbours or the federal government. Among these groups are the Ijaw National Congress (INC) and Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign Sate of Biafra (MASSOB). The Niger Delta has been at crisis point since the 1990s as a result of the oil production activities. The militant posture of the natives has always constituted a serious threat to the oil industry which is the mainstay of the nation's economy. From 1992 – 2000, different militant groups like the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Niger Delta People Volunteers Force (NDVF), the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV) and most prominently, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) were formed. There have been several clashes between the militant groups and the Nigerian state. Kidnapping of both foreign and local workers is the order of the day among these groups. They also target oil facilities by blowing up pipelines and flow stations with the intent of crumbling the oil economy of Nigeria (Ngwoke&Numonde, 2011).

With these challenges, Nigeria's desired vision for national transformation will remain a nightmare. This is because the security, transparency, peace and stability which constitute the pivot for national transformation will elude the nation as a result of the above factors. With these challenges hindering effective national transformation in Nigeria, what kind of leadership is expected of the church?

The Role of the Church in Meeting the Challenges of National Transformation

The church is one of the social and religious institutions in the society and has many roles to play in Nigeria. The crucial role of the church in Nigeria today is how to bring about transformation of lives among the citizenry especially the political class elites. This is a great task for the church judging the level of moral decadence that have bedevilled the country over the years. The prophetic role of the church is to declare the will of God in the political, social and economic life of the nation. Luther, in Quaben (1960), contended that the church is put in possession of the word of God and this can transform the hearts and minds of men and renovate the society. This is one way to ensure that leaders experience inward change. If they encounter spiritual change, then the much desired change in leadership pattern will automatically follow. The church is challenged, through its pastors, clergy and laity to ensure genuine religious conversion that will transform people's attitude to possessions, power and social prestige reflect the demands of the gospel.

The failure of the church to call corrupt political leaders to order through their preaching is responsible for many tragedies in the country. According to Ibrahim (2010) the church has failed to bring their rulers (political and secular) forward to account for their stewardship, but rather prefer to praise them because of selfish, material and financial gains. The roles the church is called to play include the setting of leadership models – the servant-leader principle of leadership that will enhance honesty, accountability and transparency both in public and private life (Chukwujuidu, 2014). It should give direction to the society in matters of holiness, righteousness and integrity.

For any stable national transformation, there must be peace, unity and appreciation of human dignity and freedom. Religious and ethnic issues have often been politicized in the country and these have led to many conflicts. No meaningful transformation can be established and sustained under such unhealthy atmosphere. This situation calls for a purposeful and effective religious teaching (by church leaders) which will disengage true religion from undue politicization to that which promotes peace. The Catholic Archbishop of Abuja Diocese Cardinal John Onaiyekan has on many occasions charged the political class to ensure that Nigerians do not suffer as a result of their ambition. He equally used his position to condemn the use of religion by politicians to perpetrate evil in the country saying it would encourage disunity and take the country backward (Isaac, 2013). Religious values that emphases the dignity of the human person as created by God irrespective of his or her belief and situations in life should be preached (Kukah, 2007). Values should be preached because it enables man to be aware of his specific obligation to himself, his fellow human being and the society to which he belongs and above alls, his maker. Religion by its nature if practised well unites individuals, communities and nations.

Apart from ensuring the value of peace, the value of social justice must also be emphasized. Violence and disharmony among ethnic nationalities are those that arise out of unjust social structures. The church through her position should challenge the inequalities inherent in social institutions and structures. The Holy Bible is replete with examples of prophets who spoke against injustices in the society. Onimhawo and Adamu (2011) stated that the church must be a voice for the voiceless. It should be fearless and

courageous in tackling the socio-economic situations in Nigeria as we have today. Unemployment among youths, poverty, inequality and environmental deprivation in the Niger Delta are issues that the church cannot afford to overlook.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made: The crucial preliminary task of the church would be to create awareness among their members about the magnitude of the moral crisis in Nigerian politics and its consequence for national survival and development. Resolving the moral crisis in the country's politics would require primarily a morally upright leader or elite that can resist the temptation to abuse its mandate.

Church leaders should endeavour to organize seminars, conferences and workshops for their members during which the importance of truth, honesty, loyalty, dutifulness, peace and justice will be taught and emphasized. Debates on topical issues and publications of books, journals and magazines should be utilized as a way of inculcating moral consciousness in the society.

The church should denounce or question publicly vices and abuses such as political intolerance, violence, constitutional infidelity, distributive justice, absence of a sense of civil responsibility and private appropriation of public resources. Any corrupt church member in government, politician involved in corruption or not living according to Christian principles should be excommunicated with immediate effect to avoid the spread of such vices.

Church leaders must live exemplary lives both in speech and in conduct. It is no gain saying that being good examples to their flock can reduce practices that hinder national transformation. This is why a church leader who is guilty to corruption should be willing to resign from his office voluntarily.

Conclusion

The task of national transformation is great and challenging. It will require the commitment, cooperation, understanding and support of all church leaders, members and the government. The church must continue to play its indispensable role in society as the frame within which the destinies of people are determined and the horizons that ultimately provides both inspiration and motivation for leaders and citizens alike.

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