CHURCH UNITY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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Abstract

Church disunity remains a significant challenge to Christianity globally, particularly in Nigeria, where denominational divisions have reduced the Church's collective influence on national governance. Divergent doctrinal beliefs, ecclesiastical traditions, and differing attitudes toward political engagement have fragmented the Church's prophetic voice despite the presence of ecumenical bodies. This study examines the causes of disunity within the Nigerian Church and explores how renewed Christian unity can enhance the Church's contribution to good governance. The study employs historical and analytical approaches to examine the development of denominational divisions, ecumenical initiatives, and the Church's role in governance. The study is grounded in the biblical doctrine of ecclesial unity, drawing from the Trinitarian model and Christ's prayer for unity in John 17. Results indicate that denominationalism, doctrinal disagreements, competition for membership, leadership conflicts, and differing theological perspectives on political participation are major sources of division. These factors have weakened the Church's moral authority, diminished the effectiveness of its prophetic witness, and limited its capacity to influence governance positively. Nevertheless, a shared Christian identity in Christ, common ethical values, and cooperative ecumenical engagement provide a foundation for collective action toward national transformation. The study concludes that although doctrinal diversity may remain, unity in mission and social responsibility is essential for effective Christian witness and national development. Its key contribution lies in demonstrating the relationship between ecclesial unity and good governance in Nigeria. The study recommends stronger ecumenical collaboration, sustained theological dialogue, and a unified Christian advocacy framework to promote accountability, justice, and good governance.

Introduction

Nigeriahas tragic history of economic exploitation, political dominance, and social exclusion brought on by both internal and external factors. Nigeria has encountered numerous difficulties with her government up

till the twenty-first century. Her efforts to promote national growth have suffered as a result of this development. The majority of Nigerians' hopes for a long-term socioeconomic change in the twenty-first century through the employment of governmental power have been repeatedly crushed.

Serious security issue that has exacerbated regional polarization is the violent spiral in northern Nigeria, where armed bandits carry out lethal organized attacks on villages, displacing large numbers of people. A democratic culture that places less value on the skills and experience that political leaders may contribute to public service exacerbates the governance dilemma. Nigeria's political system is controlled by those who use nepotism rather than skill to rise to power, use food to sway voters rather than vision, and use intimidation or material gifts to reward supporters, a corrupt attitude. The corruption perception index reveals that in 2023 Nigeria has a score of 25 this year, with a change of 1 since last year, meaning it ranks 145 out of 180 countries.

However, one cannot ignore that such attitudes and practices originate from a society where the influence of religion is high – in this case, Christianity - and the citizens are expected to be molded by the ethical standard of faith which would directly or indirectly affect the building and governance of the nation. In most cases, the Church in Nigeria tries to exonerate herself from bad governance, but that is being insincere because governance involves individuals and organizations to perform their roles for the common good of the society. Therefore, good governance according to Okwueze, holds that "individuals and institutions are obliged to perform their functions in a manner that promotes good values of efficiency, public honesty, transparency, and responsiveness to society". [cix]Okunoye,raises some cogent questions related to the aloofness attitude of the Church towards governance in Nigeria. He opines that "The Church is called to build a just and equitable society…"[cx] He analyzed the eight ways in which the Church can achieve the goal of good governance within a constitutional democracy. His emphasis throughout the paper is constantly on the unity of the Church on the values and virtues mentioned for achieving the purpose of the Church for good governance in Nigeria.[cxi]

Church Unity

The church's declaration of oneness is confirmed in the scripture and it is well

[cix]F.O. Okwueze, *E-Governance as a Tool for Public Sector Development in Nigeria*. Nsukka: Society for Research and Academic Excellence, Volume 2, 2010 http://academicexcellencesociety.com/e_governance_as_a_tool_for_public_sector%C2%AD_development_in_nigeria.html

[cx] Job O. Okunoye, "The Role of the Church towards Achieving Good Governance in Nigeria" *in Religion and Good Governance in Nigeria*. Eds. Ayantayo, Kacob K., Dada, Oyinloye A., Labeodan, Helen A. Published on 2012. Available at https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/the-role-of-the-church-towards-achieving-good-governance-in-nigeria/86524706 . Accessed on the 30/10/2024

[cxi]Okunoye, "The Role of the Church towards Achieving Good Governance in Nigeria"

articulated. Scripture makes it quite evident that there is only one church.[cxii] According to Berkouwer, there has been much discussion on the church's unity. However, the entirety of the New Testament makes it very evident that the church is one.[cxiii] Scripture does not contain the phrase "the one church" since it would be a pleonasm (use of more words than are necessary for proper expression). By definition, the plural is excluded because there can only be one ecclesia. Scripture uses analogies to illustrate the relationship between Christ and his church, which further demonstrates the reality that there is only one church[cxiv] asserts that just as there can only be one bride, one temple, one flock, and one body, there can only be one house.

It is fundamental to view the church's unity from the understanding of the oneness of the triune God. "The oneness of the people is modeled after the oneness of God"[cxv]. The Trinity, which represents one God whose very nature Father, Son, and Spirit are equally divine and from whose favor the church is established as one church, is the central element of the unity in the Nicene Creed.

The prayer of Christ in John 17 is cited by numerous scholars in this context[cxvi]. The unity of the church is emphasized in John 17:21–24 as being modeled after the unity (union) between the Father and the Son[cxvii]. According to Berkouwer, the unity is comparable to that which exists between the Father and the Son.[cxviii] There isn't a more compelling sign of solidarity. The most fundamental basis for what constitutes the church's essence is the union of Father and Son

Disunity: Nigerian Church Experience

Christianity was from inception introduced to Nigeria by different foreign Christian missions in form of denominations, such as the catholics in the fifteenth century and later in the nineteenth century, the methodists in 1842

[cxii] Chika Okoye, "Ecumenical Challenges of Pentecostalism: Towards the Unity of Christian Churches in Nigeria", *MINISTERIUM – A Journal of Contextual Theology* Vol. 9 (Dec. 2023) 55-68

[cxiii] G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* . Translated by Jack Bartlett Rogers. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 33.

[cxiv] G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* . Translated by Jack Bartlett Rogers. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 33.

[cxv] C. Scouteris, "The people of God, Its Unity and Its Glory: a Discussion of John 17.17-24 in the Light of Patristic Thought". *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 30(4) 1985:399-420.

[cxvi] T.E. Pollard, 1958-1959. "That they All May be One": John xvii.21 and the Unity of the Church. *Expository Times*, 17:149-150.

[cxvii] J.E. Staton, "A vision of unity: Christian unity in the fourth Gospel". *Evangelical Quarterly*, 69(4) 1997:291-305.

[cxviii] G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* .

followed by Church Missionary Society (CMS) with different governing policies (system of government). Oyalana postulated that these denominational shades introduced division and disunity in Nigerian Church life.[cxix]There were initial cooperations between these missionary societies based on the agreement not to trespass on territories already occupied by another, but as they expanded and moved closer in proximity to each other,[cxx] competing efforts began to define evangelistic distinctives of each movement as against others. Thereafter emerged African Indigenous Churches, most of who were offshoots of the foreign Christian missions. The emergence of AIC or Aladura Churches compounded the problem because the distinctives had shifted from western practice of the Christian faith to African practice.The inroad of Pentecostal Movement into Nigeria is another factor.[cxxi]some Pentecostal movements form themselves into well-established churches with strong administrative structures while some have independent outlook.[cxxii]Mozia discussed error ofdenominationalism[cxxiii] as an obstacle militating against the unity of the Church among others.[cxxiv]

[cxix] A.S. Oyalana, Oneness in the Spirit: The Goal of Ecumenism in Nigeria, in *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Yaba, Lagos: Wellspring Pub., 2000), 81

[cxx]Ahuche Peter Zaka, "Public Theology in UMCA: An Evaluation" in Foundational Issues in Mennonite, Missionary Church, United Missionary Society and United Missionary Church of Africa: Histories, Theologies and Liturgies. Eds, Samuel PeniAngo and Ahuche Peter Zaka (Ilorin: United Press,2021), 60-63

[cxxi]the Pentecostal movement can be referred to as a unit of Protestant Christianity but with a different doctrinal emphasis. However, technically speaking, the Pentecostal movement involves and incorporates the various Christian religious groups which emphasize the gracious manifestations and working of the Holy Spirit through spiritual endowments by individuals in their fold through tongue-speaking (glossolalia), faith healing, miracle, enthusiastic worship and glowing evangelical zeal.

[cxxii]D.P. Ukpong, "The Presence and Impact of Pentecostalism in Nigeria," 56pps. Retrieved from https://www.glopent.net>pre... Accessed November 12, 2024. The Apostolic Church Nigeria (TACN), Assemblies of God (AG), Foursquare Gospel Church (FGC), Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), and very few others are not that independent although some are prone to the engagements of dissensions and splinter groups.

[cxxiii] Michael IfeanyiMozia, "The Roman Catholic Perspective" in *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Yaba, Lagos: Wellspring Pub., 2000), 97

[cxxiv] Michael IfeanyiMozia, "The Roman Catholic Perspective" in *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Yaba, Lagos: Wellspring Pub., 2000), 97-99

The influence of the European, American and Canadian missionaries had contributed immensely to the developments in the Nigerian society. Their effort was particularly limited to education and health with the focus of having direct contact with their target audience. Hence, they opened schools, dispensaries for the common community residents. The anti-social attitude and practices of the early Church in their context was embraced by western Christian societies in Africa. They advocated strict separation from civil government; insisting that Christians and Pastors should have nothing to do with politics. This is clearly seen in the doctrine of the Mennonite Brethren Movement[cxxv] which metamorphosed to UMCA today. While some Churches consider the separation as unreasonable, some insist that mingling with civil government corrupts faith and is against the purpose for which the Church was established.

Scholars have made efforts to formulate a theology of unity. The Roman Catholics consider diversity as inimical to the unity of the Church while others describe the experience of the unity of the Church as spiritual and invisible and so cannot be impaired by empirical divisions.Oyelana paints the nature of Church unity as a type of oneness brought about by the Holy Spirit as the only means of real fellowship between man and God and man to man. This oneness he emphasized, is such that every Christian irrespective of denomination/movement is treated equally without discrimination. Despite this, Kenny argues that the springing of Churches on daily basis has introduced more challenges of disunity.[cxxvi] Accompanying the spring of Churches is the spirit of rivalry and competition for members, doctrinal differences, money as a major factor for schism as each denomination seek to retain and sustain her identity as superior to others. Kenny categorically says "… we have a house divided against itself."[cxxvii] He describes these attitudes as scandal of disunity affecting the non-Christians also. This matter of disunity has led to the belief that the church which is supposed to be a place of acquiring morals, integrity and discipline, has degenerated in integrity and moral values such that Christ-followers and ardent believers who ought to be keepers and lovers of one another are now suspicious of one another. The situation has gone so bad to the extent that what is mostly read and heard about the church today gives causes for alarm. There have been reported situations whereby church leaders sponsored armed robbers and kidnappers and many other heinous crimes even against themselves.[cxxviii]

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cxxv E.R. Storms, History of the United Missionary Church (Elkart, Indiana: Bethel Publisjhing Company, 1958), 12-13

cxxvi Joseph Kenny, "The Church, A Light to the Nations" in *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Yaba, Lagos: Wellspring Pub., 2000), 93

cxxvii Joseph Kenny, "The Church, A Light to the Nations"

cxxviii AjayiAdetokunboOlaiya, OluwasegunOladosu, in *African Journals Online*. available at ajol-file-journals_598_articles_220838_submission_proof_220838-7035-. Accessed on the 12th November, 2024

Recent happenings among ministers especially in the Pentecostal circle in Nigeria on doctrinal issues and biblical interpretation on social media reflects the nature of the manifestation of disunity among Nigerian Churches. By implication, it affects whatever system is put in place to govern the society the Church also belongs.

Oshitelu noted that if the Church had been true to her calling and ideals, a lot of atrocities in the Nigerian community relating to ethnic conflict and so on would have been averted. Beyond denominational differences, he argues that the Church needs to put into practice the teachings of Jesus on social, economic, ethnic, political, civic and religious affairs.cxxix

Ayegboyin stressed that it was time Christians woke up from their slumber to correct the wrongs in the government and the society at large in order to restore sanity. While stressing that, he highlighted that the greater problem Nigeria is facing are political instability, economy instability, academic instability and religious instability, just as he noted that if the highlighted problems could be addressed, Nigeria will be at peace and experience defined progress.cxxx For the Church to be an agent of change, Ayegboyinalso stressed effort to rediscover the meaning of the Church in the contemporary times. He noted that different denominations could be regarded as members of the body of Christ and that understanding this would lessen our worry about unity, but failure to see Christ as the center of our togetherness would make us not to see ourselves as fellow citizens even though we claim to worship the same God and call the same Jesus.cxxxi This point is most crucial because it affects fellowship among Christians and indirectly affects Nigerian citizenship in the area of socio-economic and socio-religious life of the people. Invariably, this would affect good governance because a divided people cannot have a voice and would not make a tangible contribution toward good governance.

Mozia argues towards an effective ecumenism emphasizing the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit. All his six pointscxxxii are apt, but the fact remains that the spirit that leads to disunity would determine whether those points are applicable and effective or not. His

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[cxxix] G.A. Oshitelu, Ecumenical Movement: A Historical and Theological Perspectives, in *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, ed. AdemolaIshola and DejiAyegboyin (Yaba, Lagos: Wellspring Pub., 2000), 77

[cxxx] SeyiSokoya,"Christian's Unity Important to Nigeria's Restoration", in *Nigerian Tribune*.July 24, 2022 in Church News. Available at https://tribuneonlineng.com/christians-unity-important-to-nigerias-restoration-ayegboyin/

[cxxxi] DejiAyegboyin, Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience, in *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Yaba, Lagos: Wellspring Pub., 2000), 28

[cxxxii] Michael IfeanyiMozia, "The Roman Catholic Perspective", 102 – Fidelity to the Holy Spirit, Authentic Ecumenism, Discernment of the Holy Spirit, Dynamic response to a life of continuous conversion, dynamic growth in knowledge and prayer.

fourth point – dynamic response to alife of continuous conversion- could be very effective if attitude against unity of the Church was displayed out of sincerity. It should be noted that the idea of Church unity is seen by some Church leaders as a bane to the growth of their Churches. Hence, they fly on the wings of disunity to gain and retain their relevance. In the light of this, Amusan opines that "disagreement in areas of doctrine will be difficult, if not impossible to fully reconcile. However, disagreement in areas of relationships and practices can be resolved, provided there is a general will and a general commitment."[cxxxiii] The condition attached is worthy of note – "provided there is a general will and a general commitment". In agreement with the postulation of Mozia on authentic ecumenism, pointing to the co-operation with the Holy Spirit in all ecclesial communities[cxxxiv], Amusan argues that means for achieving that should be explored, but not as an ecumenical position.[cxxxv]

Oshibanjo explains ecumenism in Nigeria. He states that "to the ecumenical, unity almost at any cost, is the greatest good thing that could happen to the Christian Church."[cxxxvi] He raises a challenge on the issue of all denominations coming together on the platform of liberal ecumenism emphasizing that the Churches may not agree in doctrines, but should agree in service with reference to Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12:17. "Simply put, our unity should be that of unity in diversity".

Ecumenical Bodies in Nigeria

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) exists to promote ecumenism among the nation's diverse Christian communities, not to politically represent all churches. Therefore, any group of people who identify as Christians is eligible to join CAN.The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is divided into several blocks. These are: (i) the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN); (ii) the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN); (iii) the Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN); (iv) the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC); and (v) TEKAN (TarayaEkklessiyoyin Kristi a Nigeria) and ECWA (Evangelical Church Winning All) fellowship. The creation of these blocks was made possible by certain scenarios that center on disunity. A strong indication that there isn't a total truce in each CAN group is the splits and lack of genuine unity within each denomination. To the extent of bringing matters pertaining to the internal election of the organization to court, this has led to preventable disputes that typically accompany the election of CAN's top executives.

[cxxxiii] Solomon Amusan, "The Perspective of the Anglican Communion", in *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Yaba, Lagos: Wellspring Pub., 2000), 105

[cxxxiv] Michael IfeanyiMozia, "The Roman Catholic Perspective",

[cxxxv] Solomon Amusan, "The Perspective of the Anglican Communion", 105

[cxxxvi] Matthew OlusesanOshibanjo, "The Perspective of the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria" in *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Yaba, Lagos: Wellspring Pub., 2000), 143

Ambrose ObodoezeOgueche and others[cxxxvii] state the overarching objective in the definition of CAN thus: The association is a Fellowship of Christian churches with distinct identities recognizable structures and systems of worship of one God in the Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Association makes Christ the center of all its work and shall promote the glory of God by encouraging the growth unity of churches, and by helping them to lead the nation and her people to partake of Christ's salvation and all its fruits.Oshibanjo considers the existence of CAN and other ecumenical movements as fulfilment of Jesus prayer. Meanwhile, Ayegboyin objectively analyzed the deficiencies in these movements. For instance, CCN is basically protestant, NAAC is Aladura Churches, CSN is basically Catholic and CPFN is Pentecostal. This he considers as polarization in a larger scale. The reason why some of these bodies had to relate with CAN is for times of crises and emergencies. In fact, some of these movements are tired of working with cooperative institutions and so on. Ayegboyin encourages unity in diversity[cxxxviii] – a liberal approach – which would better foster mutual relationship with an understanding of individual denominations' distinctives and respecting such at whatever level of relationship.

Apart from the effort of the ecumenical institutions, effort had been made by denominations that share common identity such as Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterianetc to enhance unity in the body of Christ. For instance, Anglican and Methodist made a move of inaugurating United Church of Nigeria which failed along the line as a result of greed, selfishness and pride and that worsened the experience of disunity. But in any case, the schools they were able to establish jointly have in no small way enhanced cordial relationship that affects their immediate environment and the society at large. Such schools include Immanuel College of Theology and Christian Education.

This fostered Church unity because both were able to have a platform where their clergy were trained under the same objectives set for the institution. There were other institutions that were jointly founded such as United Missionary College, Molete, Ibadan where teachers were trained and Presbyterian joined the aforementioned Churches to establish Trinity College of Theology, Umuahia to train seminarians. These institutions still exist today and serve the purpose of uniting the Churches, but in the contemporary Nigeria, churches – especially Pentecostal - spring up and start individual schools such as Bible Colleges and seminaries, even other institutions without any affiliation or relationship with others. This affects the unity of the Church because it distorts sharing the same objectives. Emphasis is now laid on doctrinal distinctives alone instead of focusing theological education towards the common good of the Church and the nation.

[cxxxvii] Ambrose ObodoezeOgueche, Joseph Umar Bibinu, HabilaKatuka, Alex Ibi And BrunuIshaya, "Causes and Effects of Christianity Disunity In Nigerian Contemporary Society" in *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS)*, Vol.3 No.2 June, 2020; p.g. 159 –170; ISSN: 2695- 2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

[cxxxviii] DejiAyegboyin, "Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience", 31

The Situation of Governance in Nigeria

Centuries of ruthless slave trade, decades of colonial exploitation, and several years of tyranny have dominated Nigeria's recorded history. Our path to democracy and decent governance has not been aided by the tragic history of economic exploitation, political dominance, and social exclusion brought on by both internal and external factors.[cxxxix]

Nigeria has been largely enslaved by the regressive forces of military dictatorship and arbitrary control, which have resulted in resource mismanagement, abuse of authority, and corruption in public service. As a result, the country's economy has stagnated. While the rest of the world has been making incredible strides in meeting the socio-economic and political aspirations of their people—advancing the cause of democracy, making strides in science and technology, and developing the arts and humanities—our country has long been marked by arbitrary rule, the preponderance of feudal lords, the big man syndrome, a command and control culture, corruption, oppression of the weak, including women and young people, and, of course, ethnic bigotry, religious intolerance, and civil unrest.

Furthermore,the nature of governance in Nigeria reflectsautocracy, dictatorship or arbitrary rule, totalitarianism, culture of impunity, authoritarianism, etc. Leaders have become monarchs who impose their philosophies on the governed. Leaders routinely impose their "wisdom" on their followers. self-perpetuation of authority in opposition to the people expressing themselves. the stifling of press or the silence of dissenting opinions. political or social exclusion based on factors like gender, class, or religion, among others. persecution or exclusion of any group within the community. corruption and a lack of openness in government positions.

In light of these, the Church is called to support the poor—those who lack social, economic, or political rights and who have lost their human dignity as a result of their material circumstances—and to play a part in improving good governance in the country. The defense and protection of the weak is especially necessary for the common good, or the welfare of society as a whole. Because of this, a society's level of civilization or development is determined by how it treats its poor and helpless members rather than by how much material wealth it possesses. People must take their neighbors' well-being into account as part of their responsibilities if a society is to be genuinely human and this should be the focus of the Church. The Church should jointly channel her faith towards achieving the common good of Nigeria

The Christian Church in Nigeria, an important player in the society, must continue to promote the spirit of common good and to contribute to tangible development as a lesson for political leaders to also cultivate a new sensitivity to the common good. Conflicts, destabilization, environmental disasters, and other traits of failed states may continue to hold the country hostage and thwart the pursuit of social and economic justice until the country has the healthy conditions that are inherent in the common good and are easily perceived.

[cxxxix] Cyprian C. Alozie, Nigeria and the Challenges of Governance and National Development in the 21st Century. *South East Journal of Political Science* Vol.3 No.1, 2017. Available at admin,+Complete+SEJPR+VOL+3,+NO+1,+JAN-JUNE,+2017-36-57.pdf. Accessed on 15th Nov. 2024.

In conclusion, it is pertinent to note that the activities of the Church will, to a large extent, determine the socio-political and economic reformation of Nigeria. The Church is called to protect politics from deterioration, enhance good governance through her ecumenical approach and with one voice, provide guidance to political leaders whose actions are deviating from the values that underpin sound politics. The Church is both salt and light in the world. She shouldn't be so busy with the politics of denominational distinctiveness at the expense of the health of the nation.