

THE MISSIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF LAY MINISTRY TO THE GROWTH OF MAINLINE CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The mandate given to the church through the Great Commission suggests that the vital works of mission require collaborative efforts of both the clergy and laity, but there has been noticeable negligence on the part of the latter in some Mainline Churches in Nigeria. Rather than being actively involved in evangelism and mission, a pronounced passiveness has been the trend for many years, and this has resulted in scuttling the effort to actualise profound discipleship needed for the exponential development of the church. This attitude was orchestrated by the erroneous notion that the clergy have the sole responsibility of engaging in the work of mission or evangelism. Leveraging the concept of priesthood of all believers vis-à-vis the stand of the Second Vatican Council on the shared responsibility of the lay people in the pastoral, prophetic and noble agency of Christ, this work explores lay ministry from a historical perspective. Biblical and historical approaches (a recall of the Era of Reformation and Early Missionary dispensation) will be adopted to articulate the veracity of lay ministry to ascertain its relevance to the church's growth.

Keywords: Missiological Relevance, Lay Ministry, Growth, Mainline Churches in Nigeria

Introduction

The laity can be defined as members of a religious order but without ordination. They have a ministry which is intended to embody Christ and his *ecclesia*; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and leveraging on their endowments, to carry on Christ's redemptive work for humanity; and to take charge in the life, devotion, and administration of the Church. The term laity has frequently been utilized to distinguish it from the term clergy. The first implies the role of the congregants who offer voluntary services in the church; the second characterizes the role of those who are officially employed in the service of the church (Nwanguma, 2014: 201).

To a large extent, the ministry of the laity thus takes place outside the official church organogram: in homes, workplaces, schools, and so forth. Therefore, we can infer that lay ministry occupies a significant space in the organization of the church. Hence there are designated lay representatives on the variety of the hierarchies of the mainline churches such as the Anglican Communion, Methodist Church Nigeria, and the African Church. In the Church of England as well as Anglican Church in Nigeria, these governing bodies range from a local Parish Church board, through Deanery and Diocesan Synods. At the apex level, the standing committee includes the house of Laity (Composition of Synod in the Laws and Regulation of the Constitution of the Ibadan Diocese, 6). Likewise, in the Episcopal Church in the United States America, the General Convention includes four laymen from each diocese in the House of Deputies, and each diocesan convention includes lay delegates from the parishes. On the local parish level, laymen are elected to a church council called a vestry which manages church finances and general affairs.

Though the structure of the churches mentioned earlier recognizes the administrative functions of the laity, yet their presence has not been adequately felt in mission areas in the contemporary age. This indifferent attitude of a large percentage of the laity to mission work which encompasses evangelism and outreach programmes among others has aroused the curiosity of this research and generated the pertinent questions: was the Great Commission the sole duty of the Apostles or of the entire church? How can the mission of the church be effective without the inputs of the laity more so that much of their ministry takes place outside the church structure?

Mission is the term that addresses the whole essence of the church. It begins with God and overflows to all humankind and other creatures (Melisande Lorke & Dietrich Werner, 2013: 191). Mission encompasses evangelism/outreach programmes, visitation, care giving and every aspect of the church that makes Christ relevant to the world. Within the context of this paper, mission is not to be understood as an organized Christian action in terms of sending missionaries from one clime of the world to another but the deliberate action of the church, both clergy and laity to walk in obedience to Christ in fulfilling the great commission. The word mission is from the Latin *Mitto* meaning 'to send' (Cheesman, 1997:16) while its Greek equivalent *Apostolos* means someone who is sent. The argument from this etymological connotation of mission is that rather than being obedient to the command 'to go', the laity is sitting within the sanctuary, praying and listening to messages for years. This has raised the question, for how long will the outreach programmes of the church suffer neglect? Idialu asserts that mission could be carried out in different modes and paradigms such as mission as evangelism, as theology, as social action, as quest for justice, as contextualization and as ecumenism (Idialu, 2012: 38-43). Therefore, attendance at church services or partaking in the Eucharist without active participation in the work of mission makes church membership a passive and docile one; and does not help in the expansion of Christianity. In order not to overburden the priestly ministry, all Christians are expected to accept the eternal truth of being partners in the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Laity in the Biblical Times

In the New Testament, the word *laos* is profoundly used when referring to the body of Christ (Oosterwal, 1972: 63). It does not refer to a group within the church but to the entire church itself. *Laos*, used in the context of the church, literally means "God's own people". It is nowhere used in contrast to other within the church. Gottfried Oosterwal expounds this idea clearly, stating that the lay and the ordained ministers in the Bible are used interchangeably. They are not in contrast with each other. The lay people performed clerical duties as clergy (Oosterwal, 1974:77).

However, he adds that there are some thin differences between the terms, leading us to see more clearly the intended role of the entire membership of the church. Succinctly puts, one might also say that the term laity stresses in particular the privileges of being chosen by God from among the many others to the exalted status of God's own people, separated and different from the world; while the term clergy emphasizes in particular the function and roles of the laity, namely, to show their gift of grace with others. Laity stands for the status of God's people, ministry is their function.

This concept that every church member is a minister seems to be a stimulus for some of the great successful movements in the history of the Christian church. This is exemplified by the reformation of the sixteenth century, the great awakening in John Wesley's day, as well as the work of Millerite movement of the nineteenth century and that of the Seventh - day Adventist church all reflect this emphasis (Thompson, 1996: 287).

The New Testament indicates that every baptized believer is ordained for the ministerial responsibilities of the church. This view is supported by the fact that at the baptism of Jesus, He was commissioned through the impartation the Holy Spirit. Equally, Paul's letters seem to corroborate that position. In his epistle to the Ephesians, particularly in chapter four, he mentions that the body of Christ, which is the church, is endowed with various gifts to equip God's people.

Speaking persuasively regarding every baptized person's call to the ministry, Oosterwal adds,

To be baptized in the baptism of Jesus means not only God's confirmation that we are a member of His chosen people, the laity, but also our ordination to the ministry (Oosterwal, 77).

He argues cogently that the rediscovery of this concept could very well be the key to a finished task in the Christian church. If the early era was a church mostly populated by lay people, then the contemporary generation should by all means conform to the original pattern. More so, Jesus Christ in His earthly ministry sent people who are considered to be laymen today to go in twos to preach the gospel. If lay people were not so important, He would not have chosen people such as fishermen and tax collectors, but instead He would have preferred the priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes who are highly regarded as the religious authority in the world then.

The woman He met at the Jacob's well was another instance of Lay ministry. It should be clearly understood that after genuine conviction of the person of Christ, she chose the work of evangelism voluntarily. Nathaniel, Mary, Salome among others in the Bible were lay people who key themselves into the ministry of Christ through active participation in the work of evangelism. Although Apostle Paul was notably known to have received formal religious training, but virtually most of his missionary partners and acolytes were lay people without any accredited education.

It could also be confirmed in the Old Testament that God did not only use the trained and ordained people like the priests and prophets but also the lay people. For example, he chose Abraham whom by qualification had no theological background or training. Besides, there were no records about the training of Noah, yet God chose him to preach and caution the people in his own time from all their atrocities. In today's language, this would have been termed lay ministry.

The Lay Ministry during the Reformation Dispensation

As early as the 12th century during the rise of revival movements which attempted preliminary reformation in Europe, Peter Walde or Waldo, the rich merchant of Lyons and the founder of the Waldesians (Mepaiyeda, 2013: 29) took a cue from the template of Jesus Christ. History reveals that he raised seventy disciples, equipped with copies of translated Bible in the vernacular of parts of Europe and sent them on evangelistic mission to Southern France, Italy, Spain and Rhine Valley (Mepaiyeda, 27). It could be argued that by this action, the foundation for the orchestrated doctrine of 'priesthood of all believers' among the reformers was solidly laid. This allusion emphasizes the important role of lay ministry in Christianity.

The religious renewal movements of the 16th century took many forms; some remained within the traditional ecclesiastical structures; others broke away to form different religious community. Gradually the term "protestant" from the protesting estate at the diet (parliament) of the Holy Roman Empire in Speyer in 1529 or 1530 (Mepaiyeda, 54), came to be applied to most of the new religious bodies, although it was originally designed primarily for the followers of Luther.

One of the reasons for the emergence of reformation was the discovery of the attractiveness of the gospel. A new generation arose, who by reading the New Testament at first had begun to discover that there was something exciting, something life changing, which as like new wine, which just couldn't be curtailed in the old wine skin of the church of the late middle age (McGrath, 2021).

Firstly, between the ten and fifteen centuries, the church experienced the emergence of real doctrinal disorder because at this period she lacked any sense of certainty about her beliefs. The reformation brought to consciousness the great truths of the Christian faith; which the clergy by then failed to produce. This portrays the fact that the clergy were oblivious of other responsibilities expected of them such as adequate preaching ministry, evangelism and mission; beside the pastoral care of the flocks. Though they had certain privileges, yet they were not seen to play any decisive or important role in the life of the church. The late Middle Ages saw the clergy really living in different levels while the laity were simply despised. They had no role to play in the church at all (Amour Rollin, 1960:12).

What could be tagged the "rediscovery of the laity" came with the Reformation which emphasized the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, the idea that all Christian believers have a role to play in the church. For Martin Luther, every Christian man is a priest, and every Christian woman is a priestess, whether they be young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, scholar or illiterate.

For instance, the Calvinist city of Geneva, which had five thousand citizens and two hundred clergy before reformation, with the same population in post-reformation era, the laity were discovered and given substantial roles to play in the church (Mepaiyeda, 2013: 56).

Contributions of the Laity in Early Missionary Era in Nigeria

As earlier stated, the role of laity is indispensable in growing or developing the church, most especially in the case of massive spread of the gospel. While the clergy is a trained spokesman of Christ, the laity under the leadership of a minister is to carry out both spiritual and social responsibilities beyond the four walls of the church building.

Most of the successes recorded by the early missionary in Nigeria can be traced fully to the support of the laity. While some of the European missionaries focused largely on towns and cities, African converts moved to the hinterlands to propagate the gospel. One cannot forget the exploits of Babamuboni, Olubobokun and Mary Oja who spread Christianity in the interiors of Ekitiland (Oguntuyi, 1979:3). These were among the laity converted into Christianity by the Church Missionary Society.

In addition, in the North-Central Nigeria, Anglicanism was said to have penetrated Kabba and Yagba areas around 1900 by the effective evangelism of Mr. Daniel Olowolayemo, a freed slave who regained freedom at Abeokuta. With the abolition of slave trade, he returned to his village, Obele, near Kabba with the light of the gospel. After Bishop Ajayi Crowther had administered baptism and confirmation on him, Daniel commenced his evangelistic campaign among his people who were said to have refused to embrace Christianity owing to the conviction that it was a threat to their traditional religion (Oyelade, 1996: 3). In order to encourage the pioneering effort of Daniel Olowolayemo, Rev. Milatyre, Mr. Walter Bako, Mr. Alfred, Mr. J.G. Ekin and Mr. Thomas were sent from Lokoja as missionaries to reinforce the evangelistic enterprise in Kabba and all parts of Okun areas (Oyelade, 3). Ijagbemi sheds light on the above statement when he said that at the beginning of the 21st centuries, three Missions and one Church were established among the Okun people. These were, the Church Missionary Society, the Sudan interior Mission, the Roman Catholic Mission and the African Church (Ijagbemi, 1981:42).

Furthermore, preponderance of evidence shows that the penetration of Christianity into Ebiraland came through their sons living in Edo and Western States of Nigeria around 1911 and 1912 (Yakubu, 2000:25). One Moses Eleko from Ogori and his close friends Messrs Daramola, Isaiah Alabi, Daniel Akerele (later the first Baba Egbe of St. Peter's Anglican Church Ogori) and Adeoye Akibito were all involved in the planting of the Anglican Church in Ogori in 1911.

Ajaokuta area benefited from the wind of evangelism that blew from Kabba through one Ekundina from Kabba in 1914. Ekundina was said to be a trader of tobacco who combined his trading with the preaching of the gospel of Christ. Among his first converts in Eganyi were Joel Onipe, Paul Puke, John Baiye Pin, Jacob Bajeh, Iregba Ore and Samuel Akove. Among the women were Madam Membeya, OnyiAjagu and Ologo. The Anglican Church in Okene started as a house fellowship in the house of Chief Abraham Ihieze Ijibana around 1914. With the efforts of Mr. Adegbulu, a non-indigene who had already been an Anglican prior to his coming to Okene, the house cell became very formidable. Later, around 1919, Archdeacon L. A. Lennon (a Jamaican) was sent by the C.M.S. authorities in Lagos to supervise the Churches in Owo, Akoko, Kabba, Ogori, Lokoja, and Kukuruku areas. Thus far, going by this historical survey, one can see that the spread of Christianity in Kogi and Ekiti States in Nigeria today was largely undertaken by the laity before the clergy were sent to the areas for the consolidation of the churches. Therefore, one can assert that the missionaries would not have succeeded without the significant contributions of the liberated slaves.

Reminiscing on the roles of some laity during the missionary era, Reuel affirms that village heads such as kings and chiefs who can as well be referred to as laity also played significant roles (1967:90). Mention was made of King Akintoye, the Oba of Lagos, King Sodeke of Egba and King Obi Akuzua of Onitsha who used their positions to support Rev Ajayi Crowther and the white missionaries.

The Laity in Contemporary Nigerian Church

It has been observed in the contemporary mainline or historic churches that emphasis is more on the pulpit ministry rather than the lay (pew) ministry. This could have resulted from misconception of what the church's duties vis-à-vis the mission entails. Apart from the African Church, Nigeria that has special recognition for the laity due to the process of her historical emergence, other mainline churches focus much attention on priestly or pastoral functions. Even within The African Church where the laity seems to wield enormous powers, energy seems to have been dissipated on the administrative aspect of the church, leaving the work of mission for the clergy. The myth among the mainline churches that the clergy should play the multidimensional roles of a pastor, teacher, healer, counselor, evangelist and caregiver has created a mindset that fundamentally affects the growth and mission works of most churches. While the clergy is over-tasked, the laity is under-utilized. The implication is detrimental to the development of the church.

The Church was established to enlarge the frontiers of the kingdom of Christ across the universe to glorify God; to enable all men to share in His saving redemption, and that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ. All activities of the mystical body directed to the attainment of this goal are called the apostolate, which the Church carry on in various ways through all her members. For the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate. No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but has a share in the functions as well as life of the body. In the same vein, in the body of Christ, which is the Church, "the whole body... in keeping with the proper activity of each part, derives its increase from its own internal development (Eph. 4:16). Indeed, the organic union in this body and the structure of the members are so compact that the member who fails to make his/her proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useless to the church or self.

In the Church, there is a variety of ministries, nevertheless, we have oneness of mission. Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying, and healing in His name and power. The laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have a significant role to play in the mission to the world (Smith, 1959: 17& 18). Hence, apart from the Apostles, He also sent seventy or seventy two disciples on mission.

They exercised the apostolate by their activity directed to the evangelization and sanctification of men and to the penetrating and perfecting of the temporal order through the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, their temporal activity openly bears witness to Christ and promotes the salvation of men. Since the laity in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ.

The laity derives the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's mystical body through baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation (An Anglican Rite of Impartation by the Bishop), they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself. They are consecrated for the royal priesthood and the holy people (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10) not only that they may offer spiritual sacrifices in everything they do but also that they may witness to Christ throughout the world.

In order to operate effectively in this apostolate, the Holy Spirit gives the faithful special gifts, allotting them to everyone according as He wills (1 Cor. 12:11) in order that individuals, administering grace to others just as they have received it, may also be "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10), to build up the whole body in charity (cf. Eph. 4:16). From the acceptance of these charismata, each believer is bestowed the right and duty to use them not only for the edification of the Church but also for the good of people outside the body of Christ. The success of lay ministry depends upon their living union with Christ who expressly commands that, "He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Though it is true that the laity in the mainline churches assist in many units/departments such as the choir, ushering, technical, youth and children coordination, maintenance etc, the fact remains that their relevance has been confined to the four walls of the church. The most important duty which is to reach out to the society in obedience to the Great Commission, is yet to be given adequate attention. If the mission aspect is given the priority it deserves by the laity, it will not only serve as a platform to showcase the relevance of Christ's death to the world and those perishing, but it will be a catalyst for monumental population increase of the Kingdom of God in Nigeria.

This paper advocates, therefore, that in-reach programmes within the premises of the church should be matched with outreach ones and that the laity should be encouraged to play significant roles because they are the ones that live among the people.

It is therefore recommended that the following methods can be adopted by contemporary laities in mainline churches in Nigeria:

One, **floating a youth or adult club**. This is John Wesley's model that was geared towards encouraging the youth in Oxford who had stopped attending Church services (Schwarz, 1995: 147). With the cooperation of his brother Charles, this club was founded at Oxford as a strategy to evangelize the youths. Within few years, the pews of mainline churches that had been abandoned were filled with many youths.

Statistics have shown that in spite of proliferation of churches in Nigeria, many people still don't attend churches. The rich members of the church or societies can float clubs with sporting or educational orientations in different communities (depending on their peculiar nature) with captivating programmes; to serve as a forum to reach out to non-Christians and through which the gospel could be disseminated.

Two, **Sokari Braide's strategy of healing ministry** (Mepaiyeda, 2018:333) could be adopted. This man from Niger Delta area of Nigeria had the mandate to establish a prophetic-healing ministry. One aspect of this ministry that cannot be denied is the fact that through it, the population of Churches in Calabar and its environs at the beginning of the 19th century swelled. Sokari took evangelism to the doorstep of Niger Delta people despite the fact that he was an Anglican laity. Even when he was pressurized to organize his movement into an autonomous church, he resisted it and said that God did not instruct him to start an independent Church. Gifted members of mainline churches should not just confine themselves to the four walls of their churches but be encouraged to stage revival programmes in different communities where the sick and demon-possessed could be healed. To complement this suggestion, medical mission should be organized by medical and health experts in the church as an outreach strategy.

Three, the laity could feature in the **advocacy for social justice**. The presence of oppression in most parts of Africa and Nigeria in particular calls for a synergy between evangelism and social responsibility. The church could become a mouthpiece of the oppressed through her action that transcends the activities within the church. McGavran (1979) corroborates this position by asserting that such social responsibility should be the intervention in the lives of those who are marginalized and oppressed by the social structures that undermine the integrity and value of human beings. The Catholic Church Nigeria should be commended for her advocacy for justice and peace. Other mainline churches should combine their prayers with efforts to eradicate or minimize the menace of oppression, imbalances and other social evils in Nigerian society. The laity most of whom are lawyers will be relevant in such department of the church.

Four, is **the strategy of morning cry in the neighborhood**. This strategy has long been adopted by Indigenous Churches in Africa right from their inception even till date. Morning cry is one of the evidences of their commitment to evangelism and revival where the laity play a significant role. Though, it may not be a means to achieve population increase in the church since its activity is devoid of one-on-one evangelism, yet it has remained a veritable means of evangelism. Lay members of mainline churches could adopt this in order to boost evangelism in their communities.

Five, **market/motor parks evangelism** could be another method. Among the Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals in Nigeria, it is a common practice to see the laity assisting their pastors in evangelism to market places. While stationing their vehicle at a spot, the speaker uses the megaphone to reach out to a large crowd in the vicinity while the laity move into the interior to distribute tracts. The same strategy applies to motor parks where passengers are reached and prayed for before they embark on their journeys.

Six, **mission to hospitals, correctional centres and orphanages** etc. This strategy makes Christ relevant to occupiers of these locations. By reaching out to the sick through evangelism, the Church raises their hope and assures them that Christ, the Healer will restore them to wholeness. For culprits in correctional centres, the visit of the Church gives assurance of hope in their hopeless situation. Through the ministry of the grace of salvation, some of them actually turn a new leaf and these portend a good omen for societal peace. In addition, evangelism to orphanages which involves donation of food items and other body needs, is a way of portraying Jesus Christ as a caring Savior who will not abandon any of His creatures. For a long time, some mainline churches have been carrying out this outreach at irregular

periods; during their celebrations or annual anniversaries. This however should be done at regular intervals with the laity pooling resources together to buy items needed for the mission centers.

Through proper teaching and encouragement of the laity, if the strategies discussed above are adopted, they will make the laity to function as expected and become active stakeholders in the work of mission.

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