

AN ASSESSEMENT OF THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA

JEGEDE, OYEBODE PAUL, PhD

**Department of Religious Studies,
Faculty of Humanities, Management and Social Sciences,**

**University of Kashere,
Gombe State, Nigeria.**

Email: jegedepaul19@gmail.com

Phone: +2347031890773

Abstract

Poverty has been identified as a worldwide problem to humanity. It is a phenomenon that has caused several afflictions and untold sufferings of varying degrees not only to Nigerian citizenry but the world at large. Poverty has many dimensions, but its causes include unemployment, social exclusion and a host of others. Several categories of people in schools at all levels cannot afford the school fee. Majority of the Nigerian workers can hardly feed well. Crime is on the increase today because people are compelled to do anything either good or evil so as to obtain the necessities of life. A lot of people in Nigeria are living on less than \$1.90 per day. The lackadaisical attitude of the government to alleviate or completely eradicate poverty has mandated other social factors to be involved in handling the issue. Therefore, the role of the church in the fight against poverty becomes relevant. The method adopted for this work was historical research method. This became imperative in order to trace the history and current trend of poverty in Nigeria and efforts made and still being made to at least alleviate it. The study concluded that poverty must not be understood as God's will for one's life. As such, it must be treated as a war which must be fought and won by all means. The work recommended that the number of poor people should be identified and loans should be given to them without interest. Also, Church and organizations can commence training on financial and economic matters that will lead to self-reliance of the needy ones in the society.

Keywords: Assessment, Role, Poverty, Poverty Alleviation, Church.

Introduction

The level of poverty in Nigeria and the world at large is almost reaching that of a plague. Billions of people world over live in abject poverty. Almost one billion people are living below the World Bank poverty line of \$1.90 per day. Half of the world lives with a household income below \$2.50 a day (Addision, T. and Demmey, L. 2007:18). In actual fact, poverty is a complex issue and many factors can be attributed to its scourge not only in Nigeria but all over the world. Poverty results from a lack of human, physical and financial capital needed to sustain livelihood, and from inequities in access to, control of, and benefits from resources, be they political, social, and or economic (Boff, L. 2010:45). Nigerian nation, for example, is racked with financial problems. As the rest of the world is progressing, getting richer and perhaps enjoying a better standard of living, Nigeria is deteriorating at alarming rate. The population grows poorer, hungrier, and sicker. The nation is being consumed by ethnic violence and striven and ravaged by diseases like HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Corona Virus and the number of widows and orphans increases on daily basis (UNDP, 2005: 222).

Similarly, according to the United Nations' 2005 Human Development Report, the five poorest countries in the world are Niger, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad, all located in Africa (UNDP, 2005). Not only that, in the last few decades, the quality of life in most African countries, including Nigeria, has steadily but surely declined: "Africa is the only part of the developing world where living standards have fallen over the past decade" (Kunhiyop, 2005:50, 52, 55). In the opinion of Liz Sly (2005:42) on poverty in Nigeria, he submitted that: "Falling living standards, environmental degradation and high population growth rates risk pushing already impoverished communities to the brink of their capacity to survive and into competition for scarce resources".

It is a well-known fact that poverty manifests itself in many ways. Some of the most common are prostitution, robbery, street-life, high rate of unemployment, people living in squalor, shanties, shackles, high infant mortality, acute mal-nutrition, short life expectancy, human degradation, living in over-crowded and often poorly ventilated homes and environments (Ehiema and Onimhawo, 2015:259). From one corner of the earth to another is visible presence of poverty. Beggars roam the streets of most cities, laying siege on car owners and begging for alms in order to feed their families.

Therefore, the above situation raises questions about why there are so many poor people and why a few have such riches. In what ways is the Church involved in the fight against poverty especially in Nigeria, the focus of this paper? What should the Church do in light of the above grim statistics on the high rate of poverty? In fairness to the body of Christ, she has been involved in one way or the other in the fight against poverty. However, in the view of A.O. Dada (2014), the Church has outlived its social usefulness because some of its activities in the past and even in contemporary time tend to promote and perpetuate the culture of poverty. In spite of this criticism, the intention of this paper is to examine the root causes of poverty in Nigeria, its effects and relevance of the Church in the fight against poverty.

Definition of Terms

Poverty

Poverty is a state or condition in which a person or community lacks the basic needs of life or financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living (NISER, 2001:255). Thus, poverty means that the income level from employment is so low that basic human needs cannot be met. This implies that it is a state where families might go without proper housing, clean water, healthy food, and medical attention (Burdin, 2015:27). Eugenia George (2013:16) submitted that poverty refers to a lack of command over basic consumption needs. This usually occurs when there is an inadequate level of consumption giving to insufficient food, clothing, shelter and moreover, the lack of certain capacities, such as being able to participate with dignity in society. The World Bank's definition (www.compassion.org/blogs: 2020) says, "a person is considered poor if his or her income level falls below some minimum level necessary to meet basic needs". It sets this minimum level, or international poverty line as living on less than \$1.90 a day.

Poverty Alleviation

Poverty alleviation embraces the efforts at all levels of governance be it government, or non-government organizations, individuals, and corporate bodies, to consign poverty, at least in its alarming dimensions to history (Beisner, 2008:185, 194). In Nigerian context, poverty alleviation refers to efforts aimed at reducing the magnitude of “poverty” defined in terms of the proportion of the population living below the poverty line. Poverty alleviation aims at improving the quality of life for those people currently living in poverty. Thus, another word that is often used is “poverty reduction”.

Church

The New Testament word for “church” is *ekklesia* which means the “called out ones”. The nature of the church is too broad to be exhausted in the meaning of the one word *ekklesia*. Therefore, to capture its significance, the New Testament authors utilize a rich array of metaphorical descriptions like, “the people of God”, “the kingdom of God”, “the temple of God”, “the bride of Christ”, and “the body of Christ” among others. The church, owing to its proximity to the poor, remains one of the major stakeholders of poverty alleviation (Adeloye, 2016: 18).

Suffice it to say that it is the mission of the church to provide the kind of place where spiritual life can flourish. To this extend, it is the primary mission of the Church to; preach the gospel; teach the saved; provide a spiritual atmosphere; reproduce the characteristic of Christ; and bring joy to mankind. This is the paramount objective of the Church in the world. Yet, one wonders; what about the poor and the unfortunate? Does the Church not have an obligation to them? In the opinion of M.T. Speckman (2001:42), it is necessary to do well and relieve the afflicted, the needy and the poor but that is not the absolute mission of the Church (Acts 6:1-7).

Church’s View of Poverty

Poverty in the socio-economic circles is viewed as the inability of individuals to meet basic needs. As such, it is often associated with characteristics unemployment, inability to provide food for oneself and family; the state of not being able to educate one’s children, poor health and lack of access to good medical care. The economists and social scientists see poverty in this way but the Church is of the belief that poverty goes beyond the level mentioned above. To the Church, poverty is “many-faced”, “many-layered” and “multi-dimensional”. Thus, poverty cannot be reduced to quantities of good that are, or rather are not available (Oyugi, 2004: 17).

To most theologians and biblical scholars like Guitierrez, Boff and Theuri, people that suffer poverty are often affected psychologically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. At the same time, poverty affects their family, community and social relations. Judging from this, it is therefore not possible to consider any single dimension of poverty in isolation as this would drastically reduce one’s understanding of the phenomenon.

The Christian sacred book refers to poverty as a societal phenomenon. According to Bible Dictionary Index and Concordance, it defines poverty as lack, need and want (Guitierrez, 1984: 32). This sentiment is well captured in the book of Genesis, which proclaims that “there

will still be five years of famine; and I do not want you, your family; and your livestock to suffer (Gen. 45:11). Numerous cases of poverty are cited in the Bible to confirm that poverty is a reality. If the Church and Christians in particular are to be “salt” and “light” in the society, they need to understand what the scriptures say about poverty and what it means for how they should live. In the Old Testament, the poor does not strictly refer to one who does not have the material things of life, but also includes one who suffers from social oppression, humiliation, affliction, distress, helplessness, misery, and wretchedness. They are those who are powerless to determine their destiny and meet their own needs (Boff, 2008: 14).

In the same vein, the Old Testament also classifies as poverty, including that of material lack of powerlessness and thus has special concern for some groups of people who appeared handicapped to help themselves considering the circumstances (Kunhiyop, 2008: 142-143). As a result of this, J.H. Christopher (2004: 176) opined that, “Poverty in the Old Testament was a plight which might occur to anyone, but there were certain groups of people who were powerless for reasons in addition to poverty”.

During the time of the prophets, being poor became synonymous with being oppressed. For this reason, in his condemnation of oppression, Amos uses the Hebrew words for “poor” except *rush*; “they sell the righteous for silver and the needy *ebhyon* for a pair of sandals. They trample the heads of the poor *anawim* (Amos 2:2; 4:1; Isa. 10:1-2; 11:4). However, the most prominent cause of poverty was injustice and exploitation of the poor by the rich (Isa. 3:14; Jer.5:27-28; 6:13; 22. 13-17). Yet, not all who were rich exploited the poor. Job, for instance, was an exceedingly wealth man and was compassionate to the poor and needy. He could even be described as “a father to the needy” (29:16). This brief survey shows that the Old Testament testifies that God cares for the poor and that oppression arouses His anger.

Although the New Testament does not contain such detailed instructions regarding the treatment of the poor as the Old Testament does, yet, there are still similar orders concerning the poor. Jesus, for example, witnessed the state of poverty among the people and proclaimed the Gospel of liberation against socio-economic injustices and political oppression as implied thus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty of sight to the captives; to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save His people” (Lk. 4:18-19; Isa. 62).

The above message could be interpreted as a message of hope to those who were materially and spiritually depressed in life. The good news Jesus brought to mankind was not only meant for spiritual nourishment but it also to take care of the physical needs of the body by setting man free from all manner of suffering, including social, economic and political injustices (Kunhiyop, 2008, 149). The poor being referred to were those who are materially poor, who die of hunger and diseases, who are illiterate, unemployed, the exploited, persons denied the right to be “persons”. Thus, the poor do not only lack simply material goods but they also miss, on the level of human dignity, and full participation in socio-political life. Those found in this category are principally peasants, manual labourers, marginalized urban dwellers, and in particular children and women of those social groups (Sider, 2012:6,9).

Since the time of Jesus, the Christian Church has considered itself as the Church of the poor. Christ followers have been charged with the responsibility of taking the Gospel to the world. The condition Christ imposed on Christianity when asked, “why do you call me Lord, Lord, and yet you do not do what I tell you?” (Lk. 6:46) explains the Church’s social responsibility today which among other include visiting the prisoners, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, or the captives. The gospel commitment of the Church should be like that of Christ who took on full solidarity with humanity, and therefore, should be a commitment to those in need.

It is unfortunate to say the least that the Church and Christians in general in many poverty-stricken societies have failed to obey Jesus’ call to be salt and light. They have instead contributed to the exploitation of the poor. In the view of John Stott (2002:28):

“Christians are to be fundamentally different from non-Christians; we must permeate non-Christian society; we must influence non-Christian society. We cannot bring good news to the poor unless we ourselves are good. When Christians are involved furthering the rottenness, darkness, degradation and deprivation of others, it is indeed grievous”.

It is therefore imperative for the Church to study the moral impasse that is affecting the societies they found themselves and come up with workable alleviation programmes beneficial for the poor masses. If the Church were to covenant before God and before one another to be uncompromisingly honest, to defend the poor, and to do all it can within its power to better their lives, it would indeed be a source of good news to the poor.

Poverty in Nigeria

Poverty is a complex and critical issue in the Nigerian society. The scourge of poverty is prevalent and can be seen in all spheres of life in Nigeria. It has persistently wreck havoc in the life of its victims. In most cases, the problem of poverty in Nigeria can be attributed to overpopulation, war and civil unrest, gross corruption, and unemployment. Its effects on the citizens can also be captured in lack and deprivation in the basic necessities of life. Concerning poverty, J. S. Ukpong (1993:172) submitted that;

“...poverty has earned recognition in the extent of its ravaging society and the affairs of humanity at the international, national and local levels...the need exists now for urgent actions towards its eradication and control...Indeed, poverty is a snare. It is dehumanizing...It must be eradicated”.

In Nigeria, the desire to migrate is linked with the desire to succeed in life and avoid a poverty-stricken situation as it is in the society, where the poor who are in majority have been marginalized by the minority of the citizenry who wield control over huge proportion of national wealth. Thus, Ronald J. Sider (2007:76) asserted that “frequently, the rich are wealthy precisely because they have oppressed the poor”. Moreover, the oppression that poor people suffers does not always come from another country but from the minority within the country. Half of the nation’s resources are squandered daily on the elites who allocate huge sums of money to themselves as salaries while the meager ₦30,000 wage paid to Nigerian workers is debated. Government officials enrich their families and ethnic and tribal factors are allowed

to take precedence over commitment to the economic health of the nation. The end-result is that,

“Most Nigerians have come to believe that unless their “own men” are in government, they are unable to secure those socio-economic amenities that are disbursed by the government. Hence, government decisions about the citing of industries, appointments to positions in the public services are closely examined in terms of other benefits to the various ethnic groups in the country” (Nnoli, 1980: 176).

The above problem is not unique to Nigerian nation. It can also be seen in other countries the world over. Ethnic rivalry and a lack of co-operation make it almost impossible for any economic system to succeed. On the individual level, the author of this paper is of the view that poverty in Nigeria is not always caused by oppression. Studies have shown that people become poor in Nigeria just as in any other nation for variety of reasons:

“Some because of their own lack of discipline and initiative.... Other people are genuinely victims, suffering from injury, diseases, or catastrophes such as famine, and earthquakes...Still others are poor because of economic exploitation” (Billings, 2013:343).

In the attempt to squash the plague of poverty in Nigeria, government initiated different policies and programmes between 1986 to 2004. Among these programmes are: Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFFRI); Better Life Programme (BLP); Directorate of Employment (NDE); People’s Bank of Nigeria (PBN); Community Bank (CB); Family Support Programme (FSP); Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP); Poverty Eradication Programme (PEP); National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP); and National Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS). The aims of these programmes were to ameliorate the suffering of the people by providing them employment opportunities and access to credit facilities so as to enable them to establish their own businesses.

It is interesting to say that the current administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, in 2016 budget, earmarked about #500 billion to alleviate poverty in Nigeria (P.M. News, 2016). There is also the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), where one million extremely poor Nigerians will receive #5,000 monthly. The money will be paid directly to the beneficiaries through a payment system that is being worked out. The World Bank and the Bill Gate Foundations are also collaborating with the Presidency to develop an efficient payment system. All together, about #60 billion has been estimated to be paid out to extremely poor Nigerians (Kunhiyop, 2008).

In Nigeria, the mismanagement of the economy and the subsequent introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), led to a sharp increase in the cost of goods and services while the income of the Nigerian workers dropped. The imposition of programmes like these has had a negative effect on the economies, not only in Nigeria but in African continent. In the words of Stewart:

“The stabilization and adjustment policies advocated by the IMF and the World Bank and widely adopted in Africa have not succeeded in restoring growth in most countries; indeed,

they have often been accompanied by continued economic deterioration. Moreover, in many respects, the policies are pushing African economies away from a desirable long-term structure especially because they are dampening comparative advantage in non-traditional agriculture and industry” (Stewart, 2006:33).

To this extent, the national government should be encouraged to introduce programmes that will reduce economic hardship and alleviate the suffering of the masses. Such programmes should be targeted to groups such as the rural poor, civil servants, widows and orphans. In Nigeria, the government has been able to establish a Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) to provide loans to families to start small businesses. Similarly, a Woman’s Right Advocacy and Protection Agency (WRAPA) was established to protect the right of women, who are usually degraded and abused in the Nigerian society (Alcon, 2010: 231). Neither of the programmes mentioned above sets out to produce an artificial equality, but each seeks to alleviate suffering and give the poor an opportunity to find relief.

Causes of Poverty in Nigeria

The Nigerian nation is approximately 200 million in population. Owing to this figure, it is always referred to as the most populous nation in Africa and third after China and India in the world. Although the nation’s economy seems to be expanding, but there is no corresponding improvement in the lives of her citizenry, rather, abject poverty is the order of the day. In order to alleviate poverty in Nigeria, the root causes must first be identified. A few of these were discussed below:

Gross Corruption of Government Officials

Corruption in Nigeria has become a cankerworm. It has not only eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society, but it has also soiled the character and personality of every Nigerian, more especially those in power or position of authority. Government corruption is endemic in Nigeria. Government officials often take payments from oil companies that are supposed to go into public trusts—payments which can run into several billions of \$USD and siphon such money into private bank accounts. When these sharp practices happened, the poor and under-served populations within the country become directly affected. If these huge amounts being siphoned were used to build the much needed social amenities like electricity, road and a host of other facilities are provided, the sufferings of the masses would be alleviated and Nigeria as a nation would be better for it.

Bad Leadership and Political Corruption

Leadership is service to humanity and God. A leader is a facilitator and administrator, who directs and controls available resources in order to ensure that the objectives of the group are achieved (Jegede, 2018: 131). M.M. Akangbe submitted that “bad leadership is one that lacks accountability and encourages corruption and other vices which impede the realization of good governance and robs the people of the benefits there-of” (Jegede and Isaac, 2017:16). In Nigeria, bad leadership and corruption triumph because of selfish desire to get rich by robbing the poor the benefits of government. Thus, J.J. Omoregbe (Omoregbe, 2004:32) is of the view that,

“The political setting in Nigeria is made of dishonest and fraudulent people whose main purpose of coming to government is to enrich themselves and their cronies at the expense of

the poor majority. Embezzlement of public funds by those whom the funds are entrusted have become the order of the day”.

In the opinion of Asakwe, right from 1960 when Nigeria gained independence, the political elite pursued selfish interest at the expense of the poor. They demonstrated smuggle and scrabble for power and shared the spoils of political office. They looted public treasury with impunity. Judging from this act, Sider accused the leaders of and political elites as “participants in a system that dooms even more people to agony and death than slavery did” (Sander, 2006:72).

Poor Access to Education

A lack of a robust educational system in Nigeria has been a cog in the wheel of development at all levels. Knowledge can only be a source of power only if it is readily made available through establishment of schools from primary, secondary to post secondary levels. It is estimated that about 10.5 million Nigerian children do not attend school at all and regrettably, about 60 percent of these children are girls (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics, 2020). These problems are profound in the northern part of the country where the terrorist group like Boko Haram deems western education as evil and against their belief. Education gives many the needed skills either for self-improvement, or government job. It is a means to escape impoverishment but the lack of educational opportunity is a major cause of poverty in Nigeria.

High Rate of Crimes and Conflicts

The incessant unrest and attacks by the insurgents like Boko Haram and Fulani Herd-men in the North, and the various militant groups in the East have created gaping hole in the society. This has translated to an increase in the poverty levels in the country. Through the activities of Boko Haram in the North and militancy in the East, sources of livelihood are being destroyed on daily basis, businesses are shot down and investors are driven away and these further added to poverty rate and misery level of the masses. Owing to violent conflicts, people tend to embrace migration and are faced with the challenge of settlement. Examples of this can be seen in the high rate of the internally displaced persons living in different camps across the nation. They have, therefore become a part of the poverty stricken populace (Nwanna and Njideka, 2017, 257). It is the belief of the writer of this paper that adequate security and proper re-integration of internally displaced persons will go a long way in reducing the ever increase number of poor people in Nigeria.

Low Economic Growth Performance

A viable economy is essential for provision of employment and thereby reducing poverty levels in the country. The Nigerian economy has a low performance, and growth rate is very slow. This, in turn, has contributed to the high poverty level in the country. It has also affected employment opportunity which would have been possible if the economic is stable and growth is sustained. A diversification of the economy will provide more employment and hereby contribute to a reduction in poverty among the citizens. Similarly, infrastructure that supports economic growth at all levels is essential and must be put in place in order to ensure speedy economic growth and reduce the rate of poverty in Nigeria. Such economic structure includes things like access to micro-credit that help farmers invest in their crops and entrepreneurs lift their businesses off the ground. Micro-credit is an important tool for

Nigerian masses working to escape poverty (Burdin: 2010). However many Nigerians, especially in the rural communities do not have the means to escape their circumstances. As such, setting up economic structures that empower them is vital to combating poverty within the nation.

Effects of Poverty in Nigeria

On the possible effects of poverty in any nation not just in Nigeria is that it causes social tensions and threatens to divide a nation because of the issue of inequalities, in particular income inequality. This is usually the case when wealth in a country is poorly distributed among its citizens. In arguing that the gap between the rich and the poor is sinful and should be eliminated, Sider (2006) agrees with Paul's injunction in 2 Corinthians 8:13-14 that;

"Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time, your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality".

Judging from the aforementioned citation, Sider (2007) claims that Paul clearly enunciates the principle of economic equality which is lacking in the country. To Sider (2007), God sides with the poor because He disapproves of extreme wealth and poverty...There is equality in the distribution of wealth by the few rich because justice demands that they end their oppression and share with the poor.

One of the effects of poverty on children's development is to lead them to build an anti-social behavior that acts as a psychological protection against their hostile environment. Such children therefore have the tendency of becoming menace to the society (Litcher, 2017:24). Discrimination and social exclusion often push them to more aggressiveness and less self-control and nuance in reaction to stressful events. As they grow up, these behaviours are more entrenched in their personalities and often-time considered unrecoverable.

It is unquestionable that crime ranks high among the effects of poverty in Nigeria nation. High crime rate can be attributed to lack of unemployment for those that are employable, non-availability of capital to even start a venture that is profit yielding and very low incomes for those working, create an environment where kids cannot even get basic education needed for better life (Gyimah, 2006:42). As for those who can actually go to school, they simply do not see the essence of hard work or how it can even improve their lives as they do not see any remarkable progress in the lives of their parents who toil day and night, yet, leaving in chronic and abject poverty (Ugwu, 2016:17).

Another unhealthy effect of poverty in Nigeria is that poverty has made electorate to sell their voting rights, leading to the election of corrupt and arrogant politicians who are only interested in looting the national treasury and who do not have respect for the rule of law or genuine desire for sustenance of the democratic system (Macaver and Maiangwa, 2003: 28).

Roles of the Church in Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

The Nigerian nation is blessed with both human and material resources yet, the country is ranked among the poor in Africa and the world at large. This fact is supported by the results

of a study attributed to the National Bureau of Statistics which confirmed that about 70million Nigerians are living below poverty line. The 2007/2008 United Nation Development ratings also placed Nigeria at the 158th position out of 177 countries. Nigeria struggled at the bottom of the list with countries like Burkina Faso, Chad, Sierra Leone, Niger Republic, Guinea Bissau, Mali and Central African Republic (Nigerian Bureau of Statistic:2020). These are countries that could not even command the resources available to some of the 774 Local Government Areas listed in the 1999 Constitution. No doubt, Nigeria lacks nothing in terms of human and material resources however, there is no corresponding benefits in the standard of living of her citizenry.

At this juncture, one wonders if the Church is still alive to her social responsibility? Or what does the church have to say to those in the community who are daily oppressed by the economic and political structures? Every church and individual Christian must ask; what are we doing to feed the hungry and her help the poor? What are we doing to secure justice for the poor? What are we doing to uphold the cause of the needy in Nigerian society? Historically, the Church stood at the forefront of giving freely to the poor, caring for the widows, taking in destitute orphans, visiting the sick, and caring for the dying. We need to take seriously the social implications of Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 to the Church; we need not only to preach to people and convert them, but are also to teach them how to live in a way that pleases God. The social relevance of the Church is best articulated in the words of Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2003) when he submitted that:

Today, our country gropes in the dark, looking for a new dawn. The Church... is expected to play a prominent role in her rebirth, reformation, and reconstruction, through a redefinition of national morality, code of conduct and discipline...The Church carries a sacred burden to return our society to the path of sanity, discipline and total submission to the will of the Creator.

One of the fundamental roles of the Church is to act as an agent of social transformation. From the time past, the Church has been responding to the scourge of poverty in the world and Nigeria is no exception. However, has the Church's intervention in the fight against poverty been effective? And to what extent the Church in Nigeria has been trying to address the problem of poverty? The Church in Nigeria has been offering conceptual platforms, through motivational teachings with the hope of re-orienting the mentality of the individuals in order to enhance productivity, efficiency and wealth (Dada, 2004: 95). One of such motivational teachings is "prosperity gospel".

According to A.O. Dada (2004), the concept of "prosperity gospel" is that God's plan for all believers is to have them free from sickness and material poverty. The proponents of prosperity gospel in Nigeria believed that poverty, diseases and other forms of deprivations are some of the consequences of the fall of man. However, Jesus through his death brought redemption, not only from sin but also from material poverty (Ukpong, 1993). Therefore, for this message to be effectual, church members and general populace are often admonished to operate and live along some principles and to think and confess wealth in order to bring into operation forces and angels in charge of wealth. This is known among them as "positive confession" (Loveth, 2008: 714).

More so, there are programmes run by the churches and non-government organizations (NGOs) that play important roles in helping the poor. In Nigeria, mission agencies have long operated the only development programmes designed to combat poverty. They have provided education and medical care and have improved agricultural production so that the farmers are able to take care of themselves and their families. Among the Christians NGOs that aim to raise the standard of the poor in Nigeria include;

- a. The Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria (CRUDAN), which has the goal of promoting “Christian wholistic development by enabling the Church in Nigeria to empower the poor in the name of Jesus Christ,” (CRUDAN, 2020) and
- b. People Oriented Development (POD) of ECWA aims to “promote and improve sustainable living conditions through effective community mobilization and capacity building of the underprivileged communities in Nigeria” (POD, 2020). It has provided sustainable water supplies, encouraged sustainable agricultural practices, improved community healthcare and sanitation, and focused on the economic empowerment of women and young people.

Furthermore, in the attempt to address the issue of poverty in Nigeria, the Church has taken a practical step by establishing different centers for skill acquisition and other people oriented development programmes. It is rather unfortunate that most of these church-base interventions in addressing the problem of poverty in Nigeria had little or no effects. In fact, a good number of institutions that helped in alleviating the problem of poverty bequeathed by the missionaries to the churches in Nigeria are in a sorry state.

The problem of the nation is not only lack of human and material resources rather it has to do with mismanagement of the available resources occasioned by corruption and lack of discipline. The Church therefore has the mandate to promote national rebirth that will facilitate moral transformation of the led and the leaders (Nyerere, 2001: 104). This becomes imperative for Nigerians to be genuinely transformed morally. As such, to effectively carry out this mandate of social transformation, the Church must first purge itself inwardly. In other words, this calls for inner cleansing. It is only a church with clean slate of integrity and probity that can speak confidently and courageously to the corrupt leaders at all levels of government.

Promotion of social justice is another role the Church can play in the fight against poverty in Nigeria. Injustice pervades every nook and cranny of the nation. There is injustice at both corporate and individual levels. The Church must therefore empathize with the poor and the hungry, the dispossessed and the oppressed in the society. They must be the voice of the voiceless. The Church can do this by constantly speaking out against the evils in the society; by speaking the truth to power that unjustly maltreat and create conditions that impoverish the lives of the poor masses.

It is equally expected of the Churches in Nigeria to promote ethical values that enhance both personal and natural developments. A.O. Dada (2007) submitted that the entry into politics by the Nigerian Armed Forces has eroded the traditions, customs, values, and standard much cherished in the society. Excellence in all spheres of life was sacrificed on the altar of nepotism.

The nation's work ethics was badly affected... The social implication of this is that get-rich-syndrome became the order of the day (2007:8). The Church should stand in the gap by promoting such core values like hard-work, integrity, honesty, probity and selflessness.

In order to curtail the scourge of poverty in the society, the Church should be at the forefront of promoting the spirit of communal living that existed among the early Christians, in which they shared things in common and the needy were not neglected. As a community of faith, the Church can pull resources together to help members and non-members alike as the need arises. Through this means, the sufferings of the less privileged in the society, the widows, and orphans can at least be reduced if not completely eradicated.

In the same vein, the Church cannot afford to stay off empowering the less privileged, hence the need to urgently rediscover her economic viability to aid the poor and ultimately cater for her spiritual objective (2003:160). The Church in Nigeria can engage in entrepreneurship without undermining salvific objective sanctioned by Apostle Paul, who showed his converts that he was self-supporting and self-sufficient and therefore did not rely on their resources to survive (Phil. 4:19). Paul could boldly say this because he was into "leather-work" business. Judging from this, it is apparent that along with the spreading of the Gospel, Paul was still making some living through his trade along with Aquilas who was in the same business with him (2003:177).

Paul demonstrated that the combination of evangelism and discipleship should not be an excuse to meaningfully engage in a vocation. He taught and modeled the importance of working to the young Christians in the early church. He wrote:

Keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day laboring...(2 Thess. 3:6-12).

The above passage warns against laziness and encourages hard work, which prevents poverty. Thus, the Church is likewise expected to constantly encourage both believers and non-believers to develop a mature understanding of work. However, it is not enough to encourage people to work hard, the Church must also encourage employers of labour either at private or Federal, State or Local levels to pay a living wage in the fight against poverty in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The sacred book of the Christians clearly shows that God cares for the poor and oppressed in the society and as such, the Church must do likewise. The Church's involvement in human development is a sacred responsibility under God's divine direction and it is rooted in justice. Injustice springs from the helplessness of people living in abject poverty and lack the ability to free themselves from the shackles of poverty. The work examined, therefore, caused and effects of poverty in Nigeria and the roles of the Church, it is a clear fact that the Church in Nigeria cannot afford to shy away from confronting the scourge of poverty in the land.

Recommendations

1. The work recommended that any effective solution to the problem of poverty in Nigeria must involve not only economic remedies but also spiritual and moral solutions.
2. It is also expected of the Church to live up to its spiritual and social responsibilities, to give generously, to encourage governments to help the poor by relieving heavy debts and to work with church-sponsored agencies or non-governmental organizations to start programmes and projects intended to help specific target groups.
3. The Church must involve, engage and actively participate in social structures and economic organizations (like providing micro-credit schemes, agric-business, co-operative system and other empowerment programmes) that will alleviate poverty to the bearest level.
4. The Nigerian government, as a matter of urgency must formulate pragmatic poverty related policies and programmes with purposeful implementation devoid of corruption but high level of transparency.

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