

DIALOGUE: A PANACEA FOR ECUMENICAL DISCOURSE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Ecumenism seeks to foster unity among diverse Christian denominations in Nigeria, originating with Protestant missionaries and expanding through the Vatican II council. Despite this progress, persistent denominational biases and schisms hinder true unity, contradicting Jesus' call for oneness as noted in John 17:21. The ecumenical movement's efforts since 1910 have largely fallen short, with historical challenges preventing genuine cooperation and dialogue among denominations in Nigeria, hence the need for the research to fill this gap. This paper uses qualitative analysis of literature, books, journals and case studies of successful initiatives to identify challenges and pathways to unity. It recommends that to enhance ecumenism, different blocs of Christianity in Nigeria should prioritise dialogue, develop educational programs on unity, encourage collaborative mission efforts, and model cooperation among leaders. The study concludes that while the ecumenical movement has made strides, true unity remains elusive. By embracing dialogue, collaboration, and a communal spirit, Christians can work towards the unity Jesus envisioned.

Keywords: Ecumenism, Protestant, Catholic Church, Roman Catholic Church and Christianity

Introduction

Dialogue has been a recurring decimal amongst different blocs of Christianity in Nigeria. According to Hornby (2000), Dialogue implies the coming together of two persons or groups of persons to iron out or discuss issues at a round table conference. Etymologically, it is derived from the Greek word “*dia*” (two) and “*logical*” (work) or *legein* (verb) to speak or to converse. Ubaka(2004) sees it as a conversation between two or more persons; it is an exchange of ideas and opinions. According to Eze (2023), in Igbo, dialogue can be interpreted as “*di anyi alula ogu*” (*my friends do not fight*). But the emphasis in the context is an ecumenical dialogue, which is at the heart of ecumenical cooperation and accompanies all forms of it. It differs to some extent from interreligious dialogue, even though both are forms of dialogue. To Achunike (2003), “Ecumenical dialogue is a Christian endeavour, which deals mainly with interactions between different Christian denominations with an open mind to understand each other's creeds, feelings and practices.

That is why Omegohain(1999), observed that impatience and intolerance led to the breakage of the medieval church, but if proper ecumenical dialogue is employed, the desired unity will be realised. Proper dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the separated churches will promote better understanding among them, which will pave the way for the realisation of the ecumenical dreams of the church. Okeke (1998), establishes that dialogue with other Christians stands out as a pressing necessity for authentic Christian witnessing in the world. And for this dialogue to be effective, the partners are to first of all enter into it with sincerity and the disposition to learn and not to impose their denominational creeds on their partners. It must be pursued with openness, love and tolerance as well as with mutual sharing. Once these are vigorously pursued, there will not only be success in the ecumenical dialogue, but it will ultimately promote unity in Christendom.

Barton(2007) analyses the progress made so far in the Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue when mentions that, conferences were subsequently held in 1976, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 1997 and 2000, which resulted in their joint declaration on the doctrine of justification by faith in 1999 and that they have jointly published a lot of things on Christian faith. This is another landmark record in the ecumenical dialogues going on in Christendom because it goes on to prove that once the dialogue is allowed to take place, biases and assumptions may easily disappear, thereby leaving the parties to understand themselves clearly. This whole endeavour is aimed at clearing the way for the unity of all Christian communions. Here, Christians of all denominations are to embrace this in love and in the spirit of Christ. It is not only an exchange of ideas, but an exchange of spiritual gifts and spiritual experiences.

According to Kasper (2004, p.7), "every Christian can do this in his or her own place and manner, for everyone is an expert in his or her own way, i.e. somebody who has had an experience and wants to pass it on". The people involved (members of different churches and ecclesial communities) are to set aside their denominational doctrines and dogmas that may cause disagreements and focus on the issues that they hold in common as Christians. Furthermore, ecumenical dialogue does not mean abandoning one's own identity in favour of an ecumenical "hotchpotch". It is a profound misunderstanding to see it as fostering doctrinal relativism. Thus, the aim is not to find the lowest common denominator. It does not aim at spiritual impoverishment, but at mutual spiritual enrichment. "In ecumenical dialogue, one discovers the truth" (Kasper 2004, p. 67).

The goal of ecumenical dialogue is not to convert others to one's side, though individual conversions cannot and must not be excluded; mutual respect for each other's denominational creed should be exhibited, people's consciences are to be respected and encouraged for conversion to the full truth of Jesus Christ. The attitudes of sincerity and openness are also to be present for the partners entering the ecumenical dialogue, they are to enter into the dialogue with an open heart, "which is glaring for all to see and it must be done in and with sincerity so that

none will be suspicious of others of having ulterior motives" (Ikalama 1995, p.40). One also needs to be clear about their faith before stepping into the ecumenical dialogue, because such a forum is meant for people who are versatile and can easily transmit or translate their faith and doctrines if the need arises. Again, one needs to know the position of his faith as regards ecumenism to guard against distortion, misrepresentation or misinterpretation of his denomination. This is because a partner in the ecumenical dialogue is like an image maker, and his discussion and level of presentation are the level at which he can sell his group's image. In addition to this, a partner in the dialogue must also have a clear respect for other people's creeds; he must understand their point of view before they can easily respect them, and this means that he or she must be ready and disposed to study other people's creeds. Those who engage in the ecumenical dialogue must gladly acknowledge and esteem the true Christian endowments from our common heritage, which are also found among the Christians of other denominations.

Ecumenism in Nigeria

The foundation of ecumenism in Nigeria was laid in 1911 when the Presbyterians initiated a missionary conference on more practical issues. The outcome of the conference reads: "To secure uniformity of discipline within the native churches founded by the different missionary societies, the relation of the church to marriage under native law, the baptism of women themselves, Christians, married to polygamous husbands, the definition of spheres of influence in the untouched field.(Ekechi 1978, p. 4).

According to Ekpunobi(2002), the conference was attended by Presbyterians, Methodists, and Anglicans. The main reason for convening the conference was "to fight denominational competitions The truth remains that it was convened to "break the roman catholic's monopoly of the mission field in Nigeria: During the conference, the issue of organic unity was ultimately discussed the type that will erase denominationalism. According to the Minutes of the conference (1911, p.77) Wilkie, a participant of the conference declared: "we are not here primarily to establish in Africa, Presbyterianism or Methodism or any other-ism, but to preach Christ and take a lowly place under the guidance of the spirit of god in the foundation of a church which shall not be foreign to the Africans".

Perhaps the missionaries also felt that there is an urgent need for ecumenism in the land for the denominational gospel they brought to the Africans which may have created rivalry, division and enmity among the people instead of unity and love, the conference was also stimulated by the world Christian conference of 1910, the conference solemnly declares the aim of missionary effort to be the establishment of one church of Christ and resolves that to attain this unity, there should be mutual and full recognition of the discipline of the churches of southern Nigeria, that immediate step is taken for the corporation union of native churches not Episcopal ordained (Groves 1955).

The argument here is that it is only by agreement that the desired Christian unity would be realised. To achieve the unification dream, the union was named the “Evangelical Union of Southern Nigeria by 1923. However in 1947, another missionary conference was held at Onitsha, with Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Qua Iboes and Sudan United Mission in attendance, but the Sudan United Mission (the missionary body working in Northern Nigeria, by then) was forced to withdraw from the conference because the colonial policy then could not favour it. Though they seriously worked for the unification, they could not succeed, but the formation of the world council of churches in 1948, and its mandate on the unity of churches, gave them the impetus to continue the struggle, finally, a date for the inauguration of the church union (United Church of Nigeria) was fixed for 11th December, 1965. But before the day came to pass, the event was aborted. Ekpunobi depicts the scenario in this way;

The inauguration of the church union (United Church of Nigeria) was fixed for 11th December, 1965, some of the guests had arrived in Lagos, many other guests were on their way to Lagos, and the visitors did not know that urgent messages had been sent to their offices regretting an indefinite postponement of the inauguration ceremony, thanksgiving services were already held for the new United Church of Nigeria in parts of Africa and Europe, funds close to \$15,000.00 were raised from Britain and North America in support of the new United Church of Nigeria unfortunately, it was still born.” Ekpunobi (2002, P. 69)

Despite all the noise about the proposed Church Union, it failed for several reasons, including lack of clear ideology, inadequate mass education, personality conflict, and ethical sentiments. Hence, the church union initiative failed because of interdenominational antagonism. These missionaries came together to champion the cause of church unity, but failed to fight the forces of rivalry. They ended up fighting or pursuing their denominational interests, which finally killed the vision of the church union in Nigeria.

Truly, the initiative failed, but it gave birth to the Christian Council of Nigeria as we have it today. The council was made up of various “protestant churches, notably the church missionary society (CMS), the Church of Nigeria (Anglican communion), Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Qua Iboe, and the Salvation Army. The newly formed Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) provided a forum for member churches to co-operate in various projects relating to pastoral education, joint ownership of schools, health institutions and their aims were to foster and express the fellowship and unity of the Christian church in Nigeria, which will further enhance the realization of its oneness with the church throughout the world, finally, it aims to keep in touch with the International Missionary Council and the WCC (World Council of Church), moreover, it is this CCN that later on Metamorphosed into CAN in Northern Nigeria. And later on into the Southern and Eastern parts of Nigeria, the move for the Church Union (Ecumenism) in Nigeria was orchestrated only by protestant missionaries at this time, while the Roman Catholics stayed aloof. On this, Baur said,

....no one should be surprised that the African church was slow in its acceptance of ecumenism, for protestants, the ecumenical movement has been restricted to a search for unity among the protestant churches, sometimes as a strengthening bond against the so called Roman danger, for Catholics, the prohibition of any participation in worship with heretics and this meant all protestants had been so severely inculcated that ecumenism could only mean pray for them so that they may return to Rome (Baur, 1994, p 500).

This was the understanding of the parties, both Catholics and Protestants, even after the Second Vatican Council. That is why it took a long time for the African Catholics to perceive that the Vatican II council was a new reformation in which the Roman Catholic Church accepted the basic ideas of the protestant reformation. It was really on this basis that both groups (in Africa) began to see themselves as brothers and sisters from the same Lord, and discover that what unites them is greater than what divides them, with this new insight coupled with the impetus given to them by both the World Council of Churches and Vatican II council ecumenism became a common agenda of both Roman Catholics and protestants in Nigeria, though their effort were minimal but from 1970 till present, the wind of ecumenism increased, both for formal and informal conversations, meetings and theological discussions began earnestly among Roman Catholic and protestant ministers to facilitate the desired Christian unity in Nigeria.

Challenges facing ecumenical dialogue in Nigeria

Despite the achievements recorded in ecumenical work in Nigeria, she has persistently encountered difficulties, which have made her work incomplete. These challenges are to be discussed below.

Fear of syncretism. Many Catholics see ecumenism as a step to syncretism. A renowned catholic, such as Abbe George de Nantes, condemned the Vatican II council's document on ecumenism: "unitatis reintegration". According to him, bringing both Catholics and non-Catholics together for the purpose of unification means joining both real and quasi-church together, which is real syncretism (Abbes De Nantes, 2007). This and some other like-minded comments often make the whole effort of ecumenism null and void. Although syncretism does not have only negative connotations, the argument here is that seeing ecumenism as syncretism makes people shun it or view it as evil. As a result, some Catholics also see ecumenism as false-Pan-Christian unity.

Superiority complex among the Roman Catholic clergy also impedes the ecumenical progress in the country, notwithstanding the efforts of Vatican II experts in convincing the church of the need to accept others as brethren; many of the Roman Catholic clergy still rate them as inferior or mushroom churches. This, as a matter of fact, intimidates some of the protestant churches, so that they feel that accepting Roman Catholicism means losing their identity. Therefore, they perceive the Roman Catholics as intimidators, and partnering or dialoging with them cannot

bring about ecumenism, conservatism and “intransigence on doctrinal matters (Okeke 1998, p. 217).

The Old mentality in hierarchy: change is consistent in life and is not easily accepted by any system. When the Vatican II council’s message on ecumenism came on board, the majority of the clergy were reluctant to let go of the old order because they were at ease with it. It was believed initially that salvation could only be found in the Roman Catholic Church, but Vatican II changed that. “But the problem till today is that the majority of the catholic clergy still refuse to accept partnering with these Protestants. Continuous denominational prejudice and rivalry have also made the message of ecumenism peripheral. According to Ozigbo (1985, pp. 85-86), ecumenical effort in Nigeria had been long, though largely cosmetic. This was against the backdrop of bitter memories of strife and rivalry in Eastern Nigeria between the Catholic missions on the one hand and all the protestant churches on the other, from 1890’s right up to the 1960’s, the memories of hate, hostilities, mistrust and suspicion were still fresh and raw, they had not been able to make Catholics and Anglicans see themselves as comrades of the same Christian religion. Today it is evident in our churches that most often the roman catholic will not accept a person who is baptised or confirmed in the Anglican or Methodist Church, let more accept their priests at the altar or in the Lord's supper.

Rivalries, unhealthy competition, mutual distrust and scepticism are the bane of ecumenism in Nigeria.”(Ndiokwere, 1994, p.330)

Okeke (1998) concluded that “the denominational rivalry is worst between Catholics and Anglicans at least in Eastern Nigeria, where each targets the other in their relentless criticism and attacks. Instead of seeking a way of unity, each denomination spends time protecting its denominational boundary, almost to the detriment of other denominations. For instance, when the 2003 general elections fell on Easter weekend, the Roman Catholic Church requested the federal government to shift the date because of its significance to Christendom, but Anglicans and other churches convinced the government to go ahead with the elections. It is still not far from the Methodists, Anglicans and other churches. The rate of antagonism is so high in the eastern part of Nigeria and in Anambra State, to be precise.

The proliferation of churches in Nigeria has continued to hinder the dream of Christian unity: the problem here is that despite the evils inherent in proliferation, some protestant groups justify it in the name of church planting. But regardless of their claim, the church has continued to disintegrate thereby making the dream of unity an unrealizable dream even with the relentless effort of both CAN and PFN fundamentalism.

Holier-than-thou attitude among the Pentecostals hinders the ecumenical work in Nigeria.

The majority of the Non-Catholic, Methodist, and Anglican churches claim to be living churches, while others are dead. They thrive only by destroying other churches through vitriolic

criticism. Indeed, outside the call to repentance and acceptance of Jesus as one's personal lord and saviour, some of these new religious movements' sects have no other doctrines to preach. As a result, there is hardly any basis for meaningful dialogue on doctrinal matters with such groups. The Pentecostals give these mainline churches (Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, etc) some derogatory names, such as "*ndi otu odi na mbu*" (as it was in the beginning), etc. The problem here is that as long as this mindset is not removed, the whole noise about Christian unity will be a wasted effort. Mutual suspicion is another thing that hinders ecumenism in the country. Each denomination avoids the other as one does to a leper, while the Pentecostals attack the Protestants and Roman Catholics, the protestants attacks the Roman Catholics and belittle the Pentecostals, and the Catholics on their own never see any other church as a church or in existence, hence the heart breaking and reflecting question is "are we still brethren" Achunike observed that, there is too much suspicion in our approach to the Pentecostals, if one approach a Pentecostal clergyman, his quick impression is that he wants to convert him to Catholicism Vice versa.

Ignorance of the context of ecumenism also hinders the efforts towards ecumenism in Nigeria.

In Christendom today, many are ignorant of the context of ecumenism, even with the level of awareness created by both the Vatican II Council and the World Council of churches. As a result, there has been persistent infighting and character assassination among the hierarchy and lay faithful of both traditions. Doctrinal differences also negatively affect the move for church unity in Nigeria. This is because most of the Christian churches in Nigeria have doctrines which go against the unity of Christians. And the problem is that these doctrines are difficult to change because their churches have their headquarters elsewhere. Therefore, in matters that affect those doctrines, they find it difficult to touch them or, if they must, it may take a long time, thereby slowing down the speed of the ecumenical work in Nigeria.

Governmental indifference also draws the hand of the clock of ecumenism back:

The government knows that a united Christianity will positively affect the sociopolitical unity of our country; even the freedom of worship enshrined in our constitution supports the continuous proliferation, which is against the spirit of ecumenism. But instead of correcting these anomalies, which will enhance Christian unity, the government chooses to stay aloof.

Conclusion

The Church in Nigeria remains committed to the vision of ecumenism, aspiring towards a future marked by greater openness and collaboration among Christians of various denominations. While the full realisation of this dream is still in progress, ongoing efforts such as prayers and dialogues within the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) may progressively contribute to

fostering unity and brotherly love, ultimately diminishing the barriers created by denominational differences.

The current movements within charismatic groups across both mainline and other denominations are seen as potential catalysts for spiritual ecumenism, reinforcing the belief that all Christians are united through the same spirit and baptism. Observations suggest that while bilateral ecumenical exchanges are gaining traction, particularly among Protestant churches in specific regions, a significant amount of work remains to establish meaningful relationships with the Roman Catholic Church. The church is optimistic that persistent ecumenical discussions may facilitate joint social action and spiritual unity, dismantling longstanding denominational barriers and leading to a more unified Christian community in Nigeria.

Recommendation

- In the first place, there must be the avoidance of negative trait which often leads to antagonism. According to Ikalama (1995), for religion to be ecumenically focused, it must avoid arrogance, fanaticism, discrimination, etc and emphasise the idea of god, one people, one culture and religion. And this means that, “regardless of suspicion, scepticism and prejudice among the churches, each group should jettison her personal biases, selfishness and pride and focus more on ways of having a common understanding of the meaning of ecumenism”(Vanderwilt 1998, p.12).
- In the second places the interior change of life and conversion is needed in the lives of the Christian if ecumenism will work, minds must first be renewed, while attitudes are to be developed before the desire for unity can materialize, there must be self-denial, humility, and gentility in the life of the Christians, who promote Christian unity.
- In addition to this, ecumenism should be accepted not as a catholic or protestant affair but as a collective affair.
- The church should participate virtually in the activities of CAN and CCN as one of its founding members, from where its contributions will help in making CAN more ecumenically minded.

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