

Media Evangelism: A Case for Effective Coverage of the Rural Areas

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Abstract

Evangelism was instituted by Jesus Christ Himself when He sent out his disciples and commissioned them to bring the ‘Good News’ to all nations and to baptize in the name of God Almighty. With this great commission, the word of God has spread to all nations like wild fire. The advances in information and communication technologies have also aided immeasurably in the spread of the gospel. Hence, evangelists in Nigeria as elsewhere have extensively used the mass media especially, radio and television in reaching their audience in both their immediate and distant locations. However, the use of mass media in evangelism has remained largely and urban affair as burning religious issues in the rural areas like the frequent skirmishes between Christians and Traditional Religionists are hardly given a mention in these rampant media evangelical messages. What the rural dwellers often receive are evangelical messages packaged in the urban areas that largely address the evangelical needs of the urban dwellers at the expense of their rural counterparts. This paper therefore, examines media evangelism as a whole; traces its history, takes a look at the rural areas, the problems associated with media evangelism in the rural areas and makes recommendations.

Introduction

The need to spread the Gospel to every person has engaged evangelists since the time of Jesus Christ. This is sequel to what has become popularly known as the Great Commission as recorded in the book of Matthew (28: 18-20) thus:

Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Since this commission, evangelists have not looked back and have used different methods to ensure that the 'Good News' reached every man on earth. One institution that the evangelists have found effective in carrying out this commission is the mass media especially, radio, television and lately, the Internet. However, this upswing in evangelism particularly, media evangelism has largely been an urban affair. Most of the well-known media evangelists are based in the cities and urban areas in the country from where they dish out such messages to their audience via the mass media. As a result, what the rural people get from these media contents (evangelical messages) that pervade the mass media mostly radio and television are contents packaged in the urban areas and perhaps, intended for urban audience exclusively. There are hardly any rural inputs or perspectives in such messages. This, in reality precludes the people residing in the rural areas that constitute nearly 80 percent of the population of the country (Gana, 1983) even though a good number of them have access to these messages. Akpan (2006, p.11) laments that:

While television and radio are receivable in most rural areas in developing countries they rarely originate from rural sources and location. Indeed, such services bring a new form of urbanization through the transmission of urban images, values and culture directly into the living rooms of rural dwellers. Thus the rural viewer or listener is largely relegated to the role of passive consumer of urban culture and information reinforcing the process in inward migration through the broadcast image.

The reason for this ugly state of affairs may not be unconnected with the dwarfed height of infrastructural development in the vast rural areas of the country that has equally negatively affected their teeming population. But despite the very many constraints associated with reaching and evangelizing the rural populace particularly the absence of good access roads and such other facilities, the rural dwellers need the word of God as much the urban dwellers that are, in reality, bombarded with excessive doses of these messages. This lopsided approach to evangelism is a total negation of the instruction of Jesus Christ to his apostles: "... to bring the good news to all nations." This being the case, this study explores and suggests ways through which this vast rural people including religious issues concerning them could be effectively covered through the use of radio in evangelism.

Evangelism and Media Evangelism: A Capsule History

The need to spread the ‘Good News’ (gospel) to all nations of the world was instituted by our Lord, Jesus Christ. To successfully accomplish His mission of bringing His Messianic message to the doorstep of all without discrimination, He (Jesus Christ), despite touring different towns and villages in Israel also sent out his disciples on different evangelical missions. In each of these missions, He instructed the disciples to ensure that the ‘Good News’ reached all and sundry without discrimination and to baptize any that believed the gospel. On sending them out on one such evangelical mission:

He gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to heal the sick. Christ told them: Take nothing for the journey – no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town as a testimony against them (Luke, 9:15).

With these foundations, evangelism became a cardinal programme of the early church even as it came under severe persecution. Many followers of Christ (including a former persecutor of the church, Saul, later Paul) especially those who fled from the persecutors embarked on evangelism as they fled to foreign climes. Paul, who was initially, the chief persecutor, had, after being converted and despite all sorts of personal privations, toured many parts of Asia and Europe spreading the word of God. Taking a cue from these early missions, various churches the world over have embarked on different evangelical trips/missions and have as well evolved other ways of ensuring that the words of God reached peoples of all nations.

Media Evangelism

Since the time of the early disciples, the face of evangelism has changed in many significant ways. The most significant change is that the evangelists need not travel far distances nor do they have to know the faithful in person or meet them face-to-face before preaching the word of God to them. Media evangelism has removed these particularly taxing factors. In Nigeria, this method of spreading the word of God through the mass media quickly became an elite affair as well-educated people took to evangelism especially, media evangelism. In no time, evangelists like Chris Oyakhilome (Christ Embassy); David Oyedepo (Winners’ Chapel); Tunde Bakare (Latter Day Assembly); T.B. Joshua (The

Synagogue); Chris Okotie (Household of God); Bartholomew Asimolowo (KICC); and many others became popular with media evangelism. Using the instruments of the mass media mainly radio and television, these preachers have ensured that their messages reached a huge chunk of the population.

However, in the context of this paper, media evangelism is narrowed down to those religious contents packaged and delivered to the audience through the radio medium only. Radio is arguably the most popular medium of mass communication because of its very unique attributes. Not only that it is cheap to acquire and maintain, it also simple to operate. Its beauty mostly lies in its abilities to penetrate remote, inaccessible areas and to transcend linguistic and literacy barriers. Besides, the cost acquiring a radio set, nobody pays anything for using it. These may explain why most people: traders, civil servants, farmers as well as the nomadic Fulani herdsmen have a radio set within reach in their homes and places of work. With their radio sets, they can access information on different subject matters within their immediate and distant environments. The miniaturized radio sets with multiple band receivers are at the beck and call of most information-hungry people of the world today. UNESCO study cited in Okoro and Emakpor (2010) maintains that radio is the most effective medium for mobilization the rural people. Apart from the fact that it is cheap, easily available and portable, it can also be used without electricity, which might be lacking in rural areas.

The radio medium is one institution that has helped immensely in oiling the wheel of societal growth and continued existence through mass communication. It exerts so much influence in the present day society that governance, social organization, economic and cultural interactions will be virtually impossible without their effective deployment. Affirming the influence of the mass media in our society, Hall cited in Oso [2002 p.32] says:

What we know of our society depends on how those things are presented to us by the media and that knowledge in turn informs what we do and what policies we are prepared to accept.

Evangelism has exploited these unique characteristics and powerful influence of the radio medium a great deal from time immemorial. Evangelism which is taken from the Greek word, *euangelion*, (meaning Good News) is defined as “the bringing of the ‘Good News’ into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and

making it new” (wikipedia 2009:2), has witnessed an upward swing in Nigeria since last two or more decades. It is the singular desire to save mankind from eternal damnation and make the whole human society a better place for all that led to the unprecedented proliferation of churches in Nigeria as elsewhere in the world. Skutch (1970, p.9) explains this upsurge in evangelism through prism of self-preservation. He said:

We are religious because we love life and cling passionately to our conscious existence... Religion is life’s ceaseless effort to preserve and perfect itself, become at last self-conscious, foreseeing and, in consequence, fearful amid thousand perils that beset it. It was of old, and has been reiterated by modern students of religion, that fear made the gods; but this is a half-truth. We fear only when that which we wish to preserve is threatened. Love of life, concern for things that embellish it, is prior to fear. When we pursue our analysis of it far enough, it becomes clear that it is our attachment to conscious existence, which made the gods. Religion begins at its natural starting point, the instinct of self-preservation, which has been called the first law of nature. Its function has been to deepen and broaden this natural impulse.

This, therefore, also explains in part why churches, adoration grounds, praying grounds, praying bands, itinerant preachers among others have sprung up in all nook and cranny of the urban areas in pursuance of evangelism. In fact, different churches especially the Pentecostal churches in the country including local and international itinerant preachers have raised the ante of evangelism in the country by using different tools including in the main, the mass media.

Evangelism through the radio medium has, in reality, come a long way. Lievrouw cited in Encarta (2009) traces the origin of broadcast evangelism to the Christmas and New year eve of 1906 when the inventor of the radiotelephone, Reginald Fessenden in Brant Rock, Massachusetts, read passages of the Bible in a broadcast which was picked up as far away as New York, and by ships in the Atlantic. Moore (1996) traces the first radio church broadcasts to KDKA in Pittsburgh from Calvary Episcopal Church on January 2, 1921. According to him, “at that time, the primary influences on radio evangelists were popular evangelical revivalists, like Billy Sunday and Dwight L. Moody. Charismatic and powerful orators were deemed the best suited to the new medium. By 1927, there were an estimated 60 religious groups operating their own radio stations around the United States and hundreds of other secular broadcasting services.” Following this example, and given its inherent

advantages over other media of communication, churches all over the world began to use the radio medium to reach their faithful.

In Nigeria, radio broadcasting began in 1932 through the Overseas Services of the British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC. Being a subjugate country, the service was not meant for consumption of the natives but for the British in Her Majesty's Services in the colonies. So the contents of the broadcasts were tailor-made for the Britons and religious services featured very little in them. It was, in reality, immaterial to the natives because most of them at this point in time were adherents of African Traditional Religion and abhors Christianity with passion.

Nevertheless, with the spread of Christianity in the country, there arose a need for better use of the mass media in evangelism. But with broadcasting firmly in the hands of the government for 32 years after independence, and with government being very pessimistic about the outcome of the use of media in such potentially explosive issue as religion, religious broadcasts remained few and far between. Again, the recurring ethno-religious crises in the country in which hundreds of lives and property worth millions of Naira are lost seem to justify the stand of the government given the sensitive nature of religious beliefs and the fact that Nigeria is a multi-religious country. Based on the above premise, the government was very reluctant to give religion a big space in the media because any slight abuse or even a seemingly innocuous language could result in very unpleasant circumstances.

However, all these changed with the liberalization of broadcasting in Nigeria in 1992. In that year, the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida retired caved in to internal and external pressures and enacted Decree No. 38 of 1992 (now Act No. 38 of 1992 as amended) authorizing private broadcasting. Okenwa (2000, p.53) asserts that:

The year 1992 marked a critical turning point in the development of the broadcast media in Nigeria. It came with new policies that were to revolutionize the media industry, through allowing private participation in the ownership of the electronic media.

From this early beginning, broadcast evangelism has grown and spread as fast as new broadcast technologies are developed. With radio within easy reach and with many people embracing the Christian faith, the evangelists now have both the audience and the

medium to reach them with relative ease. Evangelists therefore, exploit the enormous influence and powers of broadcasting particularly, radio, to reach people in far-flung rural areas. This was the view of Adaba (1997) cited in Okoro and Emakpor (2008, p.5) when he averred:

No other medium can deliver as large and instantaneous an audience to politicians or government (including preachers) as broadcasting can. Secondly, rightly or wrongly, the belief persists all over the world that broadcasting is an eminently persuasive medium, omnipresent in people's homes, work places, even in transit. It is akin to a second skin through which most people stay in touch with their immediate environment and the world at large.

Not only that they have used the immense opportunities provided by the radio to reach their large audience differentiated in time and space, the evangelists have almost on hourly basis and in various radio channels, inundated their listeners with well-packaged, persuasive evangelical messages. It is common today to watch or hear preachers on television and radio respectively dishing out incisive and persuasive evangelical messages to their immediate and external audiences. The snags however, are that these messages have no rural input or content and do not cover some sensitive issues in the rural areas like masquerading, traditional ceremony surrounding the assumption of the position of the eldest man in the community, cultural music, perennial clashes between the Christians and traditional religionists and other such explosive religious issues in the rural areas.

The Rural Areas and Rural Evangelism

Rural areas and rural dwellers are known by different names in the country. While some refer to the rural dwellers as villagers, others wish to call them peasants. But by far the most popular of all these is the name 'the grassroots'. Indeed, grassroots has become a euphemism for people (or even government) in the last rung of the societal ladder: people who live in the rural areas of the country. Despite being home to over 80 percent population and producing over 90 percent of the food consumed nationwide, rural areas and rural dwellers are still in sorry state of development. Agbese (1981, p.6) called them 'the real Nigerians'. According to him:

Real Nigerians... wear anguish like tribal marks on their faces; toil in the sun or in the rains with kids strapped on their backs to eke out a living. The Real Nigerians from the look of things live in the rural areas.

Nwachukwu in Ogbazi (1992, p.207) also observed that in rural areas:

Its inhabitants are mainly farmers who maintain small holdings and practice seasonal farming. Their production is mainly at subsistence level and food crops are predominant over plantation crops. Productivity and standard of living are low. They are certified victims of preventable disease, which derive from malnutrition. Inside the rural dwelling place: man, woman and children are herded together under condition of life so poor that it prevents the realization of man's total potential.

Udoaka (1998) painted a better graphic picture of the rural areas this way:

Once the word 'rural' is mentioned in Africa, certain images are conjured in our heads. These images centre around acute underdevelopment and poverty and they manifest themselves in the forms of bad roads, lack of pipe-borne water, poor housing, poor sanitation, lack of electricity, malnutrition and illiteracy. Also the word 'rural' brings to mind geographic locations in Africa with populations of hungry, wretched looking people and stunted, kwashiorkor-riddled children. It conjures the image of a people who suffer in the farms from morning to evening but whose harvest is not commensurate with the effort and time spent; it conjures the image of a people who are starving, eating at best, once a day after returning from market. The principal means of transportation in the rural areas is the bicycle. Most people in rural settings carry their items of trade on the head and trek long distances to the market. They do not have adequate clothing and so they go about half-naked at home in a bid to save the dress for use in the church and the market.

Statistics from the Fourth National Development Plan (1981-1985) clearly shows that:

- Whereas in 1963, 80.7% of national population lives in rural areas, the number went down to 70.13% in 1985 as a result of migration to urban areas thereby putting much pressure on the resources in the urban areas.
- There exists a wide development gap between the urban and rural areas in Nigeria;
- The high number of largely unskilled manpower that could be beneficially put into use lay untapped in the rural areas;
- There bewildering high level of illiteracy, poverty and disease that are prevalent in these areas, and;
- That nearly 80 percent of the food consumed nation wide is produced in the rural areas (Gana, 1983).

Apart from these, government's half-hearted efforts and mostly self-serving promise of integrated rural development has not yielded much positive result. The rural areas still lack essential infrastructural facilities like good access roads, pipe-borne water, good healthcare

delivery system, adequate and regular supply of electricity, mass media and such other essential services. Stream water still serve as the main source of water in most rural communities and traditional-birth-attendants are still consulted to act as midwives to expectant mothers.

Evangelism in the Rural Areas: The Problems

It can be reasonably argued that evangelism as a whole (including media evangelism) is still largely an urban affair. Most clergymen and preachers live in the urban areas where they sometimes, visit their flock in the rural areas. In different Christian denominations, the clergy often frown at being posted to some rural areas to evangelize and would go to a considerable length to dodge such postings which they see as punishment. This is despite the clear injunction of our Lord to his apostles in Matthew (5:14): “You are the light of the world... let your light so shine before all men, that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven.”

The above instruction spoke of ‘all men’ and that includes rural dwellers, not just those living in the urban areas. What some of the clergymen do when posted to rural areas is to live in the nearest urban area and commute to their missions from there instead of living in the rural area where they are posted. It does not matter whether the church has good accommodation for their clergy in these areas. Where he decides to live in the mission, he is almost a visitor as he often leaves for the urban area where social amenities are available thus often neglecting his evangelical duties. This unGodly attitude is attributable to poor facilities in the rural areas.

Media evangelism is even worse. There may be numerous evangelical messages in the radio and television but as noted earlier, they are basically urban affair since none of them addresses peculiar problems of the rural dwellers. The media preachers do not have contact with the rural areas or any experience of life in the rural communities and therefore, cannot competently address the religious needs of these people. Their messages dwell on generalities and not specifics that are needed to give the rural dwellers the spiritual rejuvenation they need. Lack of inclusion of rural issues, occurrences, events, practices, actions as cases in point in such messages is a serious handicap and makes these messages sound alien to the few rural dwellers that understand them.

So besides the fact that there are virtually no mass media in the rural areas, the urban based ones ignore the rural areas in news coverage and in the few occasions they do, there is total absence of rural context in their coverage including their evangelical messages. Udoakah (1998, p.52) bemoans this absence of rural perspective in news coverage in this way:

Africa's rural areas have thus become 'Third World' within their countries and Africa's national news media are playing the role of international media. No wonder, reports about rural areas are not placed in context because African journalists when they go to the rural areas, have little time to grasp the background of and the feelings of the people about whatever they report. This is the type of treatment given to Third World countries.

The media preachers use English language almost exclusively in their preaching. Not only that they use English language alone, they use it with foreign accent. Because of this, it excludes the large number of uneducated rural dwellers and even the few that understand the language are confused by the accent in use. St. Paul cautioned against this inappropriate use of language in preaching in 1 Corinthians (14:9). According to him: "Except you utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For you shall speak to air." To the large majority of rural dwellers who understand only their indigenous language, the media preachers 'speak to air'.

Very importantly too, the message from the media evangelists are often skewed towards what the Bible said rather than what Jesus did. It is common to these preachers to use such expressions as: 'my Bible said'; 'according to the Bible'; 'Jesus Christ said in...'; among others. The excessive emphasis on what the Bible said or Jesus said as opposed to 'what Jesus did' does not really capture the whole essence of evangelism. Menkir (1992, p.85) remarks that:

The content of Christian communication should recognize that the gospel is not so much about what God has said as about what God has done. Even when the Bible seems to emphasize a word, it is in so far as words shade into deeds. Words were not simply sounds that could be lost on the desert air; they were deeds which changed the course of events.

The timing of most media evangelical messages is equally unsuitable to the rural people. Some of these messages are aired in the morning, some in the afternoon. Just very few are aired during night hours. This confirms the lack of knowledge of the life in rural areas, their lifestyle and their daily schedules. It says something for the notion that these messages are actually not meant for them in the first place. Otherwise, the programme director should know that any such message aired in the morning or afternoon cannot be received by the rural audience because at these times, most of them are out of their houses heading for their farms or market to eke out a living. This is unlike the urban dwellers who can afford to stay in their houses till seven o'clock in the morning before leaving for their places of work and also have radios and or even television sets in their places of work. This is a luxury a typical rural person cannot afford. The programmers should realize that nothing makes communication ineffective as when the target audience is not the receiving audience.

The Way Forward

There can be no doubt from the foregoing that the rural dwellers are not really taken into consideration when these evangelical messages in the radio are planned, packaged and produced. In fact, all through such media messages, there is hardly any mention of a nagging or unpleasant occurrence in the rural area as a case in point. So what is really desired is involvement of such issues and occurrences in such media evangelical messages so that it could drive the message home to them and make it relevant to them. Those producing these messages should know that many of the rural people do not have experience of the urban areas and cities they so frequently use in their preaching and these things sound alien to them.

Second, we are all aware that these preachers are urban-based and have little or no experience issues and events in the rural areas yet they could send some their pastors to these rural areas to gather information on some salient religious issues in these areas and integrate them into the messages. There is no way these urban-based media preachers can develop the rural dwellers religiously without discussing issues relevant to their lives and their environment. A preacher like David Oyedepo (Winners' Chapel) who has a network of pastors all the country can encourage them to report salient and vital rural issues so that they could be addressed in the media.

Third and very important is the use of local or indigenous languages in such messages. The rural people as noted earlier are mainly illiterates who can neither read nor understand English language, which is the only language used by these preachers. Higgs and Mbithi (1977, p.17-19) acknowledges the efficacy of use of local languages for broadcasting like this:

Implicit in the use of language in broadcasting and in the high degree of audience penetration by broadcasting media is the fact that a single broadcast can reach an entire population at the same moment – with due allowance made for possible objections from pure physicists and students of electro-magnetic propagation – and, depending on the nature of the broadcast, a chain reaction to the broadcast can be triggered off immediately.

Luckily, the radio medium has the capacity to transcend both linguistic and literacy barriers by accommodating the use of different languages, sometimes, even two of them simultaneously. Time was when such radio preaching was done using an interpreter who translates the message in the local language for the benefit of those who do not understand English language.

The producers of media evangelical messages should be conscious of the time such messages should be received and make meaning to them. After the long day at farm or market, the rural men relax with keg of palm wine or local gin somewhere in the neighbourhood exchanging pleasantries or talking about the weather and their crops before retiring for the day. The women on their own part would hurry home from their places of business to prepare the supper. This brief period of relaxation is auspicious for timing of such evangelical messages in the community radio: a time when most if not all of them are at home and relaxing. At this time, the men would not feel disturbed by the message. It could even form a topic for deliberation when the programme is over.

The Community Radio Option

With the coming of private broadcasting in 1992, elaborate provisions were made for community broadcasting. Section 2.4.0 of the NBC code says: “Due to immense benefit to communal life, community broadcasting is desirable.” Section 2.4.1 of the code further

states: “Pursuant to section 2(1)b and c of Act 38, a community broadcast station shall be licenced subject to the following conditions:

- a. Operations shall be community-based;
- b. Programme content shall cater to the communal needs;
- c. Key operatives of the station shall be as much as possible, be members of the community.”

Section 2.4.2 says that other conditions shall be as may be determined by the commission from time to time. Section 2.1.1 provides for the category of licences that the commission will consider and these include licences for rural broadcasting and community broadcasting (2.1.1. sub-section I (I &ii).

But of all classes of broadcasting provided for by Act 38 of 1992, only community radio which is essentially meant to address rural issues including religious issues has remained till date, a stillbirth. Problems ranging from policy changes and different position papers have dealt serious blows to the takeoff of the programme. According Nigerian community Radio Coalition (2010, p.1):

Several documents have emerged – in the form of white papers, laws, constitutions and policies – to define the positions of government at different periods. Some of such documents compounded the problems they were meant to solve. Some others got overtaken by events and were on their way to the museum shortly after they were released. Some got stalled in the processing mills. Yet some others were not implemented, and the challenges that caused their existence remained. But we must note that several have been produced and implemented, giving birth to some of the dividends Nigerians now enjoy.

Community radio could have ably surmounted most of the problems identified in this study if it had not run into all the problems enumerated above. The language problem, the issues, the reach and timing could have been adequately addressed by the use of community radio. These are more reasons the stakeholders in the community industry should put in extra efforts to make community radio a reality.

There are however, positive signs that the community radio initiative will not die a natural death as such other lofty programmes in the country. In fact, in October 2010, President Goodluck Jonathan approved issuance of automatic licences for community radio

operators. According to Senitt (2010, n.p.): “Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has empowered the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to approve licences for the establishment of community radio stations without recourse to the presidency. President Jonathan gave the directive in Abuja, while declaring open the eighth biennial conference of Africa Broadcasters (Africast).” In approving the issuance of the licences, President Jonathan said:

You journalists must maintain professional integrity, by ensuring truth, balance and fairness in their coverage of political activities. That is the only way they can truly help to ensure that we achieve the desired free, fair and credible elections we all crave for in this country. Journalists, particularly the broadcasters should remember the paramount place of content in their programming. If we as Africans must tell our story, in our own words, to the rest of the world, then we must pay close attention to the production of edifying programmes using the best available technology.

With the approval of the president, it is expected that communities and community-based organizations will give community radio the same attention given to other classes of private broadcasting since 1992. The Lagos state council of the Nigerian Union of Journalists has set the ball rolling as it has formally presented its request for a community radio licence with plans to locate the station in Badagry where it will give voice to one of the voiceless rural communities in the Lagos area of Nigeria. This is a positive development; a step in the right direction. Many more communities are expected to follow suit and it is hoped that in less than two years, the signals from community radio stations will rule the Nigerian airwaves. Hopefully, media evangelism will get a good portion of the airtime.

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