

Mediating Role of the Church in Peace Building and Unity in Nigeria: Implications for National Development

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Abstract

The study examined the mediating role of the Church in peace building and Unity in Nigeria towards enhancing national development. The imperativeness of this is predicated on the fact that no society will record any meaningful development in a chaotic environment. Conflict all over the world has become an issue of concern to many, most especially when considering the myriads of problems that are associated with it. It is on the basis of this that this study was designed. A conceptual approach was adopted for the study, where the key concepts were reviewed. A critical analysis was carried out on the nexus between peace and national unity, church and peace building, peace and national development. Theories and approaches of peace building were also appraised. From the study, it has been revealed that the church has been involved in peace negotiations, arbitration panels, consultations, peace committees and intervention with relief materials in conflict zones. It has also been established that peace is a panacea for national unity, integration and development. It has been concluded that peace building needs collaborative efforts that must involve the leaders of the church and other stakeholders to mediate between the conflicting groups towards sustainable peace in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Church, Conflict, Development, Role, Peace & mediation*

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Background to the Study

The concept of peace building has attracted a lot of interest from the academia, Non-Governmental Organizations, the government at all levels viz: The Federal, the State and the Local Government, Traditional Institution, Security Personnel and Peace Ambassadors. This concern for peace is since peace is a fundamental determinant of human relations and coexistence in any given society. The decision to observe International World Peace Day all over the world is an indication that peace is a catalyst for any form of progress any society can reckon with. The declaration of the international World Peace Day by the UN- General Assembly to be held on the 21st of September of every year is devoted to strengthening the ideals of peace, both in Nigeria and other nations (United Nations, 2023). Also, the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 by United Nations Member States is based on their understanding that there is no way a peaceful nation and global peace can be achieved without the appropriate processes put in place to enhance social development that will be beneficial to people and to ensure the protection of lives, food and property (United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, 2015)

From the foregoing, it has become imperative for state actors, individuals and organizations to mediate in conflict situations to avoid escalation and the destruction that comes with such conflicts. Church is one of those institutions that have been involved in mediation in Nigeria. Mediation has been considered by different scholars to be instrumental for conflict resolution. Ekpechu (2021), has argued that mediation aims to resolve conflict usually through reaching a truce. Within this temporary period of cessation of hostility by both parties, both parties are bound by the agreement. Mediation is the intervention of a third party: It is a voluntary process in which the parties retain control over the outcome (pure mediation), although it may include positive and negative inducements (Miall, Ramsbontham and Woodhouse, 1999)

Failure to achieve the desired national development in the country is some time blamed on the negligence of the development ideals such as the issues of poverty, job opportunities, health, climate change, education, gender discrimination/equality, fundamental human right, environment, social justice, water availability/quality and energy. These development ideals are expected to enhance lives and promote developments which are the bedrocks of peace in the society. Oyedolapo (2014), in his conflict analysis gave a framework of conflict energy showing a negative and a positive expression. The negative expression captures the following indicators: Wounded people, deaths recorded, destruction of property, bad leadership, bad followership, divided nation /cities, 419, crime, poor infrastructure and lack of compassion. In the other hand, the positive indicators are: Some less stressed individual cohesive families, peaceful environment, development, better informed citizenry, good governance, vibrant political parties and cohesive Nation/Cities. From the aforementioned, it can be deduced that a peaceful society is a product of many factors which people must take into cognizance in order to create united communities and nations as some indivisible entities with a common front towards economic and political emancipation.

Church and Peace-Building

The word church was translated from the Greek word “Ecclesia” which means a gathering or an assembly (Fairchild, 2019). Church is an organized body of Christian believers who follow the rules and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Velarde (2009), explains that the church is not a building, but a body of believers with specific nature and purpose. In view of this, foundation of worship, edification and evangelism were identified as the fundamental roles of a church. Over time, Church has grown beyond caring for only its members but has become part of the peace ambassadors, delivering community services, shaping the government by challenging bad policies and providing humanitarian services. The Christian body in Nigeria is governed by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). These two bodies have been part of peace negotiation, members of arbitration panels and conflict resolution committees in Nigeria. In general, the church leaders and its members in Nigeria have the following mediating roles to play towards peace building.

Peace-building is a panacea for development in Nigeria. Peace when achieved is capable of minimizing conflicts in the society. Church mediating role in peacebuilding process is critical for the unity, national integration and development of Nigeria. The study of O' Brain (2013), have noted that Peacebuilding is a comprehensive approach to conflict transformation that analyses and interfaces with the peace process before, during and after violence. This process helps in reducing and preventing communities from engaging in conflict. Many Christian bodies have been involved in solving problems emanating from conflict zones around the world. An example of such is Catholic Relief Services.

Church leaders directly oppose conflicts, institute reconciliation and promote peace. These mediating roles by the church leaders have served as a communication link between the antagonizing groups and the church as a reconciliatory agent. To further buttress this, Adebumiti (2021), noted that Christian leaders constitute part of National Peace Committee which is an initiative made up of elder statesmen who intervene in critical issues of national concern through high level mediated and alternative dispute resolution mechanism. Christian Reformed Church Report (2008) revealed that Church leaders in Christian Reformed Church in North America brought peace and stability to the people of Takum, Nigeria.

One of the strategies used by the church leaders in conflict management and peace building is the continual consultations with the government to handle the social and economic indicators that make the society vulnerable to conflict. Some of these indicators are poverty, political rivalry, religious intolerance and general insecurity situation. This will help to defend liberal democracy and encourage the government to live up to the democratic ideals. Interfaith Mediation Centre Kaduna (2015) corroborate that peace is important because if there is no peace, there will be no development. The inclusion of conflict and peace studies in the curriculum of seminaries, Bible Colleges and other church leadership training has gone a long way to build consciousness of peacemaking in

the minds of the priests, pastors and church members. These education and information on peace building will make those individuals involved to become peace ambassadors. Through this lifelong education and information on peacemaking, people will be more conscious of maintaining and building a sustainable peaceful society.

Negotiation is another mediating tool the church uses as a traditional way of resolving conflicts or grievances between disputing parties and to institute a peace accord between the parties involved for harmony and co-existence. Negotiation is a structured process of dialogue between conflicting parties about issues in which their opinions differ (Fisher, Ludin, Williams, Abdi and Smith, 2000). This can also be seen as a goal to reach agreement through joint decision making between parties (Jeong, 2000).

Peace and Unity

Peace has been conceptualized differently by different authors. Some viewed it as a condition where people are free from war and hostility while some scholars opined that peace is not the absent of war or hostility but society where there is rule law and justice. To this end, Rummel (1981), defined peace as a state of law or civil government, a state of justice or goodness, a balance or equilibrium of Powers. The scholar went further to explain that peace may be opposed to or an opposite of antagonistic conflict, violence, or war. It may refer to an internal state (of mind or of nations) or to external relations. Or it may be narrow in conception, referring to specific relations in a particular situation (like a peace treaty), or overarching, covering a whole society (as in a world peace). Peace may be a dichotomy (it exists, or it does not) or continuous, passive or active, empirical or abstract, descriptive or normative, or positive or negative.

International Alert (2019) defined peace as a situation where people are able to resolve their conflicts without violence and can work together to improve the quality of their lives. They went further to provide five conditions people must enjoy before one can say that peace has taken place. To this effect, peace condition is fulfilled when:

1. Everyone lives in safety, without fear or threat of violence, and no form of violence is tolerated in law or in practice.
2. Everyone is equal before the law, the systems for justice are trusted, and fair and effective laws protect people's rights.
3. Everyone is able to participate in shaping political decisions and the government is accountable to the people.
4. Everyone has fair and equal access to the basic needs for their wellbeing – such as food, clean water, shelter, education, healthcare and a decent living environment.
5. Everyone has an equal opportunity to work and make a living, regardless of gender, ethnicity or any other aspect of identity.

Presently, we cannot assume that there is an absolute peace in Nigeria due to the prevalent violence rate alongside with other vices such as incessant communal clashes around the country, ethnic rivalry, political thuggery, kidnapping, ritual killings, conflict between Fulani Herdsmen and farmers, arm robbery, “Boko Haram” terrorism, militancy and the separatist agitators for self-determination.

From 1960 when Nigeria had her independence, they understood that the tribe and tongue of Nigerians differ but in brotherhood they stood. This was captured in the first national anthem which was published in 1960 and lasted till 1978. To reiterate this, the last two lines of the Nigerian National Anthem according to Okoro (2018), says though tribe and tongue may differ, in brotherhood we stand. This National Anthem had unity undertone after recognizing their ethnic divide but built the nation on brotherhood. Also, the second anthem which is the current National Anthem published in 1978-present, in line 8 and 9 as rightly put, "One Nation bound in freedom, peace and unity" conveyed a message of freedom of its citizenry, peace and unity to unite different ethnic nationalities to function as one nation where peace and justice reigns. Freedom as highlighted in the current national anthem refers to the fundamental human right which include Freedom of movement, freedom of speech and the press, access to information, freedom of association, freedom of worship, the right of the citizens to be educated and right to fair hearing.

What makes individuals sociable beings is their ability to interact freely with the environment and also respond appropriately to the forces that threatens their existence. When the fundamental human rights of people are threatened, abused or violated, the unity of the entire system becomes weakened. Human relationships build a defense that sustains the entire system. The government and communities that promote fundamental human right are gradually building a pathway to a peaceful society.

The question we must stop to answer here is "in what ways can people's fundamental human right be maintained"? To attempt this question, we need to look at the constitution where these rights were enshrined. The rights of people in Nigeria were provided in the 1979 Constitution with different sections for different rights of individuals. Section 31 of the constitution made provisions for the right to dignity of the human person which stipulates that no person shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment. This section also provided that slavery, similitude, force labour is prohibited except when such activities are done in pursuance of the order of the court. Section 38(1) of the constitution maintains that people must have right to freedom of movement. Citizens must be allowed to go about with their legitimate businesses as law abiding citizens without any form of molestation nor fear, except the restriction by law in the case of emergency.

The right to Peaceful Assembly and Freedom of Association are stated in section 37 of 1979 Constitution which provides that every person shall be entitled to assemble free and associate with other persons. The right made provisions for the formation of associations such as political parties, trade unions or any other association for the protection of personal or community interest. (Okom, 1999). People must freely identify and associate with any group they want, provided the association is not inimical to the survival of other people. People must be allowed the right to choose what they want to worship, when and how, without any heresy and persecution. Like in the case of North-East, Nigeria where Churches and Mosque were burnt down and some members of these religious groups

were killed by the *Boko Haram* Terrorist, some were disconnected from their family members while some lost their means of livelihood. This kind of situation cannot promote peace in the country, especially when the citizens feel the government cannot provide adequate security for them. This is an absolute violation of the freedom of the worshippers.

The right to freedom of speech and the Press is entrenched in section 36 of the 1979 constitution which stipulates that every person have freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. It gave liberty to individuals to operate outfits that can disseminate useful information that will not lead to blaspheming of any religion. The press comprises of the media which is further divided into the following: The print media, broadcast and internet. The press monitors and regulates the activities of the government and individuals and allowed the public access to information. Individuals must also have access to information especially those one that are relevant in research or informative enough to create awareness and assist in decision making. This brings about balance of power in the system. The functions of the media can further be summarized into three viz: to educate, to inform and to entertain.

In the bid to reduce human rights abuses in the country necessitated the establishment of public Complaint Commission, National Human Rights Commission, civic Societies organizations and other internationally recognized as the protector of human right are: Amnesty International, National High Commission for Human Rights (NHCHR), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and Lawyers Committee for Human Rights. Through this medium, violators and abusers can be investigated and brought to book. Amnesty International, a non-profit international organization that was established in London, Britain has taken the responsibility to ensure human rights are not being abused in Nigeria. This has informed the world why they are engaged in monitoring the activities of the of Nigerian Military in the North-East, Nigeria to protect the citizens from abuses such as sexual assault, victimization, maltreatment and extortion of money. Since some of the citizens who suffer human right abuses cannot afford to pay lawyers to fight for justice. Their last resort is to liaise with the necessary human right agents. One of such agents is Public Complaints Commission (PCC) and other human right related organizations. Through this, citizens will become well informed or awareness on the right approach to seeking for justice pertaining to human right abuse. By so doing, citizens can make complaints on matters affecting their right.

The rational for the consideration of freedom of the citizens in this chapter is based on the fact that peace is an integral component for human existence. Both men and women alike have been oppressed, suffered as victims of human trafficking, involved in forced marriage, forced labour and suffered from other forms of harmful practices. A society with this kind of barbaric practices is still far away from modernity. These practices impede the functionality and the productive capacity of the individuals who have fallen victim of such human abuses. Individuals do better in a conducive environment where

human rights are respected and dignified. Peace and unity in Nigeria has been elusive due to ethnicity, promoted by colonialism ethno- religious conflict, ethnic rivalry, intolerance and ethnic cleansing. Nigeria comprises of different ethnic nationalities, having different ethnic groups co-existing while retaining their separate identities, cultures and institutions leading to a pluralistic or multi- culture society.

Ethnicity is defined as shared relationship and other cultural characteristics between groups which consider themselves as culturally distinct and are regarded same by others. Mboto (2001) explained that ethnicity is so prevalent in Nigeria that it manifests itself in our everyday life. Aside making for people of different cultural background to see themselves as rivals in the race for the control and allocation of national resources, in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. This has made the issue of unity in the country a difficult task especially as colonialist arbitrary partitioned the country without regard to ethnic boundaries and its consequences to encourage the divide and rule policies. This succeeded in putting one ethnic group against the other. Inter-ethnic competition and rivalry have led to tension, hatred and hate speeches. Thus, Nigeria is a good example of a nation that has not yet achieved the task of uniting the various ethnic groups into a nation state, with the interest of the nation above ethnic loyalty. These can be seen from the sharing formula of the political appointments, allocation of resources, and domination of political power by a particular ethnic group and over concentration of development projects in certain areas to the detriment of other sections of the country thus, leading to marginalisation. Ethno- religious conflict is another factor that promotes conflict in Nigeria as some ethnic groups may be identified by a particular religion and may want to dominate other religions e.g. Hausa Fulani identified by Islam and may attempt to dominate other religions can lead to conflict. Ethnic conflicts are disputes relating to political control, access to jobs or xenophobic and ethnocentric feelings against other groups. There are many incidences of ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria especially in the Northern part of Nigeria like Kano, Kaduna and Jos.

In order to promote National Integration in Nigeria, equity, justice and protection of individuals against discrimination need to be enforced, prejudice through spreading of information on the rights of the minorities groups, Promoting ethnic tolerance through inter-group contact in schools, work places, armed forces and National Youths Service Corps (NYSC) programme, promotion of Code of Conduct by Federal Character Commission to maintain the principle of proportional representation in various posts and benefits for all ethnic groups. Equitable distribution of resources, prosecution of anti-corruption war with sincerity by bringing to book corrupt people in Nigeria and the presence of committed, honest leaders, not corrupt charlatans who have nothing to offer, Respect for national symbols such as National Anthem, Coat of Arm, National Flag and Nigerian Currency.

Peace is a determinant factor for unity to exist. Unity is a joining together of different integral components or parts of something to function as a coordinated whole. In a group scenario, for any unified group to be sustained, the interest of the group must be

protected, and it must supersede the individual interest. When these conditions that are supposed to unite the groups are not adhered to, the possibility of uniting the groups becomes elusive. There is also the need for the commitment of each constituent of the group towards upholding the central whole.

Peace and Development

Rummel (1981), viewed peace as a concord or harmony and tranquility that brings about peace of mind or serenity. The scholar further explained that peace is more important than all justice. From the foregoing, one can conclude that a peaceful environment is an enabler for people to engage in economic, political and social activities vis-à-vis development activities. Development thrives better in an environment that is violent free. People invest more in areas that are not prone to conflicts because they are sure of the security of their property. It has therefore become expedient to say that peace is a panacea for development. The concept of development has been given different meanings by different scholars in the development studies. This is because the concept is encompassing and need to be viewed from all angles of the society. Todaro (1995) defines development as the process of improving the quality of all lives. He enumerated three important aspects of development, namely: Raising peoples living levels through relevant economic growth process, the second aspect is by creating conditions conducive to the growth of people's self-esteem through establishment of social, political and economic systems and institutions which promote human dignity and respect and finally to increase people's freedom to choose variables of goods and services. Ering (2006) noted that a society may change in number of ways. It may become richer, more peaceable, less authoritarian or poorer, more peaceable and more authoritarian, less peaceful and so on. These dynamics are as the result of the inter play between the actions of the citizens and the various social institutions where they function. This is to say that there is a direct influence of human actions on the society either negatively or positively. Also, the leadership style adopted by any given society has a long way to detect how the social climate of that society is being conditioned for the type of development that will be witnessed.

There is no Nation that can achieve meaningful development without the collaboration of other international bodies. The need for diplomatic relations and regional cooperation is instrumental to the promotion of peace, unity and development among different countries. Part of the responsibilities of Organization of African Unity (A.O.U) now African Union, which was established in 25 of May, 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia was to ensure that there is regional peace in Africa. Through this, there will be unity and cooperation among the different countries in the continent. The existence of peace in the region has promoted economic cooperation and trade liberalization which Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has being a major player. Peace has been seen as a pivot where development activities revolve. A country that does not initiate peace and sound security architecture will likely record low implementation of development activities, but increases the chances of agitation from dissatisfied individuals, minority groups and oppressed groups which may lead to destruction of

already existing infrastructures, low rate of investors due to the fear of insecurity in the country, a drop in Gross Domestic Product and poor diplomatic relationship. Different countries in Africa such as Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Nigeria that witnessed civil war and insecurity suffered a lot of under development which is one of the causes of poverty in Africa.

Approaches and Models for Peace Building

For peace to prevail in any society, certain approaches and models such as cooperation, tolerance, equity, relative deprivation and structural functionalism need to be considered. The above approaches and models are considered important because they are best suitable for the explanation of a complex society like Nigeria which is highly stereotyped, prejudiced, tribalized with inherent ethnocentric characteristics.

Cooperation Approach: The emphasis of this approach is on the co-existence and survival of people from different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Cooperation is a form of social interaction that binds people together to promote a common ideology or goal. People must unite their social energies to front a common goal. It is through this that families, communities and nations can function together.

Tolerance Approach: This approach promotes unity among people of diverse ethnic groups who inhabit a particular geographical location. Instead of emphasizing on ethnic differences and past disharmonized practices meted against them. This helps foster progress in the society. To this end, tolerance can only be achieved when a particular ethnic group creates an enabling environment to accommodate other tribes for the purpose of promoting national identity. The essence is to enhance inter-group interaction which helps to build a social network of relationship towards reducing tension, insecurity and elimination of embedded prejudicial conditions in the system. Tolerance contributes to building a society where people can be treated with dignity, love, have assurance of a secured and safety life and guaranteed improved socio-economic activities.

Equity Approach: one of the causes of conflict in the developing countries is the problem of lack of equitable distribution of resources. Unumeri (2009), noted that when resources are distributed equally to the members of a group or groups as reward for their contribution to the sustenance of the entire system, equity is said to have prevailed. This has been witnessed in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Nigeria. Therefore, Equity Approach advocates for equality in resource distribution among different groups according to their contributions. This will require a derivative formula that will assist to eliminate slave-master relationship. Scholars such as Michener, DeLanmater and Myers (2004) noted that equity judgments are made when one group member compares his or her own outcomes and inputs against those of another member or group.

Relative Deprivation Model: This model is credited to sociologist Samuel Stouffer, who developed the approach while studying social psychology during World War II.

Unumeri (2009), explained this model based on the the gap that exists between the desires of individuals and their living condition. Deprivation occurs when a particular ethnic group is being treated better in terms of provision of social amenities and establishment of other development projects like good road network, agriculture, education, health facilities, food storage facilities and economic empowerment to the detriment of other ethnic groups. When the gap between the expectations and the outcome of people in the society becomes widened, it could lead to agitation, protest and rebellion.

Exhortation Approach: This approach is credited to the following scholars, Simpson and Yinger (1972). This approach explains that it is necessary to enforce sound moral values through demonstration in rallies to reduce prejudicial discrimination. Prejudice can take the forms of ethnic, religious, gender, occupation and politically. National development does not only refer to improvement in the economic condition of people but also a change in the attitude and behavior of people towards building a positive relationship with other members of the society irrespective of their ethnic or religious affiliation. Mbotto (2001) in confirmation noted that this approach of exhortation attempts to show that inherent in the basic values of democracy, freedom and the rights to the individual is the notion that people should not be discriminated against on the basis of their ethnic and religious affiliations. A society where prejudice and discrimination are eminent will find it difficult to achieve peace, unity and meaning development.

Structural functionalism: Parson (1960), produced a general theoretical system for the analysis of the society that came to be called structural functionalism to analyze the interaction or the interdependency of human activities and the various social institutions towards the sustenance of the entire system. The model explains how the society can attain equilibrium state or a consensus of other sub-systems. When some aspects of the system are dysfunctional, the entire system will begin to malfunction. The social institutions co-exist, to ensure none of the institutions suffer setbacks also, to avoid conflict from occurring in the system which comprises of social institutions.

Social institutions are part of social structure saddled with the responsibilities of providing vital social services such as provision of education services, health services, and promotion of family values, economic activities, politics and other moral values in the society. Social institutions are platforms where social interactions take place through the various activities of people. These institutions include family, education, health, economy, politics and religion. The outcome of these social interactions determines the state of human society. These social institutions are interdependent; a change in one institution inevitably causes adjustments in other areas. For example, changes in education by way of producing low quality graduates can affect the quality of service in the labour market (Ukah, Njemanze and Omiya, 2017)

To promote peace and progress in the society, there is a need for integration of all the social institution, reduction of tension, maintenance of the institution, agreement, stability, cooperation and inter-dependency. Radcliffe- Brown (1976) pointed out that the

concept of function applied to human societies is based on an analogy between social lives and organic life. He sees the functions of social institution as a correspondence between it and the needs of the social organism. Every institution must exercise some degree of control over its environment, setup goals and working to realize them, motivating individual to perform their roles according to the societal expectation.

Conclusion

The study appraised the mediating role of the Church in peace building and Unity in Nigeria towards enhancing national development. The connectedness of the Church and peace building, peace and unity, peace and development were critically analysed. The view that peace is a vehicle for unity and development in Nigeria is an indisputable fact. This is because peace and development have continued to be in the front burner of academic discourse over the years. This is an indication that peace is a panacea for unity and development in every society. This is evidenced in the available literature, theories, information from the media and the observation from the social realities around the environment.

Peace does not come on its own until conscious effort is applied by different stakeholders. This is critical as it has been exemplified by the mediating role of the Church in Nigeria. There is no country that can achieve meaningful growth and development without building a peaceful environment. Peace is a panacea for social change and progress. To build a peaceful society requires that every peace building actor must be committed to promoting a culture of peace by ensuring that the right approaches to peace building are adopted towards handling issues that can hamper peace, unity and progress. Some of these approaches are cooperation during crises, exhortation to enforce sound moral values through demonstration in rallies to reduce prejudicial discrimination. Other approaches include tolerance among different ethnic groups and equity in distribution of resources.

In addition to the application of the right approaches in building a peaceful society, the fundamental human rights and human dignity also need to be respected.

Recommendations

Based on the study, the following recommendations should be used:

1. Nigerian government should make effort towards the continuous promotion of national integration, elimination of ethnic rivalry, prejudice, discrimination, ethno-religious conflicts and other forms of social disharmony. Through this process, peace, unity and national development will be realizable.
2. Peace accords initiated by the Church as part of their mediating role should be obeyed by the parties involved.

Conflict of Interest

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