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THE CHURCH'S MORAL OBLIGATION TOWARDS POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA.

Adesina A. Olubitan, & Agnes O. Adeyeye,

ABSTRACT

In time past, the Church inherited a form of theology from the missionaries in which they failed to analyse the social impact and the significance of the major Christian themes for the transformation of the society. The Church then was totally separated from the culture of the society which prevented them from seeing anything good in what the society has to offer. What the Church believed then was that 'worldly concerns are seen to be obstacles to the life of perfection'. However, as the world began to turn to a global village and members of the church seen to be the same set of people that constitute the society, the 'syllabus' of Christianity and the Church theology must begin to change. Therefore, this article prescribed a social mission for religious institutions that would challenge the status quo theologies that reduce the poor to apathy and merely promise paradise after death. It recommends that, the Church should change her behaviour towards the society by taking the challenge to carry the society's cross, i.e. alleviation of poverty. The Church's obligation to the poor therefore forms the basis of our discussion as we attempted an assessment of the Church and her obligations to the poor. The basis of our assessment were highlighted in the arguments that follows under the concept of moral obligation. Our findings indicated that, instances abound in the bible and in history where God arises on behalf of the poor, hence using the bible as our basis; we argued that, theologically, the Church has an obligation to the poor. The research instrument of participatory observation was used to interpret our data using historical and experiential methods.

KEY WORDS: Moral Obligation, Poverty Alleviation, Moral Institution, Social Development

Introduction

There are usually different views and perceptions on the issue of poverty and poverty alleviation in Nigeria. Okunmadewa (in Oshitelu 2001), noted that poverty is more easily recognized than defined. As a result, a universally

acceptable definition of the term has remained elusive. Poverty, he continues, is a multi-dimensional socio-economic and cultural situation that transcends economic description and analysis (Okunmadewa in Oshitelu; 2001:78-79). This description is quite acceptable in view of the situation of the poor in Nigeria. Stemming from this understanding, Akanmidu (1995:44-53) further articulates the situation of the poor as those whose lives' needs have permanently overwhelmed his resources for life's sustenance. Consequently, he asserts that, "poverty, in its true meaning, is the state of lacking the means to exist adequately" (Akanmidu, 1995: 44).

From the ethical perspective, the reason is that poverty affects the complete being of man-body, soul and spirit. Hence, poverty can influence or impact on people's thoughts, character or behaviour positively or negatively. The reason that informed this scenario hinges on the basis that one's behavioural pattern and personal self is concomitant to human beings' crave to become somebody of worth in life. In view of this, it thus connotes that poverty has the potential of affecting one's morality or even the complete moral life of a person. This is where the position of the church comes in. The church as the body of Christ should constitute a dominating force that will champion the cause of the poor. As highlighted in Luke 4:18-19, the poor constitutes the central focus of the messianic mission of Christ. They hold such privileged position that they become the determinant measure of blessedness or damnation on the day of reckoning (Matt.25:31-46). These biblical indicators punctuate the fact that, to alleviate poverty in Nigeria the position of the church cannot be over-emphasized. Indeed, the Christian church in Nigeria must assume moral obligation for its fight against poverty to be viable. We shall therefore articulate in this paper the moral obligation of the church to give, especially to the poor in order to assist them in the alleviation of poverty.

The Church Institution in Nigeria

Sustainable evangelization of Nigeria began in the 1830s through the activities of ex-slaves from Freetown who were migrating to the coastal areas of modern Nigeria. With the expedition to the Niger in 1841 by some Europeans and Africans who were ex-slaves, the planting of Christianity in Nigeria became a reality (Ajani 2004:20). Perhaps one name worth mentioning among the team of the 1841 expedition is Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African Bishop, an ex-slave, who later became a great influence in the spread of Christianity in Nigeria.

The first mission of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was established in Badagry in 1845 and later in Abeokuta in 1864 thereby leading the expedition to Yoruba land. Earlier in 1842, the Methodist Missionary Society (MMS) arrived in Badagry (Ajayi, 1965: xiv); while the Presbyterians of the Church of England Mission arrived in Calabar in 1846 (Ajayi, 1965: xiv). Ajani (2004:21) observes that the Southern Baptists from America sent their first missionary, J.T. Bowen to Yoruba land in 1850. The Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) on the other hand, started its mission work in Yoruba land in the 1860s. But it was in 1875 that they were able to make their initial contact outside Lagos. However, the Holy Ghost Fathers did not arrive in eastern Nigeria until 1884 (Ajayi, 1965: xiv). In the Northern part of Nigeria, Christian mission work began from the 1900s by the CMS (Ajani, 2004:21). The growth of Christian Missions continued until the establishment of African Independent Churches in Nigeria.

By the end of the nineteenth century, missions have been established in every part of Africa. The new churches were supported and controlled by Europeans at first, but as they grew stronger, a larger measure of self-support and self-administration was achieved. In some instances, it is observed that converts broke away completely from European organizations and even Europeans theology and formed independent African denominations (Fajana & Biggs, 1964:153). Fajana and Biggs further stated that, recent developments show that it is possible for African branches of the main Christian denominations to achieve autonomy and complete self-government without severing the links with the mother church (Fajana & Biggs, 1964:153). For example, the Methodist church of Nigeria was granted full autonomy in September 1962 and became an equal partner with Methodist churches of other lands. This was the situation at the wake of nationalism and Ethiopianism in the Africa religious history during the colonial era

However, it is worth noticing that Christianity has been active in Nigeria for close to forty years when the first visible signs of an indigenous response to this new religious phenomenon began to emerge. Early movements took the form of independent churches, motivated by the desire to cast off the yoke of white denomination in religious affairs (Hackett, 1991:285). We must point out here that, there are variations in these indigenous churches. First, we have "African Churches" or African Indigenous Churches that seceded from the major protestant missions in Lagos (Anglican, Methodist and Baptist) from the 1880's until 1971. The major schisms are Native Baptist church, the United Native African church and United African Methodist Church (Hackett, 1991:285). We also have the African Independent Churches or Movements,

which have precursors such as: William Wade Harris, Garrick Brade, Orimolade, and Babalola to mention but four.

Concomitantly, the various schisms and secessions dragged on to the wave of revival movements which arose in the early part of the twentieth century, in both western and eastern Nigeria to make a more radical stand against Western missionary Christianity (Hackett in Olupona and Falola, 1991: 285-286). Hackett (1991:286) opines that the majority of the movements professed a Christian orientation, but sought a more African way of worship, in terms of symbolism, music, dance and a more direct religious experience characterized by dreams, visions and spirit possession, and spontaneous emotionalism. Hackett (1991:286) notes further that, while many movements called for a break with traditional religious allegiances and reliance on traditional charms and medicines, in essence.

they are seeking a rapprochement with African worldviews. An existential recognition of witchcraft and other malevolent forces, counteracted by spiritual of faith healing based on the holistic theory of sickness and misfortune, and communal fellowship and participation, formed the mainstays of what came to be described as the prayer of prophet-healing or spiritual churches. This early wave of religious independence was located chiefly in the Yoruba-speaking areas of Southwestern Nigeria and was referred to as the Aladura (praying people) movements.

The African Independent Churches constitute a significant portion of Christianity in Africa and a unique spirit in African Christianity. The developments of the Independent churches have attained a dimension unprecedented in the history of the Christian church in Nigeria. These independent church movements have been founded by separation from parent churches, missions, or independent churches in a few cases, under the initiative of a dynamic leader (Falk; 1979:452). Thus, R.C. Mitchell contends that:

What motivated Aladura leaders and their followers, was a desire to reform existing mission protestant Christianity and make it

more relevant to the needs of the daily African life (in Ayegboyin & Ishola; 1999:21).

Apparently, the fact remains that, these religious movements did not emerge in a historical or social vacuum. They were conditioned by a number of factors ranging from spiritual, cultural, political, social and circumstantial factors (Ayegboyin & Ishola; 1999:21).

The rise of the African Independent Churches (AICs) in Nigeria was a phenomenon of the post-World War I. The Churches felt there was need for spiritual revival to liberate man from the negative grip of the war (Peel; 1968). To achieve this, charismatic indigenous churches emerged, whose focus was spiritual re-orientation designed to free the mind of the people, and also to purify the church. The factor that precipitated the establishment of AICs in Nigeria, apparently, was as a result of concern for humanity. It was in an attempt to find spiritual alternative to the sub-human conditions suffered during the war that made way for the rise of AICs. What is not certain is, whether the AIC was able to find solution to the degrading problem of the human person, which is poverty. Because, in addition to the aforementioned, the economic depression which followed the first World War led to the death of over 25,000 people in the Southern Nigeria alone (Peel; 1968:102). The AICs felt the white dominated churches were complacent in alleviating the lingering and festering suffering of the people. Attempt to solve these problems subsequently led to the emergence of the AICs movement.

One factor that simply characterized the AIC was their dependence on prayer as the ultimate solution to human problems. This is apparent, because, in 1901 when there was an outbreak of terrible influenza epidemic disease, especially in the Southern part of Nigeria, the AICs formed themselves into various groupings in order to combat the effect of this deadly disease. It was the belief of the group that God will answer their prayers and heal them without the use of medicine. In the same vein in the 1920's, there was an outbreak of bubonic plague and small-pox. Since the European medicine had failed to provide an effective cure to these frightening epidemics, the indigenous people sought for solution elsewhere (Peel; 1968: 103). They sought the solution in the Indigenous African churches. It is obvious that, from the outset, the AICs have been trying to find spiritual alternative into the problems of humanity. Writing about the Aladura in Yoruba land, Peel (1968:103) observed that:

their aim is to be good Christians within Yoruba society, whose general terms they

accept, to change it as far as they can, and to intercede with God for it.

The above is an indicator of the concern of the AICs within their society. They believed that there is no problem that cannot be surmount, if taken to God.

Consequently, they result to interceding for men. All these efforts are as a result of their determination and utmost desire to change their environment for good. Omoyajowo (1978:106) also avers that, we must not be oblivious to the claim of the Aladura churches that in them man can find solutions to his existential problems: his health problems, his fear of witches and other spiritual enemies, his economic and social problems. Omoyajowo notes that there is no end to what they claim God can do through them. All this meet the aspirations of the typical Nigerian, whatever his learning and whatever his status. These roles have, therefore, continued to boost the prestige of the Aladura in Nigerian society. Despite all these however, there is still a lingering poverty situation in Nigeria. The AICs attempt to address the socio-economic situation of the people from the spiritual perspective might in recent times not be ideal solution to the menace of poverty. Although the Aladura believe that society must be freed from all the besetting problems of sickness, fear, insecurity, etc., so that the spirit of God could freely operate in their lives and ultimately manifests the kingdom of God (Omoyajowo (1978:108). But the problem on ground demands for a more practical approach.

In view of all these efforts, C.O. Oshun (in I.A.B. Balogun, 1988:81) avers that the exploration of the possibility of spiritual leadership in terms of the formation of viable economic communities based on economic cooperation and spiritual communality might be a way out of the socio-economic setback of the society. This assertion apparently calls for a moral obligation on the part of the Church in Nigeria. It is in view of this that, this paper reiterates a call for committed and holistic approach to poverty extermination by the Church in Nigeria seeing it as an obligation and not a choice in the fulfilment of Christ's salvific work on earth.

One of the most remarkable trends of the last decade among the Christian population of Nigeria especially in the southern part has been the dramatic rise of the so-called "charismatic" or "Pentecostal". Generally speaking, thousands of new churches and evangelical groups have cropped up in cities and towns, forming a broad-based religious movement which is rapidly becoming a powerful new social and religious force. However well-placed Marshall points out that, the religious and socio-political impact of these churches in Nigeria can only be assessed in terms of their incidence, doctrine,

and social make-up, and an understanding of the community's interests in the religious as well as social, political and economic context of the urban South (Marshall, 1993:8).

According to Laurentin (1977:21), the Pentecostals (those belonging to classical Pentecostal denominations) have penetrated the mainline churches in response to a seeming need in these churches. In the Catholic Church, it is called the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCRN), Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (EFAC), Methodist Evangelical Movement (MEM) in the Methodist Church and Presbyterian Young People Association of Nigeria (PYPAN) in the Presbyterian Church (Achunike, 2004:12). Those who operate inside the mainline churches are called charismatic.

Ndiokwere (1981:16) also avers that the precursors of Pentecostalism in Nigeria are the African Independent Churches, which arose as a result of a number of factors; political, social, economic, ethnic, liturgical and theological. Running through all these factors was a need to assert "our Africanness" and to be in charge of the church in Africa. Traits of Pentecostalism were found in the 1970s among curious students in a few Tertiary institutions that became avid readers of Pentecostal literatures (Otonko, 2005:30).

Furthermore, features common to the Pentecostal movement are; an emphasis on the centrality of the Holy spirit, Biblical fundamentalism, baptism in the spirit, vocal/spontaneous prayer, emotional display during worship and an emphasis on charisma. There is also a devil consciousness (Devil mania), total commitment to evangelization, conservative approach to ethical matters, condemnation of alcohol, smoking, drinking, indecent modes of dressing, body adornment, slang, etc., and a strong emphasis on being born again as well as waiting for the "imminent coming of Christ" (Otonko, 2005:20). Another trait is that they easily adapt to the people's culture.

They emphasise a "holiness of life ethics" but not in all Pentecostal churches; since they have to adapt to the environment in order to gain membership. Because the movement is a reaction against the rigid theology and formal worship of the traditional churches, it combines a highly emotional, informal approach to worship and emphasis on sobriety and hard work, which help to improve the economic and social lot of the poor. We shall expand on this shortly. The Church members are empowered to teach in church; this makes their churches prone to fragmentation. Any member who feels "called by God" can go off to start his own group. They develop small communities where individuals feel loved and appreciated; this is what is known as "cell fellowship".

Owoeye (in Odumuyiwa 2005:405), a scholar who has written extensively on the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, and here writing about the growth of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria observed that, the dynamic growth of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century is a major feature of the modern religious scene. He observed that, from its beginning, divine healing, speaking in tongue and Baptism in the Holy Spirit were recognized as critical elements of the Pentecostal movements. Healing and miracles are central to the teaching of Pentecostal churches.

The dimension in which this centrality operates is carefully articulated upon by these emerging Pentecostal preachers. Healing was diversified. There is physical healing, spiritual healing, emotional healing and business /career healing. Hence, the idea of healing in the Pentecostal churches were healing over the problems, battles and challenges of life (Joblessness, poverty, hardship, attack, etc.) which is termed "success and prosperity". They even talk about healing the socio-economic and political problems of the country (Owoeye in Odumuyiwa, 2005:406). This explains the reason for frequent calling of prayers for the nation.

Who are the Poor in Nigeria?

It is not until when one lacks money probably when needed, that make one to be poor. One can have money and yet remain poor. One can have wealth, wife, children, cars and other good things of life and still remain poor. The so-called rich in the sight of men can still be 'poor'.

The Chambers Dictionary defines the 'Poor' as "those possessing little; those dependent on relief or charity. It is seen as, having little money; not having and not able to get the necessities of life". Pauperism is another word used in place of poor. By implication, the poor means one or those who is/are destitute of wealth and material goods, lacking in even the necessities of life (Wolf; 1984:844).

In Nigerian context, the poor include the needy, those who are depressed, haggard with hollow eyes due to unbalanced diet, malnutrition and malnourishment (Salami; 2000:35). Some of them live in crowded homes with an average of four or five persons sleeping in a room. Those in the villages live in mud huts and ramshackle buildings with poor or no ventilation, and inadequate or lack of toilet facilities. The poor in Nigeria include millions of unpaid labourers, unemployed and under-employed, unpaid workers or those not paid in time. Some are poor because of joblessness and nothing to live on while those who secure gainful employment are poorly remunerated.

The starved and the undernourished in Nigeria make up a great percentage of the population. Broadly speaking, people belonging to this class include the working class, and the peasantry, found in the rural areas and urban centre. (Nebechukwu, 1992: 11). Apart from food, some of them do have clothing and lodging. Some of their houses lack furniture, beds, chairs, tables, television set, light and some of the children move about naked. Thousands more live on the streets and under bridges in cities. They include beggars, the blind, lame, deaf and dumb, the mad who roam about the city streets (Nebechukwu, 1992: 12).

However, this materially poor people should not be understood as isolated individuals, but as belonging to social, racial, cultural and sexual groupings. They constitute a collective, historically determined phenomenon in every society. They usually suffer most the consequences of socio-economic, religio-cultural, and political injustice. They are neighbours. They live next to us. They are Christians and non-Christians alike, as a matter of fact, they are human beings, and they can be found everywhere (Mk. 14:7). A great percentage of them are Christians, hence church leaders must show them concern and render help to set of people. The teaching of the Bible demonstrates that God cares for the poor. The bible also bears record to the fact that, compassion and care for the poor are divine command for the believer and the church. It is upon this summation that we shall articulate the church as a body of Christ, and her obligations to the poor.

Arguments on the Church Moral Obligation to Give

God is the giver of life and the ultimate provider of all that is necessary to maintain and enjoy life. This includes money and other possessions (Job 1:21; Eccles 5:19; Matt. 6:26-30; James 1:17). Since God is the ultimate owner of all things, his people should acknowledge that whatever they possess they hold in trust for him. They are answerable to him for the way they use these gifts, and by giving a portion back to him they express their thanks and worship (Nemering, 1990:151-152). However, since the bible admonished for true spirit sharing particularly to the least of the brethren, it is counted to have been done unto the Lord; it behooves us therefore to create avenue for helping the poor on behalf of God. Such giving, however, is also a sacrifice. It must be given to the giver personally if it is to be a genuine expression of devotion (Lev. 4:3-4; 2 Sam. 24:24; Mal. 1:8; Phil. 4:18).

Christians are not governed by the law-code of Israel, but the principles behind that law-code are written upon their hearts (Rom. 7:6; Heb. 10:16). The New Testament does not teach the Israelite tithing system for Christians, but it does teach that the amount Christians give should be in proportion to the

income they receive (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 8:3). It encourages Christians to give regularly, generously, and with thoughtful planning; though they should also give cheerfully, not grudgingly, and not under compulsion (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:7) (Fleming, 1990:152).

To this extent, we have some arguments upon which moral obligation to give in the Nigerian churches can be acknowledged. The first argument upon which our discussion shall be based is postulated by Singer. Singer formulated the principle as follows:

If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it (Singer, 1977:24).

Before linking this argument to our assessment of the Church, there is the need to articulate some aspect of this argument. Leaning on Akanmic (1995:60), in reacting to this argument notes that, by "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance", Singer means, in his words "without causing anything else comparably bad to happen", or doing something that is wrong in itself, or failing to promote some moral good comparable in significance to the bad thing that we can prevent (Akanmic 1995:60). This argument is tenable in view of the fact that the Church, as 'called-out' people is built upon the foundation of sacrificial giving. Jesus Christ gave His life and upon this He commanded the Church to go and do likewise.

Poverty as a moral problem can be prevented from happening upon the sacrificial giving of the Church. God does not want to drive people into poverty (2 Cor. 8:13), though he commends those who give more than they can reasonably afford (2 Cor. 8:3). God views a person's gifts not in relation to their market value, but in relation to the offeror's total financial capacity (Matt. 12:43-44; 2 Cor. 8:2). He is not pleased with those who give in a way designed to deceive people or win people's praise (Matt. 6:2; Acts 5:4). He promises his special care and a lasting reward for those who give generously because they love God and their fellow man (Matt. 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 9:6-8; Phil. 4:17-19).

The second argument is also put forward by Singer. He prescribes that:

If it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it (Singer, 1977:24).

Again, Akanmidu helps us with an application of this reformulation which goes thus:

The path from the library at my university to the Humanities lecture theater passes a shallow ornamental pond. Suppose that on my way to give a lecture I notice that a small child has fallen in and is in the danger of drowning, would anyone deny that I ought to wade in and pull out the child? This will mean getting my clothes muddy and either cancelling my lecture or delaying it until I can find something dry to change into: but compared with avoidable death of a child that is significant (Singer, 1977:24 and Akanmidu, 1995:60-61).

We can relate the aforementioned illustration to our everyday situation in which people find themselves in the pond of poverty and hunger. The Church, however, cannot claim ignorance of the prevailing poverty crisis. Wading into the pond by the Church connotes rescuing a great number of people languishing in the throes of poverty. Even though, it might mean delaying or dropping some other physical projects. It is a basic truth that there is absolute poverty, lack of shelter, hunger, and health crisis to mention but few. The church in its own capacity, have been campaigning and airing their voices against some of these social vices. It is also evident that the Nigerian church today has grown in riches and wealth; it therefore behooves of the Church to fight and alleviate poverty, "without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance". There is therefore, as Singer (1977:24) asserts, "an obligation to help those in poverty, which is no less strong than the obligation to rescue a drowning child from a pond".

Structuring the Church's Obligations to the Poor

In the words of Weil (in O'Neill, 1986:144), who writes that:

All human beings are bound by identical obligations, although these are performed in different ways according to circumstances... The obligation is only performed if... expressed in a real, not a fictitious, way; and this can only be done through the medium of man's earthly needs.... it is an eternal obligation to the human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the chance of coming to his assistance.

The aforementioned quote points to the church's obligation. Weil maintains that "all human beings are bound by identical obligations..." To this extent, since the church is an institution with human beings as members and exists based on that fact, it means they are also bound by this identical and unified obligation. Weil's statement above further shows that, this obligation is not to allow any other human being to suffer from hunger. He punctuates that man's identical needs are expressed in different ways depending on the circumstances. But beyond this surface, he sees a problem that has remained a generational problem of the world- hunger i.e. poverty. Weil therefore notes that, it is an eternal obligation to take care of man's earthly needs. This is a great awareness to the church. The Church is not only called to the spiritual needs of the people, but they are to also take care of their earthly and physical needs. Jesus demonstrated this as pointed out earlier, when He told His disciples to give the people (that is, the five thousand multitude) something to eat, after they have been together on the mountain for the whole day.

Having established our basis on the ground of this fact, Akanmide identified a clear way of involving the Church to arise and take charge of this responsibility. He opines that, "If we look at this particular way of incurring obligations with respect to aid, the duty to give aid to persons in need can only be guaranteed when those who are in a position to give help give their word that they will do so" (Akanmide, 1995:59). He made it emphatically clear, that in structuring the church obligations to the poor, the church must be able and should give their word to do so. This also speaks volume on their moral obligation. And for this structuring to be effective, the church must assist. Assisting the less privileged, the jobless, the unemployed, those who are hungry, the destitute and the down-trodden, is the only way the church can be very well involved in the lives and affairs of her members.

Assistance in the above sense goes beyond charity or relief materials. It is a system put in place to cater for the poor. This is the high point of our discussion. It is only through these aiding programmes; provided the Church puts in place such mechanism, that true succor and in fact, relief can come to the poor. This is because, aiding in its real sense, is an attempt to lift the position of the poor to a better one. If the Church in Nigeria is going to be fair and realistic the vertical and horizontal life of the church must be in full operation. In this structurization, the vertical duty is to God through preaching of the word of God, devotion, worship and preserving the elect and the brides of Christ. But in doing so, they must also not fail in their horizontal duty to human beings. This is the precedent that was set down by Jesus and handed over to her (the Church).

The aforementioned idea is the ideal principle of 'moving beyond tokenism'. 'Tokenism' is classified as the fact of doing something only in order to do what the law requires or to satisfy a particular group of people, but not in a way that is really sincere (Delton, 1969:42). Tokenism is a derivation from the word 'token' which means a token action. *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* classified token as something "done so that someone can pretend that they are dealing with a problem. It is in this vein that we see tokenism as the policy or practice of making merely a symbolic gesture toward the inclusion of members of the less privileged and the minority groups (Reference.com). These less-privileged and the minority groups are the voiceless, the poor, the destitute and the impoverished. Hogg (2008:368-369), however pinpoints the fact that, this token efforts is usually intended to create a false appearance of inclusiveness and deflect accusations of discrimination. Indeed, most of the relief assistance and charitable acts of the Church are ways of avoiding criticisms that they are side-lining the poor who may not really have much or anything to give in regard to worship, offerings and tithing.

Most of the time, the way the church react to issues of human life is heart rendering. There are evidences of lack of commitment and will-power geared towards the welfare of their members. At this juncture, it is important to state that, welfare offering can only best serve as a palliative measure. There should be a more focused and strategic approach to solving the problems of the impoverished. This conjecture is not morally justified. This is the context in which 'tokenism' is looked at in this paper. The Nigerian church of today ought to have grown beyond mere donations of food items, material goods and relief assistance. It is tantamount to breeding indolent members rather than teaching them how to catfish. It is expedient for the Christian church in Nigeria

to exude virtues of real human concern for those in dire need by venturing into sustainable livelihood.

Apparently, the problem is not relief assistance itself; the problem arises when the context and motive of assistance is wrong. Relief and aid given as a complement to long-term economic development and justice is legitimate and necessary; relief aid as a substitute for such long-term programmes is cheap charity and to Delton (1969:42), self-defeating. We have to learn to do the one and not forget the other. It is the long-range programmes in which considerably more thought and effort will need to be exerted. In structuring its obligations to the poor and as the evidence of its commitment and duty, the church should commission a task force to map out strategies relating to training in diverse vocational and self-reliant enterprises that will lift up the standard of the poor from the level of poverty. This task force would structure the needed programmes and the essential ones that will attend not only to their short-term relief but also to their long-term self-realization and satisfaction. This is going to be a positive way to kick start a poverty alleviation scheme.

Conclusion

We have pointed out in this article that giving to the poor and involving the church in poverty alleviation is an essential truth of the gospel. Necessity therefore rests on the church in Nigeria to commit morally as a matter of obligation to poverty alleviation in Nigeria. The church should go beyond pulpit ministry to activities or programmes that will engage the poor productively. But ultimately, the church should begin to venture in other productive activities like small scale business, agricultural enterprises, and some other viable entrepreneurial engagement that will assist the poor and make them to be self-reliant. The church can begin to use its resources to better the lot of the poor in the community by liberating them from the hold of economic hardship. In this, it must be with committed obligation to do so. What is the essence of preaching to an array of youths who are a time bomb instrument of destruction because of unemployment? What preaching can console a man with family who has next to nothing to take care of his family members? The church therefore should bring to the fore, a new paradigm of economic transformation that will involve all those who are at the verge of despair in order to stem down the excesses of poverty in Nigeria and in Africa at large. The Church has succeeded in the field of education, in the same vein, venturing into socio-economic schemes to combat unemployment and poverty will indeed, be an innovative enterprise.

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