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# **THE MINISTRY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: ROLES AND INVOLVEMENT**

Rev Udobata Onunwa

## **Introduction**

The phenomenon of change is taking such a dramatic dimension today in Africa that the church cannot afford to be insensitive to it. The church has therefore got to sit up to devise a new strategy of mission. The changeless Gospel needs to be communicated to millions of hungry souls in a fast changing world. This problem of change is not confined to the urban centres. Rural communities are tremendously being affected as well. Their aspirations, cosmology, and life style are rapidly being transformed and the cosmos seems to be contracting. A new magazine which appears in the street of London or New York today finds itself in Lagos in less than three days and gets into the hands of a post-primary school teenage boy or girl in a Nigerian village in about two days. So within one week, an incident that took place in Britain gains currency in a local community in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and any other part of Africa.

This paper therefore addresses itself to the challenges and prospects of the ministry in the local church, in Africa today and especially in Nigeria. It would analyse some of the causes of conflict and would posit certain practical steps for a successful pastoral ministry to rural dwellers in contemporary Nigeria. Those already in the ministry would definitely be challenged to see the need for a reassessment of their methods in view of the current existential situation.

Those being prepared for the ministry would, nonetheless, benefit from it as it would equip them for the real life situation which may confront them in their future ministry. It would deal with practical issues of pastoralia, theology and mission.

### The Challenge

In recent years many ministers have been clashing with some committed members of their church. This among other factors has been due to the mode of ministration expected of the pastor by such vibrant and zealous members. Often, a young pastor who holds a degree in theology might be disillusioned to discover in the very local congregation he is sent to that a good number of the Christians there are better qualified than he. Some have been so versed in the Scripture that they need to be challenged by one who has a strong base in the Word of God. This was not the case over twenty years ago when most local congregations were made up of illiterate people who looked on the pastor with awe, respect and admiration. The pulpit then was very much higher than the pew.

Some members are getting very much involved in national and international revival meetings with strong evangelical emphases. Some pastors in the 'Old historic orthodox and conservative churches' with petrified systematic theology may find themselves giving out stale food to hungry men and women whose spiritual appetite needs "hot cake just from the oven". The new wave of evangelical revival spreading in many parts of the world has equally caught some Christians in the local churches. The Gospel does not change but the mode of communication must change. A minister who does not have a theological education with an evangelical background and who finds himself in such a church may find the new spiritual movements too radical to understand or to appreciate. This was the genesis of the clash between many pastors and such evangelical groups like the Scripture Union (S.U.) in

many local congregations in the seventies in Ghana, Nigeria and other parts of Africa.

The young missionaries who evangelized Africa in the past were looked upon by the natives as men and women full of knowledge, power and wisdom. Their colour was an advantage. Today any missionary whose biblical background is not strong may not make much impact on the religious situation in the rural communities in Africa today where many religious sects are springing up. One has got to work hard to retain one's members from being turned into other groups. The best check is serious Bible teaching. The old closed system is fast breaking down and the rate of interaction is increased. This calls for new strategies to the ministry in the local church. Africans must, therefore, as a matter of urgency, become missionaries to themselves. In other words, the remaining task of evangelization of Africa is primarily the responsibility of the African church itself.<sup>1</sup> It does not imply that every local church is going evangelical but there is a new revival motivating people today in the rural communities. We do not intend to suggest that European missionaries are no longer needed in Africa. That is the unchristian nationalistic slogan for **Moratorium and Selfhood** in the wake of the struggle for independence in many African countries. Christianity is a transcendental and incarnate religion which is not culture-bound. Anyone who has been touched by the challenging spirit of the Gospel could minister or share fellowship with believers anywhere.

The local congregation is made up of several classes of people. For purposes of analyses, we would conveniently group them into five functional classes. These include the male adults, the female adults, the youths (young boys and girls who are the firebrand for mission), the children and finally the clergy.<sup>2</sup>

No one belongs to any of these groups by chance or choice. It is God's grace that has purposefully placed

one where one finds one's self. No one is permanently placed in a particular class. No one is insignificant in any particular group. Every member has a role to play. In God's redemptive scheme, no one is insignificant. That is why Peter calls all true believers a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). Paul's imagery of the role of individual members of the Christ's Body is clearly spelt out in 1 Cor. 12:1-11 and needs to be properly applied in the field.

### **Specific Roles and Involvement**

An active church (not an "activist" church) whose top priority is disciple-making cannot afford to ignore the important role every member could play in God's redemptive scheme. The rural community is surprisingly, slowly but steadily, becoming impersonal. This complicates the work of a minister in such a congregation which used to be a closed system but is rapidly being transformed into an impersonal one. He would act like an enabler, whose work involves nurturing, and sustaining every member to become structurally and functionally mature, a responsive, responsible and productive member of the family of God within the community. This would create a self-propagating, self-supporting and self-governing church. The minister does this by mobilising the total membership in the task of disciple-making. In a recent conference of the West African Association of Theological Institutions, (WAATI), the primary concerns were centred on finding alternative methods of training for the ministry. Gone are the days when the laity was content to be mere observers on the stage. The Rev Kenneth Strachan has proposed a thesis that the growth of any movement is in direct proportion to the success of that movement in mobilising its total membership in the constant propagation of its tenet and practices. This growth would therefore be in a geometric progression not mere addition. This thesis is even more relevant today in the local church than ever before. This is because the current craze for cultural

revival in many countries poses a threat to the old pattern of ministry in the local communities where the strength of traditional religion is immense.

The bane of the ministry in the local church in the past was the ignorance of the lay members which made some ministers behave like 'Rev Know-it-all or Do it all', a jack of all trades and master of none.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that the role of native agency had never been experienced in the local church, but what we have posited is the extension of the involvement of the roles hitherto played by the ordinary member in the pew to run across all the five groups of members we have identified. New avenues should be opened to incorporate the functions of male adult members who have special talent that could be used for the edification of the body of Christ. Those who have special gifts should be allowed to utilize them either for teaching, preaching, or in any other specialized ministry. The women adult members should equally be utilized and any with leadership qualities should be allowed to exercise them. The pastor's wife should no longer be looked upon as the best in all things. The youth is made up of teenage boys and girls who are usually keen on carrying out open air meetings and sing-songs. We have noticed in a few churches that such ministry has challenged many young men and women to seek re-entry into the local congregation from which they broke away. The youth groups have in conjunction with some elders been involved in child evangelism. The children equally contribute in no small way when they organise some door-to-door outreach during the moonlight plays in the village. Such evening plays have often offered them opportunities to learn the Bible, and entertain those who come out to watch. In the church, they find a place where the traditional aspect of social life is given expression.

In this brief analysis, we have noted that no individual is left to sit on the fence. The hub that turns every individual member is the minister. His

encouragement or otherwise goes a long way to shepherd the flock of Christ committed to his charge. Every local congregation has got its own peculiar interests, needs, opportunities, and challenges. It is the ability of the minister to decipher what would serve as stepping stones to fuller evangelism and those that would be obstacles to it. The strategies of mission, therefore, must be relevant to each local need and aspiration. More often than not, most leaders of local congregations who do not have special gifts for praying, preaching, teaching or for music, tend to monopolize or play down the aspect or even hinder those who could contribute in such areas to the growth of the church. It was the failure of Bishop James Johnson in the Niger Delta Diocese (Nigeria) to understand the motivations of the Garrick Braide Movement that led to the great schism in the Anglican Church in the Niger Delta when he declared the group heretical in 1916. The vibrant ministry of the group would have been utilized within the church if the Bishop had properly shepherded them. This group later crystalized into the Christ Army Church which did not continue with the same original zeal.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Practical Steps for Successful Rural Ministry**

The first guide to this should be the appreciation of the changing roles in ministry in the present-day Africa. Bishop B. C. Nwankiti, of the Diocese of Owerri, declared 1980 as the year of Evangelism in his diocese.<sup>5</sup> This is a rural diocese and his action was a positive approach to the challenges of the time. It is in realization of the magnitude of the problem of change in Nigeria today, where the young is especially vulnerable, that the 'participatory' ministry has been introduced in Owerri Diocese. Many of the youths are uncertain of their past, more so of the future that awaits them. Their roots in family and society seem to be threatened, their very identity is at risk. Unemployment and disappointment beckon and their fear of failure and insecurity leads to disillusionment and

cynicism which in turn find expression in acts of immorality and violence.<sup>6</sup> In an endeavour to face these problems and bring healing, reconciliation and peace to the people, a programme which involves lay Christian participation has been introduced. A form of **lay chaplaincy** in some of the schools is aimed at involving Christian men and women of mature faith to bring healing which comes through patient and loving pastoral care as well as a challenging presentation of the claims of the Gospel. A new evangelical strategy which has yielded fruitful harvest in recent years is the revival of open air ministry with the aid of itinerant missionaries from overseas churches for a week or two. In most places, the revival services are attended in large numbers and as a form of follow up, an evangelical Bible study group is formed within the larger group of the churches, a feature which was resisted in many local churches in the seventies.

Another strategy that has been recently tried out is the holiday exchange programme for young people. The excitement and fun have exposed the youth as well as their parents to the demands of the call of Christ. There is now a serious attempt to try out suggestions of the past years - the cooperation of parents, teachers, youth clubs, and the church in making the whole community a Christian one. The outreach had not been confined to the schools. Adults are particularly getting involved in many church activities that have been oriented towards evangelism. The youth, who are highly impressed and excited by this type of mission to them, have also turned to evangelize their parents. The ministry in the local church which used to be the exclusive concern of the old pastor and a few old men has tremendously changed to involve many other people - thus transforming the former dreary local church into a hilarious, challenging and refreshing community. A good number who left when they considered the worship too dull and dreary have started to return to their old churches. Retreats, night vigils, carols, etc., have been re-introduced to revitalize the old groups.



## Conclusion

Thus far the church in the local community has got to see itself no longer as a moribund and petrified institution only out there to raise funds for its own upkeep. The ability of the minister to identify and mobilize the talents with which each member is endowed is a basic step that has led to a breakthrough in reaching those outside. The concepts of 'participatory ministry' has opened room for more people to get involved in the life of the church.

There is need now, more than ever before, to emphasize the theology of the **incarnation** in all its ramifications so that the minister in a local church would certainly be able to get involved in the life of the community: He would also involve the church and the members to bring healing, peace, redemption to the community. When God took it upon himself to save man, he did not abhor getting involved with humanity.

The form of theological education today should be geared towards relevance to the practical experiences in the field.

There is need to introduce African Studies in the programme of theological institutions as well as to give missiology and evangelical theology a space in the programme.

Finally, hermeneutical problems which have plagued the church in every age would be tackled with new spiritual insight in a contextual situation. This involves a new look at a few obstacles to genuine conversion and confession of Christ in the world today. When they are properly understood, the Gospel would then be applied to tackle them in the most practical way. Although many of those obstacles may not apply in all rural communities, a few include:

- a. Religious tradition, e.g., customs, ancestor cult.
- b. Economic circumstances - economic dependency (on either extended relations, land, etc.), poverty of the people and excessive acquisitiveness, e.g., wealth.
- c. Social ties, e.g., membership of a cult, class, family, etc.
- d. Political factors, e.g., anti-church decrees, oppression, etc.
- e. Ideological factors and world-views, other value systems, etc.
- f. Types of thinking - concrete, abstract, impulsive etc.<sup>7</sup>

The Gospel, properly handled, gives a challenging and refreshing solution to problems posed by any of these and other obstacles not herein mentioned.

## Notes

1. P. A. Kalilombe, "The African Local Churches and the Worldwide Roman Catholic Communion" in **Christianity in Independent Africa**, eds. Fashole-Luke, Gray et. al. (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978), p. 79.
2. Udobata Onunwa, "The Ministry in the Local Church," conference paper at the Nigerian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (NIFES), Benin City, April, 1981, p. 1.
3. A. C. Ezeigwe, "Challenge of Evangelization in the Nigeria of the 80's," paper presented at the Third National Congress on Evangelization, at University of Ife, Ile-Ife, p. 6.
4. See O. U. Kalu, "Protestant Christianity in Igboland" in **Christianity in West Africa: The Nigeria Story**, ed. O. U. Kalu. (Ibadan: Day Star Press, 1978), p. 316.
5. B. C. Nwankiti - Presidential Address at the Synod in 1980; the Bishop himself identifies the problems in society. He also attempted some solution.
6. Extract from Presidential Address: **Ibid.**, 1980.
7. See J. S. Mbiti **Confessing Christ in Different Cultures**. (Switzerland: 1977), pp. 177-178. Cf. Udobata Onunwa, "Theological Education by Extension in Africa: Prospects and Problems. Unpub. conference paper (Aug. 1982) pp. 10-11.