



THE SITUATION OF THE CHURCH IN THE NORTH EAST

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Abstract

This paper is a testament of an insider, a close observer and to some extent a victim of the conflict in this area. The discourse addresses the situation of the Church in the North East which presupposes the first contact as a mystery of God's providential plans. The first contact of the Church with Africa South of the Sahara did not take place until well into the 16th century notwithstanding the fact, that North Africa was there on the day of Pentecost, as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. While the paper does not delve into interrogating the many reasons why Islam crossed the desert and Christianity did not, however, it suffices to say here that when the appointed time came, God sent Portuguese missionaries, who accompanied their countrymen sailors and merchants to many locations along the African coast. Progressively, the paper historically, projects the people of the North East Zone as people who have been known to be peaceful and enterprising as defined by the successes of the various empires that ruled the Zone in pre-colonial times. It posits that, the ongoing security challenges faced by the Zone have had a detrimental impact on the psychological state of individuals living in the Zone as well as the economy of the Zone. Furthermore, it assesses the ruins of Boko Haram in the North East while stating that for close to thirty years (CBM/EYN) and the (RCM) operated in this region without any other rival mission and thus, had the greatest impact in the area in terms of membership and socio-economic activities. The discussion concludes by stating that there are a lot of complaints in the nation and Christians are not the only ones going through hard times and therefore, they are definitely, not worse off than others. The

challenge is whether, as Christians, we are making our due contribution towards building in our nation the Lord's kingdom of justice, love and peace.

Keywords: Africa, Church, Christianity, Boko Haram, Peace, Conflict, North East

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the Church in Africa in general, and in Nigeria in particular, is very vibrant and flourishing on many counts. This is thanks to the grace of God and the zeal of many missionaries, both foreign and local. But this can be described as the result of a “delayed providence”, as we shall soon explain. Yours faithfully, a bonafide indigene of Bazza in Michika Local Government Area of Adamawa State in Adamawa North Senatorial Zone which comprises of Madagali, Michika, Mubi North and South and Maiha. With the exception of Maiha (in Yola diocese), these local governments all fall under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Catholic diocese of Maiduguri. As a close observer and to some extent a victim of this conflict, I believe as an insider in this area, I am eminently qualified for this task at hand, namely: “The Situation of the Church in the North East”. To start with, the first contact is a mystery of God’s providential plans that the first contact of the Catholic Church with Africa South of the Sahara did not take place until well into the 16th century. We cannot forget that North Africa was there on the day of Pentecost, as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. We note that Islam which was born 600 years after Christianity found its way into North Eastern Nigeria already as far back as around the year 1000. We cannot here go into the many reasons why Islam crossed the desert and Christianity did not. All we need to say here is that when the appointed time came, God sent Portuguese missionaries, who accompanied their countrymen sailors and merchants to many locations along the African coast. In Nigeria, we had the story of Warri and Benin kingdoms. They welcomed the missionaries, who however could only put on ground very shallow plant of evangelization, which withered quickly, like the seed of the Sower in the Gospel parable. All that is left are scarce remnants in ruins and culture (An extract from the Keynote Address given at the Missio Conference, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Durumi, Abuja: By his Eminence + John Cardinal Onaiyekan, Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja, titled: “Christian Evangelization in Nigeria: A Delayed Providence”, 20-01-2020).

Historically, the people of the North East Zone have been known to be peaceful and enterprising as defined by the successes of the various empires that ruled the Zone in pre-colonial times. It is undoubtedly a fact, that the ongoing security challenges faced by the Zone have had a detrimental impact on the psychological

state of individuals living in the Zone as well as the economy of the Zone. In contemporary Nigeria, the magnitude and scale of the destruction of lives and property that has befallen the Zone can only be compared to the devastation incurred during the Nigerian Civil War.

Geo-Political and Demographic Facts:

The North East (NE) Geo-political Zone of Nigeria covers close to one third (280,419km²) of Nigeria's land area (909,890km²). It comprises 6 states: Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe. According to projections for 2011 by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), these States have 13.5% (i.e. 23,558,674) of Nigeria's population which is put at 173,905,439. (2012 National Baseline Youth Survey, NBS). Additionally, the Zone shares international borders with three countries: Republic of Cameroon to the East, Republic of Chad to the North East and Niger Republic to the North: (Abdul-Aziz, 2015).

Although the Zone has been a major contributor to national net food production, NBS' 2010 Statistics show that the North East of Nigeria has the worst socio-economic conditions in the Country. Its average absolute poverty rate put at sixty-nine percent (69.0%) is above the national average of sixty point nine percent (60.9%). This characterizes the Zone as having the highest rate of poverty in Nigeria (Adedapo, 2014).

Geo-strategic location of the North East:

The North East Zone of Nigeria plays an integral role in the National security of the Country due to the fact that it shares extensive international borders with three other countries as earlier indicated, namely: Republic of Cameroon to the East, Republic of Chad to the North East and Niger Republic to the North: (Abdul-Aziz, 2015). This important location has a profound implication for the Country's security strategies ranging from immigration policy, customs policy, labor laws etc. Due to the worsening state of insecurity in North Africa and its effects on these countries, there exists a safe haven for insurgents in the Zone that would allow insecurity to thrive therein: (Abdul-Aziz, 2015).

Firm Beginning:

A firm beginning started about the middle of the 19th century, about 150 years ago, first with traditional, political and religious authorities that were largely hospitable. From the Catholic point of view, it is the story of the heroic zeal of the SMA Fathers in the Lagos Axis, and of the Holy Ghost Fathers in the Calabar/Onitsha fronts. The beginning of the 20th century brought about British

colonialism, which became very much as providential for the growth of the Church as the Roman Empire was for the spread of the Christian faith in its first beginnings. Here we must note the ambiguity of the scenario. On the one hand, the *Pax Britanica* gave the Christian mission enterprise some amount of protection. On the other hand, Christian evangelization was certainly NOT a priority concern of British colonialism. Where the two interests clashed, the colonial interests took the upper hand. A good example of this was in the way the colonial administrators regularly deferred to Islamic interests at the expense of Christianity in Northern Nigeria (An extract from the Keynote Address given at the Missio Conference, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Durumi, Abuja: By his Eminence + John Cardinal Onaiyekan, Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja, titled: "Christian Evangelization in Nigeria: A Delayed Providence", 20-01-2020). That was the consequence of the colonial policy of "Indirect Rule". But nevertheless, this was a period of rapid growth for the Church, thanks to the grace of God and the human efforts of many preachers of the Gospel.

The Post-Colonial Era:

This is since independence in 1960, about 60 years ago. In this period, we have been dealing with the challenges of building an indigenous Church in an independent nation. Many serious issues swept underground during the colonial era have now come out onto the surface, demanding urgent and proper attention. The main issues hovered around the place of religion in the Nigerian state, with an unresolved raging debate about whether the Nigerian nation is a secular state or not. The errors and crimes of selfish and corrupt politicians have caused a lot of avoidable conflicts and tragedies. The Sharia controversy is a case in point. When government fails to ensure freedom, fairness and equity for all faiths, our numerous mixed and cross-cutting identities of religion, ethnicity and politics exacerbate competition and rivalries leading to heightened tensions where there ought not to be (+ John Cardinal Onaiyekan..., 20-01-2020).

Contemporary Situation:

It is sad but it must be said that we are at the moment witnessing an atmosphere of very high social tension in our nation. Terrorism, which has often described itself as "Islamic" has dealt a heavy blow on our long efforts at inter-religious understanding and cooperation. The bloody exploits of heavily armed Fulani herdsmen all over the country have gone on for too long with an unacceptable level of impunity, leading many people to suspect collusion at the highest level of

government (+ John Cardinal Onaiyekan..., 20-01-2020). Many actions and inactions of this government seem to give credence to the widespread accusation of an “islamization agenda”. The divergent reaction to the news that the US government has placed our nation on the “watch list” of not respecting religious freedom, betrays the wide gap among Nigerians in their perception of their government. Nigerians are very religious. Religion generates strong emotions, which we must find ways of deploying in a positive way, for good and peace, not for evil and conflict (+ John Cardinal Onaiyekan..., 20-01-2020). For this to happen, both religious and political leaders must put the interests of the people first, as we jointly pursue the common good of our communities.

Assessing the ruins of Boko Haram in the North-East of Nigeria

In assessing the ruins of Boko Haram in the North East, it is pertinent to state here at the onset that, from 1942 to the mid-70s, the Church of the Brethren (CBM/EYN) and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) operated in the North East region without any other rival mission. For these reasons, and coupled with the fact that, the two missions had the greatest impact in the area in terms of membership and socio-economic activities; the discussion would focus largely on the two missions. Nevertheless, whatever is said of the two missions would still be a true reflection of what the other missions suffered in the hands of the insurgents.

Update of the situation

1) The Catholic Church in the North East

The diocese of Maiduguri covers the whole of Borno, Yobe and northern part of Adamawa state. According to a fresh report which highlights the scale of atrocities against Christians in the heartland of Islamist terror group Boko Haram, more than 5000 Catholics in north-east Nigeria have been killed and at least 100,000 have been displaced. The situation report on the activities of Boko Haram in Maiduguri Diocese further states that more than 350 churches in the diocese have been badly attacked, ‘a good number of them destroyed more than once.’ With more than three-quarters of the diocese under Boko Haram control, the report records that 22 of the diocese’s 40 parish centres and chaplaincies have been deserted and occupied by the terrorists. The report, a copy of which diocesan authorities sent to Aid to the Church in Need, the Catholic charity for persecuted and other suffering Christians, records a total of 7000 widows and 10,000 orphans. In fact, according to Maiduguri Diocesan director of social

communications Rev. Fr. Gideon Obasogie, schools in Maiduguri Diocese are at particular risk and the diocesan report records that 32 of the 40 primary schools have been deserted. Displacement of people has been very widespread in the diocese and the reports states that 26 of the region's 46 priests were currently displaced as well as 200 catechists and 30 sisters. Four of the diocese's five convents were closed and many Maiduguri priests taking refuge in nearby Yola diocese and indeed, other Catholic dioceses around the country.

2) **The EYN Church in the North East**

According to a report by the EYN Disaster Relief Ministry titled: Rebuilding Hope and Home:

Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN), i.e. the Hausa translation for Church of the Brethren in Nigeria (CBM), is the largest national body of the Church of the Brethren in the world with a population of over 350,000 members. The seat of the church leadership is in Kwarhi, Mararaba Mubi. Since 1959, its work has been supported by the Basel Mission USA, particularly in the area of project monitoring. With a vibrant history of more than 90 years, EYN has placed a high emphasis on education, health, and agriculture. The EYN is also active in pastoral care. Its work concentrates on rural development, basic health services, HIV and AIDS and literacy. However, today EYN is being ravaged by attacks from the militant group Boko Haram.

The EYN says Boko Haram has destroyed a total of 1,125 of its church buildings and other structures over the years of insurgency. These include its headquarters office complex which was destroyed on October 29, 2014 by Boko Haram, forcing the EYN to move its headquarters to Jos, Plateau State. It is heartwarming to note that, EYN has returned to its original base, Kwarhi, in 2016, which has been rebuilt, a church auditorium which is yet to be fully reconstructed, and an adjacent pastor's residential quarters where reconstructions work is yet to start. Commenting on the situation of the church in the north east, the President of EYN Church in Nigeria Rev. Joel Billi opined that: "The life of a Nigerian today is not worth that of a chicken." He believes it is time for Christians in Nigeria to band together to ask the government to end the violence. According to the church's statistics, some 1,300 or more soldiers were killed from July to October 2018. Four of the 55 districts of the *Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria* (EYN), were not functioning because their areas were too dangerous to administer pastorally. Billi concludes his report by stating that, apart from the Borno State government that

helped rebuild 15 EYN churches destroyed by the insurgency. Many more churches received no government aid while bridges and roads remained in ruins.

Challenges

With many Nigerian Brethren displaced, lacking access to income from farms or employment. Returning congregations face the cost of rebuilding their churches. Many people are homeless, and poverty is rampant. The President of the EYN, Rev Joel Billi, made the appeal for the reconstruction of all its destroyed churches, during the 2019 Ministers' Annual Conference which took place at the EYN headquarters in Kwarhi, Hong Local Government Area of Adamawa State, asking the Adamawa and federal governments to expedite action in rebuilding places of worship, houses and shops that were destroyed by the Boko Haram elements.

Expressing some measure of anger as he inched further into his speech, the EYN president asked, "For how long are we going to wait in vain? We are tired of fictitious promises. Are worship places not included in the rebuilding of the Northeast? Is Adamawa State excluded from the rebuilding of the Northeast? He wondered why we are flagrantly neglected as if we deserve to be punished. If not for the inadequacy of our security forces and political undertone, Boko Haram would not have overrun us. So, why do we pay for the sin that was not committed by us?"

The EYN 2019 Ministers' Conference, conducted under the theme, "Understanding the Gravity of the Pastoral Call" drew 836 pastors of the church branches, all dressed in white frocks. Continuing violence in northern Nigeria perpetrated by the Islamic sect known as "Boko Haram" has hit the EYN hard. By the middle of 2013, 149 church members had been killed by attacks and 14 EYN churches had been set on fire. Although worship services are still well attended, they take place in constant fear of attack and often under the protection of the police and the military.

Opportunities

Billi listed successes of the Nigeria Crisis Response, a joint effort of EYN and the Church of the Brethren worldwide as: giving support for camps for displaced people, medical care, trauma healing and more. One specific EYN Disaster Ministry program is to rebuild homes, with priority given to widows and the aged.

Celebrating growth

Billi's next priority is evangelism. The persecution of the church has resulted in growth for EYN, which has been expanding into new areas. "People have fled and

have taken the church with them,” he said. “Not too long from now, EYN’s presence will be felt in all of Nigeria.” EYN has celebrated the “autonomy” or full congregational status of an unprecedented number of churches in the last two years. Before the crisis, EYN welcomed seven or eight new churches each year. In early December, EYN inaugurated a Lagos district. This is significant because Lagos is the largest city in Nigeria, far from EYN’s established territory.

Despite the growth, some church members are looking for more. EYN membership is enthusiastic about evangelism and “some are saying we are slow in church planting; we should move faster.” Billi celebrates the growth with mixed feelings, because he does not want the daughter church to surpass its parent. He has observed that “the Church of the Brethren is shrinking” and that its unity is threatened by theological differences.

“I always pray that the Church of the Brethren remain as an entity, that EYN remain as an entity,” he said. “We want the Church of the Brethren to be a peace church, to influence all the denominations and attract people to join us.” (*Most of this information is taken from Messenger magazine, published by the Church of the Brethren. Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford is director of news services for the Church of the Brethren and associate editor of Messenger*).

Conclusion

There are a lot of complaints in the nation. We Christians are not the only ones going through hard times. In a dysfunctional society, it is easy to feel “persecuted” for one’s faith even when the pains are being caused by bad governance. On the whole, we are definitely not worse off than others. The challenge is whether, as Christians, we are making our due contribution towards building in our nation the Lord’s kingdom of justice, love and peace. Despite the overwhelming needs of the crisis, the Nigerian authorities only provide aid to those in government run camps. The rest of the displaced people are living with family and friends or being supported by church programs like EYN’s Disaster Relief Ministry and several other non-governmental organizations in the area. The determination, resiliency and faith of the Nigerian people are courageous and inspiring. 70% of those displaced in 2014, have returned home. Displaced families and their neighbours have started the long journey to recovery and return to self-sufficiency. Even though security has improved, millions of Christian and Muslim families are still traumatized by this crisis. On top of the Boko Haram insurgency, Fulani herdsmen have been targeting Christian villages across Nigeria’s north east and the middle belt. Many have been killed and their homes and businesses have been destroyed. With so much accomplished the Nigeria people and many Christian

families continually share their deep gratitude toward their benefactors. Working in partnership with EYN, and other Nigerian non-profit organizations, the major relief and recovery program is providing the following services: emergency food and supplies; drinking water; education for children; trauma recovery and peace building for all ages; seeds and fertilizer for agriculture; tools and resources for making a living; repair of damaged homes; and support of church leadership.

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