

## **APPRAISAL OF IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS BODIES ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA**

**Dr. Gerald Ugo. Nwabuisi**

*Lecturer, Trinity Theological College, Umuahia, Nigeria*  
Email: *geraldugo13@gmail.com* Phone: *+2348038231674*

### ***Abstract:***

Religion is regarded as a faith-based process capable of impacting on governance and the behavioural patterns of the adherents for positive impact in the society. Conversely, the fact that Africans are notoriously religious and the continent thereof still largely characterized by endemic poverty and gross underdevelopment in contemporary times brings up the questions whether religious bodies in Africa are living up to their social responsibilities or whether African spirituality places value on retrogressive structures. These imbalances and dilemma informed appraising the impact of religious bodies on community development programs in Abia State, Nigeria, for reconstruction purposes. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population for the study comprised the three major religious bodies in Abia state, vis-à-vis African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. The findings of the study revealed that religious bodies have historically made enormous positive impact in the health, education, economic, political, and social spheres of life in Abia State, Nigeria. Comparative analysis not only revealed lack of social agenda among some contemporary religious bodies in Abia state, but also a striking difference between the altruistic efforts of the early religious bodies and the self-centered interests of some contemporary religious bodies in social affairs. The study observed a complementary relationship between religion and community development especially in the absence of religious exclusivism. The study recommended a reawakening of missionary passion for development in Abia State, Nigeria and the promotion of collaborative efforts between religious bodies and other implementing agencies for a more result-oriented and consolidated approach to community development programs in Nigeria.

**Key Words:** Community Development, Religious Bodies, Abia State, Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religion.

### ***Introduction:***

Despite the noticeable interests in poverty alleviation and community development in various parts of Nigeria shown by the government, private sectors, NGOs, community and religious bodies, Wahab (2000) argues that the rural areas and the people have not yet fared well. The

rural areas have continued to be backward and low in economic and social well being, notwithstanding the enormous resources in Nigeria as expressed by Abraham, in Obioma (2016:11) thus: “Nigeria is richly endowed with different types of solid minerals-from precious metal to various stones and industrial minerals and opportunity exists for the extraction and processing of these minerals.” This is clear evidence that some factors are seriously militating against the implementation of community development programs in Nigeria. However, this ugly situation points to the need for collaborative and accelerated efforts in harnessing the available natural and human resources for sustainable development in the country. To achieve this, there has to be a comparative appraisal of the efforts made by the community development implementing bodies so as to determine their strengths and weaknesses in order to make necessary recommendations for informed proactive measures in making positive impact in the society.

Consequently, religious bodies are given special attention in this study for the facts that: religion is regarded as a faith-based process that is capable of impacting on governance and the behavioural attitudes of the adherents for positive impact in the society; the antecedents of the early religious bodies in Nigeria once served as point of references in development discourses; and faith communities are the largest and best organized civil institution in the world, claiming the allegiance of billions of adherents and bridging the divides of race, class and nationality. Religious leaders have the power to raise awareness and influence attitudes, behaviors and practices in the community and family levels. They can shape social values in line with faith-based teachings. Religious leaders have the power to promote and support government policies that accelerate development. For Okoye and Pongou in Azuakor (2019), the relative prosperity of different societies upon European contact, was seriously dependent on missionary activity; it exercised greater influence than colonial governments’ and European traders’ influence and it has impacted on human capital in modern Nigeria as well as having influenced cultural values and institutions. According to Ajani (2011), religion remains one of the oldest, yet the most dynamic of social institutions. He argues that the assumption that religion in modern societies would gradually diminish in importance or become less capable of influencing public life is now becoming a matter of dispute and that Christian doctrine and practices could be earnest and integrated into the developmental process with a bid to enhancing the livelihood of Nigerian citizens.

This work premised from the fact that despite the aforementioned potentials of religion in the society, with its liberating capacities and historic social antecedents, religion has not received

substantial recognition in contemporary scholarship as it concerns community development in Nigeria. This view was succinctly captured by Ogbonnaya (2012) who expressed that in contemporary discussions of ways to attain sustainable and authentic human development, there is a reluctance to consider the influence of religion. The reason for this stems from the divisiveness and intolerance among various religious groups. This occasionally results in violent conflicts which hampers, if not destroys, the projects and can precipitate the decline of nations. In addition, the glaring African religiosity as expressed in their names, folklores, songs, culture and traditions, is incongruous with the backwardness and deterioration evident in her educational, social and economic sectors. What therefore needs explication is the extent to which religious bodies, particularly in Abia State have positively impacted on the society and the conditions of the communities through their community development programs. Discoveries made herein are carefully analyzed in order to articulate proactive measures that would give religious bodies a prominent place in community development programs in Nigeria.

### ***Conceptual Considerations:***

#### ***1. Religious Bodies:***

Religion is a system of social unity commonly understood as a group of beliefs or attitudes concerning an object, person, unseen or imaginary being, or system of thought considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine or highest truth, and the moral codes, practices, values, institutions, and rituals associated with such belief or system of thought. It is a structure within which specific theological doctrines and practices are advocated and pursued; usually among a community of like-minded believers (Johnson & Samson, in Ikechi-Ekpendu, Audu & Ekpendu, 2016). A religious body means an association or organization, which professes adherence to a belief in a system of faith or worship. Nigeria is a multi-religious country; she enshrines freedom of worship in her constitution. Nigeria is divided roughly in half between Muslims, who live mostly in the north, and Christians, who live mostly in the south; indigenous religions, such as those native to the Igbo and Yoruba ethnicities grouped under African Traditional Religion, are in the minority. In terms of Nigeria's major ethnic groups' religious affiliations, the Hausa ethnic group in the north is mostly Muslim, the Yoruba tribe in the west is divided among mainly Muslims and Christians with many followers of traditional religion, while the Igbo of the east, which includes Abia state are predominantly Christians with some practitioners of traditional religion (ATR) and few Muslim communities mainly in the major cities.

## **2. *Community:***

In the context of Community development, a strong vibrant community is one that has and supports social networks - inclusiveness, creates economic advantage, shares common values, allows for and encourages cultural and social expression, able to encourage and accept diversity of interests and opinion, cares for its people and strives for personal, inter-personal and civic participation. In this paper therefore, a community is defined as social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government and interest. Community in the context of community development can be interpreted as a group of people with some common identity and connection which may be based on any number of factors. Examples include: Geographic location such as state, region, town, suburb, and street; locality group such as family, village, and clans; Cultural identity such as ethnicity, age, and religion; Social connections such as workplace, sports, hobbies, clubs and groups; political affiliation such as parties, alliances, and coalitions; Special interests such as industry, housing, disability, and gender. Community is a physical place, but it also can be defined as people who live in the same location, share common interests, values, norms, traditions, prejudices and sentiments, jointly own or participate in something, share common characteristics, or have mutual relations.

## **3. *Development:***

Etymologically, the word 'development' has been traced to an Italian word '*voluper*' meaning to unwrap or unfold. To unwrap or unfold gives the impression of de-enveloping or opening up an enclosed material. For the purpose of this article, development is implicitly intended as something positive or desirable. It refers to a process which is planned and desired by the society. Development is value based, people-centered, multi-dimensional and measurable. When referring to a society or to a socio-economic system, development usually means improvement, either in the general situation of the system, or in some of its constituent elements. Development relates to realizing potential, growth or expansion of something, or making something more effective. To this end, Todaro, cited in Enyi (2014:19) explained that development must therefore be conceived as a multi-dimensional process involving changes in structure, attitudes and institutions, as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and the eradication of absolute poverty. In essence, development must represent the entire gamut of changes by which the entire social system turned to - the diverse basic needs and desires of individuals and social groups within the system.

#### ***4. Community Development:***

Simply put, community development is the act of growing, expanding or making more effective groups of people who have mutual interests. Community development initiatives provide the community with varied opportunities for: developing abilities, participation, interaction, involvement in local decisions, and reduction of reliance on external resources. Amal, Natsir, and Suswati (2019) emphasis brought to surface the concept of community development in the contemporary times, which amplifies the participatory paradigm; making the rural dwellers themselves ‘get into the skin’ of the development. Community development therefore can be seen as a process that allows people to decide for themselves what they need and what they are capable of, then to implement a collective plan of action, and to monitor and evaluate the results. The ultimate aim is to empower the community to develop long term results and rely upon themselves.

#### ***A Synopsis of Community Development Efforts in Nigeria:***

Though marred by certain factors, the Federal, State and Local governments have historically shown signs of interests in community development issues at various times. According to Abugu (2014), research and studies have shown that local government plays a variety of roles to meet-up with the challenges of both community and national development and they include the provision of basic social amenities, mass mobilization, accelerating force for greater economic growth and development, and ensuring social and economic justice. Olowu, in Abugu (2014) outlined the possible contributions of local government to the development process to include; political integration and nation building; Training in citizenship and political leadership; promotion of accountable governance; and provision of social and economic development, contending that the role of local government in the community development process stands in the triadic function: as agent of mass mobilization, as accelerating force for massive economic growth and development and as agent of socio-economic equity.

The impacts of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on rural livelihoods have been robustly discussed by researchers and implementers of community development programs. It could be inferred that no significant achievement can be recorded in Nigeria in terms of poverty alleviation without incorporating the NGOs to achieve overall improvement in the living standard of the vast majority who reside in the rural areas (Yusuf, 2015). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are critical change agents in promoting economic growth, human rights and social progress. Foreign agencies such as USAID partners with

NGOs to deliver assistance across all regions and sectors to promote inclusive economic growth; strengthen health and education at the community level, support civil society in democratic reforms and assist countries recovering from disasters.

The private sector is a key stakeholder in both urban and economic development, being a major contributor to national income, the principal job creator and employer, and helping to fight the problem of extreme poverty by taking responsibility of tasks performed by the State, thereby relieving the pressure on public expenditure and allowing the federal government to focus its resources on key social and physical infrastructure. The private sector also helps in broadening the economic base, making Nigeria less susceptible to external stimuli. The private sector helps in human resource development, education and training job skill formation. It also teams up with foreign partners to provide a springboard for foreign direct investments in vital infrastructure like transportation, communication, power and information technology.

David, Edebo, and Ladi (2010) examined the role of community based association in rural development. The study identified membership dues, registration fees and donations from members as sources of funding to the community based association. Their findings showed that the association carried out many development projects such as the building of postal agency, health centers as well as supply of educational materials which is a contribution to community development in spite of some identified challenges like inadequate funding. Their study posits that community based association were also involved in conflict resolutions within the members and the community as well. Their study further reveals that given more support in the forms of favorable policies, good governance, the community based associations and other cohesive, vibrant and trust worthy groups could reduce poverty and under development in the rural as well as urban areas.

***Empirical Review of Interplays between Religion and National Development:***

Uwaleke (2018) highlights the role of religious groups, especially Christianity and Islam in the FGN's Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP), which is regarded as a blueprint to position the economy on a path of sustainable growth. The author applauds the role of religious bodies in fostering sustainable inclusive growth partnering with government in the delivery of health care and other social services including the fight against diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and provision of education with many faith-based private universities helping to transform the educational landscape of Nigeria. The author suggests other areas religious bodies could be of help such as: involvement in economic

activities in support of speedy economic recovery, and partner with the government in helping to deliver welfare programs that target the poor.

Furthermore, government can partner with religious bodies to rebuild the public school system with emphasis on technical/vocational education, Churches and mosques can organize training programs for people who are interested in learning a trade or to equip members of the youth organization with computer skills, design and implement programs that facilitate job creation and poverty reduction, partnership to establish agri-businesses, housing projects, shopping malls, hotels, printing press, transport services and a whole lot of other business ventures at affordable prices to customers; they can actually leverage crowd-funding opportunities provided by their numerical strength. Big churches and mosques that have idle structures and huge open spaces should be encouraged to convert them to productive use, champion the campaign for Nigerians to embrace locally made products especially with respect to basic items such as school uniforms, textiles, footwear and food, advocating a job-oriented economic growth and should continue to call on government to allocate more resources to projects that facilitate an enabling environment for job creation and poverty reduction. Periodically, they should issue statements on the state of the economy, the national budget and allocation of national resources to create awareness about the high level of poverty and social exclusion in the country.

Obiefuna and Uzoigwe (2012) argue that the attention on the parameters of development is shifting from infrastructure and economic considerations regarding Gross National Product (GNP) to humanistic considerations of the actual wellbeing of humans. For these authors, happenings around the world indicate that economic, political and technical advancements do not offer all it takes to live. These are material accretions that serve humans as quantitative beings. They serve the quantitative dimension of life. But there is, also, the spiritual, the qualitative dimension of humans. This is where religion comes in. The spiritual is the invisible domain of humans that propels and enables relationships not only with fellow humans but also with the invisible realities of nature. Religion is, therefore, considered critical for any meaningful, total and sustainable development in any human society. Religion is not as private and personal as some people may think. It is a group function that affects individuals directly or indirectly. The study of religion that would be contributive to sustainable development, therefore, has to take care of one's religion as a study from inside and the religion of others out there as from outside. Religion as a relational outfit in the society requires a cordial relationship between Nigeria's two major missionary religions, Islam and Christianity for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Agbiji and Swart (2015) affirm that religion constitutes an inextricable part of African society. As such, political and socio-economic activities are often flavoured with religious expressions and rituals. However, whilst Africans are steeped in religiosity - this is expressed in many ways - poverty and corruption are rife on the continent. The question thus arises as to whether African religiosity gives impetus to poverty and corruption on the continent or whether religion has a crucial role to play in the liberation of African societies from poverty and corruption. These authors argue that whilst religion has been instrumentalized in some instances to perpetuate poverty and corruption on the continent, it remains a crucial component of 'Africanness' and could contribute to moral, socio-political and economic transformation.

In a bid to discover the reason for the great emergence of underdevelopment in Africa and Nigeria in particular evident in her educational, social and economic deterioration, Ikechi-Ekpendu, Audu and Ekpendu (2016) tried to sketch the role religion has played in the development of Nigeria to ameliorate her State. According to these authors, poor formulation and implementation of policies, mono economy, lack of good governance, decolonization, corruption, religious intolerance and lack of good governance contribute largely to underdevelopment. The authors also assert that religious groups have played starring roles (social, economic, political, educational, therapeutic and agricultural) in national growth through the provision of schools, hospitals, micro loans in partnership with directorate of rural farmers, inculcating morals through teaching in religious and political assemblies for national growth. The authors recommend an improved partnership of the government arm and the different religions; the study of moral education be made compulsory in all categories of learning and national orientation agency should also include it in their plans; Promotion of the culture of Religious tolerance, through education and enlightenment of the people through the mass media, civil society organizations and educational institutions to respect and tolerate other religions as well as extol the culture of others is helpful and to effectively mitigate the persistent occurrence of religious violence in Nigeria; The government needs to be pro-active in promoting the culture of tolerance by adherents of religions. The government should give more power to the religious organizations in Nigeria in promoting inter-religious dialogue and religious tolerance through organizing seminars and workshops for religious adherents which will help in building sustainable political development.

Gbadegehin and Adeyemi-Adejolu (2016) posit that religion has suffered great deal in the hands of the rationalists, enlightenment and modern thinkers who have shown how irrelevant it is to societal development. Social scientists, especially 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century's sociologists

and psychologists had concluded on the demise of religion and had accepted the idea that modern society was increasingly becoming secular in character. Consequently it appears absurd to talk about development where religion is used, misused and abused by political elitist class and people of wealth in Nigerian socio-political and economic realm. It also raises the question as to the values, importance and relevance of religion to economic development in a country still engrossed in the spate of senseless killings and maiming of innocent lives orchestrated by the Boko Haram insurgency. It also raises concern about the prevalence of religious intolerance and violence sponsored implicitly or explicitly by the clerics and pastors of Islamic and Christian religions against the African traditional religions to national development. The authors recognized that religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam have already embarked on developmental projects such as building social institutions like schools, hospitals, and have begun welfare projects and encouraged such religious traditions to continue. However, there is a lot more to do; churches and mosques can bring their resources together to do joint projects such as constructing roads, bridges and or even donate buildings for public utilities to their respective states or local governments where they are founded or situated. They could marshal their resources together to provide city and inter-city transportations at affordable rates; this could complement government's effort both at States and Federal levels who are trying to provide mass transit for the ever-growing population of Nigeria. The only best way to respond to negative aspersions being cast on religion is to respond by reforming and restructuring the religious beliefs and practices to be adaptable to building a very virile and progressive nation where all and sundries feel fulfilled and happy.

Apenda (2015) expresses that skeptics and preachers of socialist ideologies have challenged the role of religion as a positive variable of development process of society arguing that religion has more negative value to offer to any society. However, scholars of religion have confronted, interrogated, and examined these views and have maintained that even though there are religious differences and diversities, these differences and diversities have their positive values for mutual enrichment and development of societies. The author posits that African religion has remained a critical factor in the development agenda of Nigerian communities; hence the repositioning of African religion and its values will promote and enhance development in contemporary Nigerian societies. Religious institutions and community are two terms that inevitably attract each other and they coexist with the conflicts and tensions, which have become a national characteristic of their mutual endeavor in development. All religions offer a fundamental ethics of life for their adherents. Religion offers the community a guide to live in harmony with themselves and as a binding force

between men and God. He concludes that all religious groups must widen their scope of activities to properly address community socio- economic and political issues in Nigeria; and secondly have the responsibility of teaching their adherents the need to jettison negative attitudes that could dispel community development

According to Udo (2011), religion provides a standard of value in terms of which the established norms, values, and rules may be critically examined in community services. In so doing it hallows the norms and values, or culture of the society thereby aiding order and stability and thus enhances development. Gbadero and Adeleye (2011) said that the presence of religious institutions introduced the need for the rule of law, which includes political equality of citizens and the protection of their rights as well as those of minorities, which is however grossly lacking today and possibly have paved way for the growth of corruption in the Nigerian society. Imaekhai (2011) maintained that throughout history religion has been a source of development. He emphasized that for centuries, religious institutions like the Church were among the first institutions to provide asylum for accused criminals through the influence of the established.

#### ***Community Development Efforts of Religious Groups in Abia State, Nigeria:***

Abia State occupies about 5,834 sq. km and is bounded on the North and Northeast by Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi States. To the West of Abia is Imo State, while to the East and Southeast are Cross River and Akwa Ibom States, and to the South is Rivers state. Located in the South-eastern region of Nigeria, Abia State lies approximately within latitudes 4° 40' and 6° 14' North, and longitudes 7° 10' and 8° East. The State's population during the 2006 census was 2,833,999 with a population growth rate of 2.7%. Using this population growth rate, the State's estimated population in 2016 was about 3,699,168 people. The State is low-lying with a heavy rainfall of about 2,400 mm/year, and is especially intense between the months of April through October. The rest of the State is moderately high plain. The most important rivers in Abia State are the Imo and Aba rivers that flow into the Atlantic Ocean through the Niger Delta. Abia State was carved out from the former Imo State on the 27/08/91 under General Ibrahim Babangida, bringing to thirty the total number of States in Nigeria at the time. The capital of the state is Umuahia, although the major commercial city is Aba, a former British colonial government outpost. Its citizens are predominantly Ibos with more than 95% of population. It is one of the nine constituent states of the Niger Delta region. Abia State has 17 LGAs, namely: Aba North, Aba South, Arochukwu, Bende, Ikwuano, Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, Isuikwuato, Obi Ngwa, Ohafia, Osisioma Ngwa,

Ugwunagbo, Ukwa East, Ukwa West, Umuahia North, Umuahia South and Umunneochi. (Christian Aid, 2017:12-13).

According to Ogbulu and Mbazie (2012), in Abia State, there are about 800 Autonomous Communities that spread across the three Senatorial zones of the State. Each Autonomous Community has a Traditional Ruler as its Head. There are other institutions in the Autonomous Communities which may vary from one Autonomous Community to another that assist the Traditional Rulers in the day to day administration of their Autonomous Community. The religious bodies in Abia State are predominant Christianity (Orthodox, Pentecostal and indigenous), more than a few traditionalists (ATR) and scanty Muslim communities. Their community development efforts take the forms of educational, social, spiritual, agricultural, economic, political, medical, psychological and physical undertakings. These agree with the view of Awolesi (2018), who opines that religion plays key roles in Nigeria through the following areas: education – establishment of schools, health – building of orthodox health centers, clinics and hospitals, upholding morality and democratic process, swearing in of public office holders, motherless babies’ homes and orphanages’ welfare, prisoners’ welfare and succor, peoples’ welfare, keeping hope alive, rehabilitation centers for drug addicts and mentally ill patients.

### ***African Traditional Religion:***

African traditionalists believe their religion was bequeathed to them by their ancestors as opposed to those that have been influenced by western culture and other impinging faith such as Christianity and Islam or other foreign religious traditions. Despite its suffering from stereotyping, African Traditional Religion continues to play a critical role in the life of the traditional Africa. Mazi Nnanna Nwabuisi acknowledged the role of ATR in inculcating morality through folklores and ethical standards. Apenda (2015) corroborates this view by saying that through the use of traditional folklores, children were introduced to moral values and duties that were capable of engendering community development. He noted that folklores were indispensable and played a prime role in the education of children, which facilitated the process of community development. African religion has become a tool for social services. He further argues that the only religion that is indigenous is the African Traditional Religion and the only religion that Africans practiced from generation to generation and the only religion that has extended a hand of friendliness with other religions that came subsequently to African communities.

Traditionalists such as Mazi Okebaram Onwuka and Chief Okenwa Elekwa revealed that despite the influence of Christianity, people still patronize African Traditional religion for protection from spiritual and physical forces. This agrees with the view of Ogbonnaya (2012) who hints that although not institutionalized like Christianity and Islam, African traditional religion contributes to the sustainable development of Nigeria psychologically. It provides a sense of security and assurance of assistance from the spirit of the ancestors which Africans believe serve as a protective shield against such evil forces as witches and wizards which can disrupt individual and communal development. Therefore, when faced with the riddles of life, and in moments of suffering and difficulty, a good number of Nigerians fall back on their traditional religious cultural beliefs.

Furthermore, the concepts of taboos, sacrilege, ethics, customs, tradition, etc characterize African Traditional Religion. Chief Okenwa argues vehemently that Christianity and Islam do not instill values like African Traditional Religion. For him, traditional values are wrapped with significant levels of sacredness and they help in the maintenance of sanity and decency in the communities. Although a larger percentage of the indigenous population in Abia constitutes Christian converts, it is the indigenous beliefs and values which, mainly, serve as the mediation for their religious and cultural expressions. Community dwellers dread breaking sacred laws to avoid facing the wrath of the 'gods' or the ancestors. Traditional Africans share the basic instinct of gregariousness with the rest of human-kind. Traditional African peoples also possess important sacred institutions with significant religious dimension that equally further the community ideal.

Ekeopara and Ekpenyong (2016) explained the following conditions for national development as having been provided by ATR. These include: ethical codes and sanctions, eschatological outlook, traditional medicine, natural resources conservation and management, cultural tourism, values and morals are the aspects of African Traditional Religion which deal with the ideas that defend or sustain the life of the people in their relationship with one another and the world around them. Values and morals cover issues like justice, right and wrong, respect for people and prosperity, truth, love, good and evil, the keeping of promises and agreements, beauty, crime and punishment, praise and blame, etc. Chief Ariwodo Emenike acknowledged that these values and morals determine the political, economic and social behaviour of a people and stability and development of any nation of the world.

In Abia State, African Traditional religion has contributed to the social life of the people by providing cultural tourist attractions such as the long Juju shrine of Arochukwu; Amakama wooden cave - a very large tree that can accommodate up to 15 fully grown humans, the tree has a gigantic hollow and is believed to have played the role of a fortress during inter-tribal wars as well as in the era of slave trade; Arochukwu cave - a shrine that also was a route made use of by slave traders. It contains a spring as well as a gate of no return through which victims were sold into a lifetime of slavery, etc. There are also some festivals like *Iwaji*, *Iri Ji* or *Ike Ji* – depending on the dialect (new yam festival); *Ekpe* (masquerade) festival, etc that attract people from different parts of the society. Such festivals foster unity and cooperation among the community dwellers. There are exchange of food and gifts during these festivals to demonstrate love and communal life.

### ***Christian Religion:***

Reflecting on Christianity and Community Development in Igboland, 1960-2000, Nmah and Nwadiakor (2012) reasoned that the Christianity and civilization brought by the early missionaries in Igboland is waning and therefore needed to be resuscitated to enhance community development. Explaining further, the missionaries did not only bring the gospel of Jesus Christ; they also taught the people. They opened schools wherever they established churches where young ones were, and those interested were taught how to read, write, sing hymns, psalms, choruses, recite catechism, pray, and even learnt how to read the scriptures. Some of the notable schools by the mission bodies in Abia State include the Uzuakoli Methodist College built in 1923 and Trinity Theological College, Umuahia in 1948. Till date, there are many secondary, primary and nursery schools established by Christian churches (Orthodox and Pentecostal) in Abia State. The missionaries helped in the unification of Igbo language by translating the Bible into Igbo version called Union Ibo by 1910. Christian missions helped also to preserve the vernacular languages of the people as against the wishes of the colonial administrators who preferred the English language to the vernacular languages

In the area of health, Queen Elizabeth Hospital was established in 1945 as a mission hospital and was in 1991 taken over by the Federal Government and renamed Federal Medical Centre (FMC). The Leprosy Center Uzuakoli, Abia State was established by the Methodist missionaries in 1932, and currently jointly run in partnership with the Methodist Church of Nigeria, the Abia State Government, and the German Leprosy and TB Relief Association. The Methodist Church manages the Amaudo Itumbauzo Mentally Health Centre, established in 1989 by Rosalind Colwill in response to growing numbers of mentally ill people roaming the streets of South

East Nigeria. The Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist and a few other Churches have health facilities scattered around the State, including a couple of motherless babies' homes by the Roman Catholic Church. According to Aguwa (1997), Uturu has been a site of Christian missionary activities since the late nineteenth century. Churches, schools, and a rehabilitation complex are visible accomplishments of the missionary churches. There are also state educational institutions and private medical centers. The majority of people living in Uturu have become Christians through affiliation with one of the many churches. However, when compared to her neighbors Uturu has responded more slowly and cautiously to change. Many traditional customs continue to be cherished. Christian converts, therefore, face the question of how to deal with the indigenous practices that their new religion condemns.

Apart from the spiritual rejuvenation for inculcation of morals and psychotherapy offered by Christianity, the Christian leaders in Abia State contribute to the political well being of the State by having occasional stakeholders meetings with the ruling class, engaging in courtesy calls and advocacy visits for familiarization purpose and to commend good governance and make necessary recommendations to aid in making wise decisions and friendly policies in the State. Political education and other Conscientization programs through conferences, workshops and seminars are organized by some of these religious leaders for their members so as to enable them contribute meaningfully to the development of the State. Most Christian Churches in Abia State have agro based establishments and the Roman Catholic Church has micro finance banks (eg. Umuchukwu Micro Finance Bank, Bende Road, Umuahia) for economic purposes. These facilities serve as avenues for employment of labour and services to the host communities. Some Christian Churches in the State have built houses for some of their indigent members, awarded scholarships to some indigent students in the Churches and sponsored some young people in skill acquisition programs both in their centers and other centers not owned by them. Umuahia, Anglican Diocese has demonstrated these later gestures a number of times. They also do humanitarian and chaplaincy services in schools, hospitals, disability homes/schools, motherless babies homes, Correctional Centers, etc.

### ***Islamic Religion:***

According to Egodi (2010), amid assumptions of a hegemonic Igbo Christian identity, conversions to Islam began in the late 1930s in the Igbo territory of south-east Nigeria - the only region in the country that was not touched by the nineteenth-century Islamic jihad and subsequent efforts to extend the borders of Islam in Nigeria. Four decades after the emergence of Islam in the Igbo homeland, and with the mixed blessings of a civil war, Igbo land began to manifest clear

evidence of indigenous Muslim presence. According to research conducted by Olawoyin (2021) Muslim Igbos are more commonly found in Enugu – especially Nsukka, Owerri, Enohia in Afikpo North, Nakano in Afikpo, Afikpo town, Obollo Afor, Imilike Enu, Imilike Ani, Ibagwa and Okija. This reveals that in terms of the spread of Islam in Igbo land, Ebonyi and Enugu States have a substantial Muslim population. Islam is widespread in Nsukka, Enugu State, and Afikpo axis of Ebonyi, where there is an Islamic School. This feat was not an easy one for the Muslims who see Igbo land as not being receptive to Islamic religion. It is easier to acquire land to construct recreational centers than to get a property to build a mosque or Madrasah (Islamic School) in Igbo land, said Nkiru Mohammed, an indigene of Abia. Muslims in Nigeria are predominantly *Sunnis* of the *Maliki* school of thought and the *derika*. However, there is a significant *Shia* minority. Interviews with Ali Musa and Aliyu Musa reveal that all Muslims in Abia State worship together in their central Mosques located in the city centers irrespective of the sect each sect belong. This is unlike the northern part of the country where each sect has their own Mosques. In Abia State, large concentration of Muslims is found in Aba, Lokpanta, Umuahia and Isialangwa.

Oladimeji (2004) maintained that Muslims have always believed that Islam is the ideal way of life because it provides a comprehensive and systematic arrangement for human beings to regulate their life in all ramifications. Thus, as a religion, Islam does not confine itself to only spiritual matters, rather it also covers societal issues. Consequently there is no separation between Islam and community, since both of them are fused into one entity which centers for the social - economic, intellectual, legal, and other aspects of human life. On educational development, Olademeji (2004) notes that Islam established Qur'anic schools in some communities, in 1949, appointed teachers and provided materials for learning of modern skills which opened up access to community development. Some parents still send their children to the traditional Quranic schools under the tutelage of a mallam. The students are provided shelter by their teacher. The pre-adolescents sometimes subsist through alms begging or house-help jobs, while those above fifteen learn a trade or do petty trading along with their Islamic studies. These students, primarily from rural areas, are called *Almajiris* - a transliteration of Al Muhajirun, the Arabic word for emigrant - in Nigeria. This act is frowned upon by Western-educated Muslims who are uncomfortable with the alms begging lifestyle of many *almajiri* since it is not part of Islamic teachings (Hoechner, 2011: 712–728). Though the *almajiris* are not pronounced in Abia State, Islamic religion need to grapple with the challenges posed by this system in order boost their community development efforts.

Islamic religion in Abia State contributes to community development in various ways. The leader of the Muslim community in Abia State, Sheik Ali Ukiwo, disclosed that Muslims are conscientized to be good citizens. According to him, genuine Muslims should not allow the *Boko Haram* terrorist group to use them to achieve their nefarious agenda. Sheik Ukiwo promised to ensure that the *Boko Haram* sect did not infiltrate the Muslim community in the state. Ukiwo further revealed that the Muslim community in the State had been assisting the State government to fight insecurity and maintain peace in the State. He equally urged Muslims to continue to support the government of the day and also encouraged them to be law abiding and abstain from activities that could tarnish the image of Islam as a religion of peace (Okoli, 2014). Ali Musa and Aliyu Musa disclosed that Muslims in Abia State occasionally pay visits to Correctional centers during their religious feasts.

Furthermore, the Zakat and Sarafat Foundation (ZSF) has empowered 47 Muslims in Abia State with sewing, grinding machines and various sums of money as start up capitals. The executive director and the operations manager of the ZSF, Sulayman Olagunju and Maarut Ahmed respectively said the gesture is one of the tenets of Islam to empower the poor. Olagunju and Ahmed, who stressed that they should create employments for themselves and others, urged them to live in peace and harmony with others wherever they found themselves. In another development, Ndigbo Muslims of Nigeria, which Abia Muslims are part of have agreed to speak in one voice through the South East Muslims Organization of Nigeria (SEMON) and to align themselves with Ndigbo agenda even while promoting the unity, peace and progress of Nigeria. They prayed for the peaceful conduct of the general elections, smooth handover to all the winners and urged Nigerians to work for the growth of Nigeria as one united indivisible nation. They warned against violent campaigns and admonished Nigerians especially the youths not to allow themselves to be misused as thugs and criminals by politicians for the elections. (SEMON, 2018).

### ***Analysis of Issues:***

An important purpose of most religious organizations in planning and carrying out community development projects or programs is to fulfill its evangelism function. The most significant part of the development of any country is unquestionably the development of the people that make up the country – human development. Omoregbe (2006) argues that “moral maturity is a mark of human development, and it is the most significant part of national development. We cannot talk of the development of a country if its citizens are morally undeveloped and immature.” This is the major impact of religion not only in Abia State but universally.

Again, meaningful progress and development takes place only where peace and unity reign or exist. But when this purpose is dormant, the aim of community development by the church is therefore defeated (Ukommi, Udensi, & Ekpenyong, 2013). Religion offers the community a guide to live in harmony with themselves and as a binding force between men and God. Religion is a source not only of intolerance, human rights violations, and extremist violence, but also of non-violent conflict transformation, the defense of human rights, integrity in government, and reconciliation and stability in divided societies (Appleby, in Ajaebgu, 2012). This cohesive role of religion in the society is essential for accelerated community development programmes in Abia State.

The religious groups in Abia State are helpful in validating the core values of development such as equity, justice, mutual personal interaction in every society through its teachings, beliefs and practices. These religious groups are not confined to only spiritual matters but also over societal issues. On the part of Christians, invasion and destruction of certain ATR shrines without the permission of the adherents in the name of 'purification of the land for progress' have sown seeds of mistrust between them and the African Traditional religionists and thus retarding social cohesion with the attendant loss of peace, security and economic cooperation that lead to development. In spite of their laudable involvement in promoting progress and sustainable development, religious groups in Abia State have in some ways been inhibiting sustainable development. Christianity and Islam are occasionally antagonists, leading to ethnic and religious conflicts resulting in loss of lives and destruction of properties. Religion instead of being an agent of development has, at times, been an agent of decline, destruction, violence, and revenge.

Among the three religious groups examined, Christianity tops the list in her social agenda. This could be attributed to the fact that Abia State is predominantly a Christian State. It is rather absurd that most of the schools, hospitals and event centers established by some churches in the State in the name of community development projects are not affordable and accessible to their poor worshippers. This is contrary to the examples shown by the early missionaries. What further bugs the mind is the reason that the adherents of these religions who constantly receive moral instructions from their clerics constitute the majority of the State populace, yet engage in practices that are inimical to the development of the State. Most people in Abia State belong to one of these religious groups that uphold morality but are still culprits in corruption, indiscipline and antisocial behaviours that retard development in Abia

State. It is either these adherents only pay lip services to their embraced faith or the clerics thereof no longer 'preach' and model morality and fair play. This unpleasant discovery, coupled with the divisiveness and intolerance among various religious groups could contribute to the reasons that contemporary scholarship tend to play down on the contributions of religion to community development. Religious exclusivism is also noticeable among these religious groups and within each of these groups. These abnormalities question the authenticity of their religious claims. It is also sad to note that most of the early missionary facilities in Abia State are in bits of shambles as a result of gross neglect and abandonment. This also has weakened the influence of religion and indeed its relevance to development in the contemporary times.

Another challenge especially among the Christians is that while some contemporary Churches lack social agenda, there is glaring selfish and parochial interests in the social affairs of most contemporary churches. According to Akanbi and Beyers (2017), in Nigeria, religion appears to be the most lucrative business today which has informed multiplication of churches, especially new generational churches. One may be tempted to agree with Weber (2020) that there seems to be an inalienable casual connection between moneymaking and religious enterprise today. This is largely because of the promotion of prosperity gospel, sweeping through Africa, especially Nigeria. Prosperity Gospel runs contrary to the fundamental teachings of Christian religion which is detachment from material possession and seeking for heavenly realities. Prosperity Gospel is an aberrant theology from the traditional interpretation of the Bible.

### ***Conclusion:***

The intrinsic value of religion goes beyond religious practice to other broad areas of development and social functioning. According to Azuakor (2019), Christianity, Islam and ATR all teach discipline, hard-work, love, patience, peace, respect for constituted authority, respect for justice, truth, honesty, etc. All these are a *sine qua non* for social cohesion and harmony, which are essential for security and a sense of belongingness necessary for any meaningful cooperation and collaboration among citizens for meaningful all round progress and development. Although religious bodies in Abia State have historically made positive impact in the development of the State but there is urgent need for a reawakening of missionary passion and the spirit of altruism among the contemporary religious bodies in order to sustain their relevance in the State.

***Recommendations:***

1. ATR, Christianity and Islam must recognize and acknowledge the complementary relationship between religion and community development and shun religious intolerance, exclusivism, fanaticism and sectional interest.
2. There is need for a reawakening of missionary passion for development in the Nigerian society to consolidate the historic monumental impact of the early missionaries in the areas of health, education, economy, political, and social spheres of life.
3. The society should promote collaborative efforts between religious bodies and other implementing agencies for a more result-oriented and consolidated approach to CD programs in Nigeria.
4. There is need for the articulation of social agenda among some contemporary religious bodies in Abia State. Religious bodies must understand that any institution that does not make holistic impact in the society is counterproductive.
5. Government should act as a watchdog in giving a gentle push to religious bodies in Abia State to be up and doing in their social responsibilities. This can be achieved through regular stakeholders' meeting for monitoring and evaluation.
6. The striking difference between selfless efforts of the early religious bodies and the selfish interests of some contemporary religious bodies in their supposed social agenda must be remedied and balanced by the contemporary religious bodies.
7. Religious bodies should engage the services of trained CD personnel to help in capacity building, planning and implementation of their community development programs.
8. Religious education (not moral instruction) should include the impact of religion on national development. Religious bodies should intentionally include this in their school curriculum.
9. Religious leaders must take advantage of their 'prophetic voices' to condemn bad governance, unjust structures, corruption and mismanagement of the economy to avoid being accused of tacit collaboration with the powers that perpetrate them in the society.

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**Appendix****List of Respondents (Interviews)**

<b>SN</b>	<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>LGA</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Date</b>
1.	Mazi Okebaram Onwuka	68 Years	Umuahia North	Farmer	29/10/21
2.	Chief Okenwa Elekwa	71 Years	Arochukwu	Village Chief	30/10/21
3.	Mazi Nnanna Nwabuisi	79 Years	Umuahia South	Retired Civil Servant	01/11/21
4.	Mr. Ali Musa	33 Years	Aba	Trader	31/10/21
5.	Mr. Aliyu Musa	55 Years	Isialangwa	Trader	30/10/21
6.	Miss. Nkiru Mohammed	43 Years	Umunneochi	Trader	02/10/21