

CONTRIBUTIONS OF METHODIST CHURCH NIGERIA TO THE SOCIO-ECONOMY GROWTH OF THE NATION

By

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Abstract

The persistent stunted economic growth of Nigeria has become a source of concern to both local and international communities in recent times. The attendant effects of this are that about seventy-one million Nigerians are extremely poor. The successive governments at one time or the other have floated and launched policies and campaigns with the intention of resuscitating the economic life of the nation. Regrettably, all the efforts yielded little or nothing. This paper examined the contributions of Methodist Church Nigeria (MCN) in the economic growth of the nation. It took a critical look at the economic relevance of the church ranging from the political, educational, financial and other values in nation building as the first mission that planted a succeeding seed of Christianity in the country in the year 1842. Secondary data consisting of books, journals, archival materials and a host of others were used for the work. Interpretative method was also used to analyse the opinion of scholars. It was observed that economic contribution of the Methodist Church to the nation cannot be over emphasized. Similarly, it was also noted that though, the primary assignment of any church is to preach the gospel and prepare people for the kingdom of God, yet, it is expedient for every church to make her contribution in the area of nation building by contributing substantially to the economic growth of the nation.

Keywords: Economic contributions, Methodist Church, Nigeria.

Introduction

The position of Christian religion cannot be undermined in the struggle for a sustainable socio-economic viability in Nigeria. Christian religion has become a phenomenon that can be found in all known human societies which has also continued to be a significant part of human experience, regulating how many individuals react to the environment in which they live. Economic development can be simply put as a process in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of instrument, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are in harmony and enhance both current and future potentials to meet the human needs and aspirations. These however include: physical development which consists man made goods produced by the use of technology and personnel development. The reason that necessitates economic growth of any society is to reduce inequality, unemployment and penury while national development is a process of improving the range of opportunities that will enable individual human and communities to achieve their aspirations and full potentials over a sustained period of time. It is a known fact that currently most of African countries are confronted with economic challenges which apparently could be premised to leadership problems, corruption, insecurity of different types such as, kidnapping, terrorism, banditry, and other social vices. All these means of

retrogression are similar to what is currently happening in Nigeria. Nigeria is struggling with many problems such as illiteracy, hunger, poor health condition, humiliation, wretchedness, penury and high rate of unemployment which makes expectation of accelerated socio-economic growth difficult to realize. The end products of the stunted growth of the nation are the frustration on the face of individual citizens, lack of basic amenities that could provide minimum comfort and the enabling economic environment, corruption and nepotism are at the advance stage in the hands of elected leaders. In the instance of the above, the newly sworn-in president, Bola Ahmed Tinubu in his inaugural speech precisely on 29th May, 2023 promised that the viability of Nigeria's economy would be one of his top agenda. Also, in his goodwill message to the nation during the just concluded *Eid-il-fitri*, he called for special prayer for socio-economic growth of the Nigeria nation.

The viability of economy of any country is determined on the type of equality of life of her citizens. While applauding the efforts of both government and individual in growing Nigeria economy, the need arises to beam a searchlight into the contribution of religious body with particular reference to the Methodist Church Nigeria towards socio-economic viability of the nation. This becomes imperative in order to correct some erroneous thoughts that religion and development do not have anything to do together. There is no gainsaying that without the close collaboration of Christian religions and development in the past, Nigeria would have taken more worrisome course which could have resulted to slower rate of development among committee of nations. Methodist Church Nigeria has played and is still playing a major role in social, political and economic growth of the country as reflected in this work.

Historical Background of Methodism in Nigeria

It is an accepted history that the succeeding seed of Christianity can be traced to the Wesleyan Missionary activities with the arrival of Thomas Birch Freeman and Mr. De Graft in Badagry from Sierra-Leone precisely on 24th September, 1842. The evangelical activism of these European missionary marked the beginning of Christianity in Nigeria. Omotoye (2009) affirms that, the first missionary to be sent to Badagry was Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman, a Wesleyan Methodist who landed in Badagry from Sierra- Leone on 24th September, 1842 when the Gospel was first preached under the popular and fallen Agia tree which was located in the central part of the town. It is accounted that the activities of the missionaries were facilitated majorly by an ex-slave of Yoruba origin named Ferguson, who had earlier returned from Sierra Leone to the area. James Ferguson who was one of the traders during Freeman's first year at Cape Coast in March 1841, having settled at Badagry wrote a letter which was countersigned by Warraru, the Governor of Badagry to Thomas Dove, his old minister in Freetown inviting missionaries to come and preach the gospel there (Badagry).

Familusi (1992), describes the circumstances that characterized the arrival of the early Methodist Missionaries as follows:

Eager as they were to get ashore, the sum of that evening was too heavy and the day was too far spent to make an attempt. They had to face another night on the schooner. In the morning of 24th September, 1842, they came ashore. They went under the thin shade of stately palms to the lagoon which was three quarters of a mile wide. It was calm and silent in the midday and beyond it lay Badagry in full view. A large canoe carried them across and between two and three o' clock in the afternoon of 24th September, 1842, they landed at Badagry. (Familusi, 1992. pg 11).

Though the Missionaries came to Nigeria en-route Sierra-Leone, however, Wesleyan Society based in London facilitated and endorsed the visit. Their intention was to introduce Christianity into the country and also to spread the evangelistic enterprises starting from Badagry. The ancient town, Badagry was founded around 1425. A. D. It is located an hour from Lagos and half hour from the Republic of Benin. The town is bordered on the south by the Gulf of Guinea and surrounded by creeks, islands and a lake. Today, the Aworis and Egun are mainly the people who reside in the town of Badagry as well, as in Ogun state, Nigeria and the neighboring Republics of Benin. The brief description of this ancient town becomes necessary because of the prominent role it played in the history of Christianity in Nigeria. It was reported that Warraru, the Chief of Badagry was the headman of the area where a few of the Sierra-Leoneans and other Africans who have British subjects lived, and he received Thomas Birch Freeman and his team warmly. On the above, Ajayi submitted that:

In March 1841, James Ferguson, who had settled at Badagry, wrote a letter, counter-signed by Warraru, the Governor of Badagry to Thomas Dove, his old minister in Freetown, inviting missionaries to come and preach the gospel there. I am in darkness...For Christ sake, come quickly let nothing prevent you to come, and through you, God will convert the heathens... Do for God's sake, start as at this moment. (Ajayi, 1962. Pg 141)

The passion to evangelize Africa by Ferguson as noted in the above letter could be premised to his African extraction and perhaps, passion for the planting and nurturing of the seed of Christianity in the continent of Africa.

The Roles of the Methodist Church to the Socio-Economic Viability of Nigeria

The impact of Methodist Church in Nigeria cannot be told without referring to the Father of the people called Methodists globally, John Wesley, whose activities gave birth to the Wesleyan Missionary Societies. Likewise, the history of England from 1739-1791 cannot be told without mentioning John Wesley. John Wesley, during his day ministered to victims of socio- political change and religious apathy in the established church at large. The downtrodden were cared for; their souls were revived by the care of John Wesley who engaged them in his preaching across all classes of men so that they could be set at liberty from the bondages and power of sins. From the time onward, the church has been involving in both socio and economic viability of every society it found herself. Viability within this context can be physical, social, mental, cultural or attitudinal change for proper and expected human development in any given society. There is no limit to the very way in which the church could play her developmental roles.

In the midst of many denominations in Nigeria from categories of mainlines, African Indigenous and Pentecostal churches, Methodist Church Nigeria as a denomination has been playing her active and verifiable roles in the growth of social-economic viability of the nation. This can be classified under the following sub-headings:

Educational Roles

One of the major roles of Methodism in Nigeria to socio-economic viability of the nation is on the educational sector. Abinitio, Methodism has been involving in this from the time of the early missionaries who came with western education. In other words, the Wesleyan missionaries that were instrumental to the planting of Christianity in 1842 didn't come with the gospel alone. According to the erstwhile Prelate of the Methodist Church Nigeria, His Eminence Olatunji Makinde, "it is an understatement to say the seed of the gospel was successfully sown in by the Wesleyan but also the pioneer of western education in Nigeria, confirming the fact that the missionaries did not just bring the message of Christ alone". (Makinde, 2023).

For instance, it is an undisputable fact that Thomas Birch Freeman in collaboration with other missionaries founded schools alongside the preaching of the gospel starting with a nursery school in Badagry in 1842. They proceeded from the elementary stage to secondary and teacher's training colleges with the aid from the mission house in England. (Famulusi, 1992). The schools contributed immensely to the education and training of many individuals which later turned out to be leaders of Nigeria in their respective chosen careers. The extension of these can also be noticed politically, economically and religiously. Notable among eminent that at one time or the other attended the schools established by the MCN who in the past and at the present became important leaders of our nation include and not limited to Chief Obafemi Awolowo who attended Wesley College, Ibadan, Dr. Nnamidi Azikwe, Chief Alvan Ikoku and Pastor Daniel Olukoya, the present General Overseer of Mountain of fire Miracle Ministry, one of the fastest growing Pentecostal churches in Nigeria who attended Methodist Boys high school, Lagos. Another eminent person in the political cycle of Nigeria today is erstwhile Lagos state governor, Mr. Babatunde Raji Fashola who during his goodwill message at the 43rd biennial Conference of Methodist Church Nigeria held at Methodist Memorial Cathedral, Sabo Yaba in 2012 said that he attended Methodist school for his elementary and secondary education, Birch Freeman High school Surulere, Lagos. (Fashola, 2012). The contributions of these individuals and a host of others to both economic and political landscape of Nigeria cannot be underestimated. In fact, it will be extremely difficult to quantify the values they have added to the development of the continent of Africa in general.

Aside from the above named elementary schools established by the MCN, it is also good to report that currently MCN has over 295 nursery and primary and 172 secondary schools in different parts of the country. (Oladehinde, 2015). To further contribute her quota to the nations' tertiary educational growth like other Christian denominations, MCN went ahead to establish Wesley University, Ondo in May 2007. Apart from enhancing the tertiary educational growth of the nation, The Wesley University of Ondo was also to ease the admission of mammoth of prospective university candidates that are produced annually and could not be accommodated by the public Nigerian university for obvious reason of lack of infrastructural facilities and other factors. There is no doubt therefore that all these established elementary, secondary and tertiary academic institutions have greatly contributed immensely to the social-economic viability of the nation. Each of the workers employed to work in these institutions is in one way or the other contributing their quota to the economic growth of the society. This is easily done by recycling their expenses paid by their employers, MCN in their given societies. By this contrast, they are contributing greatly to the socio-economic viability of the nation. Also, the stable academic programmes of all the established schools by the MCN is another way through which MCN is contributing to the socio-economic viability of the nation. Unlike public schools where domestic and national strikes of diverse forms distort the academic programmes and turn typical four years

programmes to either six or more years. Unstable programmes such as these waste destiny and interrupt the plans of vulnerable students which eventually may lead to the wrecking of ones' future. Especially in Nigeria where it is extremely difficult for one to get a job if one passes certain age. The mission schools therefore, affords the teeming youth population to plan for their future academic ambition with little or no interruption. This contribution to the economic growth in terms of developing human capacity cannot be quantified in terms of naira and kobo as reflected in the study.

Socio-Economic Contribution via Banking Sector

In her effort towards socio-economics, MCN established micro-finance banks to boost the economic fortune of the people. Wesley Micro-Finance Bank Ltd (WMFB), established in 2006, and licensed by the Central Bank Nigeria to operate was located at Ogunlana Drive, Surulere, Lagos, incorporated as a private limited liability company in August in 2009. Aside from the fact that the said established faith based micro-finance bank provides means of livelihood to all personnel ranging from manager to the list of the workers, it also offers financial services such as savings and deposits, loan with minimal interest rates, domestic fund, transfers and other financial and non-financial services to clients. Its strength and ability to offer all the aforementioned services is as a result of the fact that the bank is fully insured by the Nigeria Deposit Insurance Corporation and is duly licensed by the CBN as earlier noted. The contribution of WMFB to the socio-economic viability of Nigeria cannot be quantified. Both Christians and people of other faiths have benefited immensely from the establishment of the bank. These benefits are figured and noted on the different categories of loans to her community based customers such as micro loans, investment loans and agro-allied businesses.

The major requirement for the offering of micro is just for the customers of small scale businesses to form themselves into the groups of five, so that it will be easy to access the loan as a group rather than as individuals. Meanwhile, unlike other commercial banks, the customers of WMFB do not need any major collateral security before accessing the loan. Apart from the market women that have benefited from the services of WMFB, other artisans such as vulcanizers, fashion designers, and a host of others have also enjoyed the services of the bank. Minimum of about three hundred and fifty owners of diverse small scale businesses are beneficiaries annually. Kudos to the CBN that usually organizes seminars and training periodically for the staff of micro-finance banks on the optimal functionality and strategies of recovering loans. Hence, the effort of MCN in establishing this microfinance bank has in no small measure reduced poverty and employment among members and non-members of MCN. As a result, there is a steady rise in the financial flow into the church coffer in MCN churches where the banks are domiciled.

Socio-Economic Viability via Episcopal Leadership Style

Another way through which the MCN is growing socio-economic life of Nigeria is through her acceptance of Episcopal leadership style in 1976. It is widely known that the adopted leadership style of Methodism in Nigeria between 1842 and 1976 was Presidential form of church leadership. This imported leadership style by the Wesleyan missionaries that planted the seed of Methodism in Nigeria appears to be less in term of administrative structure and less expensive to MCN. However, when the late Rev. Professor Bolaji Idowu who took over the mantle of leadership as the third Indigenous leader emerged in 1972, he brought some reforms to the church. Among other reforms was the change of leadership style from Presidential to Episcopal in 1976. The

acceptability of the episcopal leadership style informed the change in ministerial vestments and other clerical outfits. For instance, principal resultant effect of the vestments were the episcopal regalia with mitre, crosier, skull cap, episcopal rings and staff, among others. All the aforementioned are needed before bishops are consecrated. Some of these items are sometimes procured locally or imported from overseas. Familusi while postulating the economic value of the aforementioned says, “One can understand that this portends for foreign exchange as well as the economic fortune of those who made them locally. Interestingly, bishops do own more than one of each of the items, especially those that have to do with liturgical colours”. (Familusi, 1992).

The socio-economic importance of the new designs in different types of ministerial outfits of the regular MCN ministers to represent an Episcopal church cannot be estimated especially for those that are trading in them. This has to be so because, immediately the church accepted episcopal style, vestment committee was put in place that reviewed and determined what each category of the ministers should wear periodically. This however necessitated the establishment of tailoring factory which employs professional workers, either Methodist or non-Methodist. Hence, jobs are created; families are fed while the proceeds from the accruing created jobs, by these means are recycling within the domiciled societies, which eventually leads to the economic growth of the nation at large.

It must also be noted that currently, MCN has one hundred and four dioceses all over the country whereas, each of these dioceses has an administrative office that employs minimum of six workers depending on the size of the diocese. The categories of each diocesan workers are ranging from driver(s), accountant(s), secretary(s), gardener(s), administrative officer(s), cleaner(s), office attendant(s), etc. In like manner, each bishop is expected to have at least two domestic workers such as cook, day and night guards, among others, depending on the financial strength of the diocese. The economic value this system translates to can only be acknowledged by those who know what it means to be jobless.

Socio-Economic Viability via Health Care System

The socio-economic contribution of Methodism in Nigeria can also be seen through her health care services. The rationale behind the church establishing these is to continue the work of Wesleyan missionaries that planted the seed of succeeding Christianity on the soil of Nigeria. It is also to facilitate and ensure that the country becomes a better place to live in by providing and helping her citizens to have good health care system, after all, there is a common saying that health is wealth, knowing fully well that it is only sound body that produces a good service delivery in every human endeavor. Some of these hospitals include the popular Wesley Guild Hospital, Ilesha founded by the Wesley Guild Britain as well as the under-five clinic at Imesi-Ile founded in the late 1950s. (Familusi, 1992). After the Wesley Guild Hospital, the Wesley Guild UK helped to establish more hospitals in partnership with MCN. These medical institutions cut across every sphere of health needs such as Royal Cross Methodist Hospital, Uzuakoli; a motherless baby's home located in Uzuakoli, establishing of leprosy center where people living with leprosy are kept away from the society. The church also has the Bethsaida Hospital at Ikachi AINU in Igede, Benue State. There are three psychiatric hospitals courtesy of MCN to cater for patients with such challenges in the country. These include; The Restoration Centre for Psychiatric illness, Uzuakoli in Abia State without forgetting the Methodist Hospital, Ifaki, Ekiti State and Dr. Andrew Pearson Hospital, Igbo-Ora in Oyo State (MCNH) and many others, too numerous to mention. Also, each of all these establishments has provided means of livelihood to its employees. The wages paid to the artisans at one time or the other for construction of the facilities cannot be quantified.

Conclusion

With all the aforementioned, it is an undisputable fact that the contribution of the MCN to the socio-economic viability of Nigeria since 1842 of her establishment to date cannot be overemphasized. The evidence is noted in all areas of life such as education, health, banking sectors and indeed, moral upbringing which cannot be easily quantified. It is a reflection of the holistic ministry and socio services of the church to her society as enunciated in the Gospel by St. Matthew 25: 31-46 and acted upon by the early Apostles in Acts of the Apostles 4:32-37. Finally, this paper appeals to the government at all levels to acknowledge these contributions of the church to the socio-economic growth of the nation by returning all the mission schools back to their original owners. This, in no small measure will further help the church to be more proactive in their efforts to build and facilitate socio-economic viability of the nation.

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