

WOMEN AND CHURCH DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF CHURCH OF NIGERIA, ANGLICAN COMMUNION

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Abstract

It is a known fact that women have been playing vital roles since the creation of the world. It was a woman who bore the redeemer of the world in her womb. Apart from Mary, there are other women who made impact in their various societies. However, in spite of their enormous contributions, their activities are scarcely documented. This paper is therefore, attempts to appreciate the contributions of women in Church development using the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion as a case study. Qualitative methodology was used which combines both primary (oral interviews and participant observation) and secondary sources such as text books, journals, web materials et cetera. It is an incontrovertible fact that women are the major contributors to Church development. If they and their activities are highly appreciated and well documented, it will spur them to do more and this will in turn impact more on the Church and society at large.

Keywords: Women, Church Development, Anglican Communion, Nigeria, Society

Introduction

No society can afford to do without the women and their activities. The contributions of women to family and societal development cannot be over-emphasized. They are active participants in the social, political, economic, cultural and even religious lives of the society. In Nigeria, we have such women as Folorunsho Alakija, Queen Amina, Margaret Ekpo, Funmilayo Ransom-Kuti, Ladi Kwali, Dora Akinyili, Oby Ezekwesili, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and others. These and other women that I cannot mention here now made marks in the history of the Nigerian society. They are incredible. In the Old Testament and Pre-Christian era, women were not left out in the service of God and His people, especially the Jewish people that were male chauvinistic. We recall the activities and roles of such women as Miriam, Rehab, Deborah, Esther, Hannah, Ruth, among others, in the Old Testament. In the New Testament and in the time of Christ's earthly sojourn, the women were not left out in the service of God, Christ and His disciples, the women include Anna – the prophetess, Mary – the mother of Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Mark, Priscilla, Phoebe et cetera. These noble women played crucial role in the life of Jesus and His disciples. In the contemporary Christian era, we cannot afford not to acknowledge the contributions of women like Mary Summer, Mary Slessor, mother Teresa of Calcutta, mother Getrude Nwaturuocha and others in the service of God and His

Church. However, in spite of the plausible contributions of the women in the development of the church and the society, their activities/impacts are less acclaimed and have not received the needed attention, patronage and applause from Scholars and the society in terms of documentation.

Therefore, the main thrust of this work is to x-ray the role of women in Church development using the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion as our point of focus.

Clarification Of Key Concepts

Women

The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2001) and the Cambridge dictionary (www.dictionary.cambridge.org), concur that a woman is an adult female human being. The Webster's Universal Dictionary & Thesaurus (2005) define a woman as an adult female, while the Merriam-Webster's dictionary see a woman as an adult female person (www.Merriam-Webster.com). We can also define a woman as a matured adult human being of the feminine gender. She may be a wife, mother, single, unmarried, mistress, religious (Reverend Sister or mother or Nun) and so on (Ugwulebo and Duruji, 2014). In the Anglican communion, there are principally two women groups. They are mothers' union and women's Guide.

Church

Many scholars have taken time to explain the concept “Church” and we shall see their different assertions. To Parrinder (1971:421) the church is an assembly of people. He adds that the Church in the New Testament means the whole body of Christians. Akpunonu (1992:28) avers that the word “Church” is derived from the Greek word “ekklesia” which means a gathering, an assembly, a congregation of people. He posits that the Church is a community gathered by the father in the Son through the spirit to proclaim the wonders of God and the salvation of humanity performed by Jesus Christ, God-man, dead and risen. In his own, Ike (2002:93) refer the Church as a mystical communion fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ the son of God, who are sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Igbo (2009:21) succinctly describe a church as a building where Christian worship God in a particular community or locality. Omeire (1993:48) see the concept “Church” as “the community of faith that continued the work of God which Jesus began hence “a continuing sign among the nations that the kingdom of God has begun”. As far as Brodd (2002) is concerned the word “Church” is derived from the Greek word “ekklesia” which means assembly. He therefore, define Church as the “Community of all Christian believers” (Brodd, 2002:245). Iroegbu shared the same view with Akpunonu when he explicitly asserted that the Church is the “Community of believers in the Trinitarian God, gathered together and commissioned by Jesus Christ, God-man, to continue the mission of the establishment of God's reign in the world until he returns at the end of time” (Iroegbu, 1996:44). Although the magnificent buildings we see around us can also be

referred to as churches but in a miniature sense. We can therefore, see a church as people who believe in the Trinitarian God, who are redeemed by Christ through his death on the cross and who are united by the Holy Spirit. As a result, they share in the Sonship of Christ and therefore, heirs of the kingdom of God (Ugwulebo and Duruji, 2014:24).

Development

Development is a subject matter that covers all facets of life, be it religious, spiritual, economic, cultural, political, social, physiological, sociological, geographical or psychological. Every scholar sees development from his discipline and personal point of view. A religionist and an economist will always see development from different points of view, likewise others. Shah describe development as improvement in country's economic and social conditions. (www.socologydiscussion.com). As far as Akinsanya (Ifeanacho, 2006:105) is concerned, development denotes “sustainable growth, poverty reduction, environmental protection, institutional transformation, gender equity and human rights protection. He maintains that it is the upward movement of the entire social system in any society. Also, another scholar, Ogunbamile (Ifeanacho, 2016:095) contended that development implies “qualitative rise in skill, capacity, freedom, self discipline, responsibility and creativity geared towards physical, material and or psychological well being. He also brought his definition of development home by narrowing it to the spiritual and religious aspect of life when he averred that development specify “that the society and the individual move progressively from a primitive to a better way of communicating with the Supreme Being. (Ifeanacho, 2006:096).

We can see development as moving from old and outdated methods or ways of doing things to a better, progressive and sophisticated ways of doing things. However, for the purpose of this paper, development can be said to mean the sustainable growth, enlargement, progress, advancement and expansion of the Church in terms of infrastructure, human and spiritual development.

Anglican Communion

Succinctly put, Anglican Communion may simply mean Church of England. Anglican Communion is said to be a body of Churches including the Church of England and those Churches that hold essentially the same faith, order, and worship with it and are therefore, in communion with each other (“Anglican Communion in over 165 Countries” nd). Wotogbe – Weneka (2004) in his own, refer Anglican Communion as all the family of Churches that share common apostolic tradition and order with the Church of England. In other words, they can “interact with” or “fellowship with” or “converse with” “talk with”, exchange thoughts, ideas or feelings with” one another. (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2004:22). Another definition has it that Anglican communion is a family of 42 autonomous and independent – yet- interdependent national, pan-national and regional churches in communion with the see of Canterbury (“Anglican Communion in over 165 Countries”. N.d.)

Brief History of Mothers' Union

The history of the Anglican mothers' Union dates back to the year 1876 when it was founded in England, United Kingdom by Mrs Elizabeth Mary Summer of the blessed memory. However, it was introduced into Nigeria in October 1908 by Mrs Abigail Oluwole, wife of Bishop Oluwole of Diocese of Lagos (“The women's organization, Ijebu Anglican Diocese”, n.d.) Presently, the union is headed by the wife of the primate of Church of Nigeria, Anglican communion. Mrs Ndukuba. The headquarters of the Union is in Abuja (“Women home/organisation”, n.d). Each diocesan Mothers' Union is headed by the wife of the Bishop, likewise in the Archdeaconries, Deaneries, and Parishes, the wives of the Archdeacons, Deans, and Parish Priests are heads of their respective mothers' ministries. Membership of the Union is for all Anglican women who have been baptized, confirmed and wedded in the Anglican Church.

Brief History of Women's Guild

The Women's Guide according to Mrs. Kanu (n.d), was founded by Mrs. Frances Melville Jones (Wife of Rt. Rev. Jones, the Bishop of Lagos and was inaugurated on the 23rd day of May, 1921. It is an important women organization in the Anglican Church. Women are first admitted into the Guide before being admitted into the mothers' Union (“Anglican Diocese of All Nations” n.d). It was founded in order to cater for all the women, who for one reason or the other cannot join the mothers' “Union women Home organisation”, 2020). The Women's Guide is for female members of the Anglican Church from the age of 25 (“Mother's Union, Women's Guild & Girls Guild”, n.d). Membership is also for all women; wedded in the Church, married according to traditional law and custom, married in the court, widowed, single mothers. (Usifoh, Ordu, n.d.)

The Roles of Anglican Women in Church Development in Nigeria

The contributions of women to Church development cannot be under-estimated. No Church can afford to do without women. Without the contributions of women, the Church cannot stand firmly. Numerically, they are very high, their financial contributions as far Church development is concerned cannot be quantified.

Ecclesiastical role: Women as wives of Bishops and priests provide emotional support for their husbands. They soothe them when they are angry, stressed or upset. The conjugal love, affection and respect shown to the priests by their wives help them a lot and make them feel relaxed to face their priestly duties with less stress. During Child dedication, birthday celebration and priestly ordination anniversary of their priests, the Anglican women usually present gifts and cash both collectively and individually to them. The women also play prominent roles during the reception of newly ordained deacons and priests by the Church as they donate cash and gifts to them. The women bodies also visit the seminaries where they make their impact felt through the donation of cash, foodstuffs and other material items. When the Church embark on building projects especially church buildings, the women sacrifice a lot to see that such projects are realized. They make financial contributions towards such projects. In the area of cleanliness of Churches and their environs, the Anglican women are not found wanting. Regularly, especially on

Saturdays, the women clean and tidy up their church building and its environment including the pews, because they believe that cleanliness is next to godliness. Also, the women provide ornamental flowers to increase the aesthetic appeal of the Church building as a place of worship. They also help in decorating the church. Some of them are lay readers in the church. In some occasions, in the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion, women are allowed to preach during Church service, especially during mothering Sunday. However, it must be pointed out here it is at the discretion of the priest in-charge to appoint somebody to preach during church service. The women also serve the Church as pastor's wardens and people's wardens. They are involved in Evangelism to reap souls for Christ and this has yielded positive fruits. The women ministry is also into children ministry and Bible study as teachers. They are actively involved in Sunday School activities. The women ministry also co-ordinate the activities of the members of the Girls' Guild to make them role models and agents of change in the society. The head of the women ministry and their members also help in the training of members of the Girls' Guild who are the future mothers on the art of motherhood et cetera. No right thinking Christian plays with prayers and the Women in the Anglican Communion are no exemption. After all, it is said that Jesus started and ended with prayers, hence prayer is said to be the master key, so the Anglican women engage in prayer sessions, praying for the Church and the society at large. A prayer less person is a powerless hence, the women lay much emphasis on prayers.

During Church harvest and Bazaar, the women are actively involved; they bring their items and equally buy them, thereby increasing the revenue base of the Church. The women ministry also take part in the Church synod where they make inputs that help in the growth and development of the Church.

On the economic role, the Anglican women are trying their best. In some dioceses, the women ministry has skill acquisition centres where women and girls are taught how to make soaps, detergents, cream, tailoring, hair dressing etcetera thereby equipping them to be self reliant and even employers of labour. In some areas, the women have multi-purpose buildings which apart from using them for their activities, also rent them out in order to generate income.

Socially, the women in the Anglican communion have made their mark. The women ministry engages in the reconciliation of people who are having misunderstanding and dispute. They reconcile husbands and wives, mothers and mothers et cetera. This is to ensure that peace reign both in the church and society. They also visit orphanages, motherless babies' homes, indigent members and give them gift items and money in order improve their living standard. Also, patients in the hospitals (especially their members) are not left out as the women ministry visit them especially after the mothering Sunday to give them sense of belonging.

On the cultural aspect of life, the women ministry is not left out. The women have always spoken out against obnoxious cultural practices such as the Osu Caste system, Ume,

widowhood practices such as forcing a woman to drink the water used in bathing the corpse of her late husband et cetera. They also stand firmly against female genital mutilation, human especially women battering and so on.

In the area of educational development, the women ministry has paid their dues both collectively and individually. They encourage their children to embrace education especially formal education. To demonstrate this, in some churches they offer scholarships to people to study in the educational institutions. For instance, in our Saviour Church, Tafewa Balawa Square, Lagos, their women ministry has offered scholarships to deserving children (“Mothers' Union, Women's Guild & Girls' Guild”, 2016). The women ministry also organizes conferences/workshops for their members, youths et cetera where they are exposed to topical and burning issues. They also organize health talks for women and girls on how to live healthy lives et cetera. The women ministry also supports church schools in their own little way, financially and otherwise.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the women in the Church of Nigeria, Anglican communion have made giant contributions in the Church projects. Their ecclesiastical/religious, social, economic and educational roles speak for themselves. It is a verity that no church can do without women and the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion is not an exemption. Their intimidating population, their moral and financial contributions are no longer in dispute. It is our humble submission that the society and indeed the men should scale up their level of encouragement to the women so that they will be disposed to do more in the church to the glory of God.

Recommendations

Women should be given their due recognition and be highly appreciated by the family, church and the wider society. The activities of the women ministry in the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion should be properly documented by scholars, the women and Church authorities. Their activities and impact should be seen in Text books, journals et cetera. The Anglican women ministry should engage more in economic activities such as Agriculture, establishing out fits like garri processing, pure and bottled water factories, et cetera. The Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion should consider ordaining women as deacons and priests as it is done in some Church denominations, this will give them more sense of belonging and more impetus to contribute more to church development.

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