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CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH TO NATION BUILDING IN EASTERN NIGERIA: A NECESSARY EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT
The development of each nation is seen to be a collective responsibility of all existing institutions within the state. The people of God are mindful of the long history of their involvement in civil affairs especially in the area of national development. The purpose of this study aims to show how the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Nigeria has contributed to nation building. The study relies on secondary data, which were analysis historically and descriptively based on their qualitative contents. The findings of the study indicate that Seventh-day Adventist Church has contributed in national building in the areas of education, health, economic and politics. One of the recommendations of the study is that other Christian organizations should take a clue form the Seventh-day Adventist Church to embark on or improve on their programmes that will aid nation building in Nigeria.

Keywords: Contribution, Nation Building, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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INTRODUCTION

The understanding of the need to avoid religious profiling and embrace quality of minds whose track records are alluring to lead out in setting the high standards for participation in national interest has become a demand within the Nigerian political landscape. Our country is at the point where we must allow God to guide us and open our eyes to see beyond our space since God has given the church the mandate to preach love, peace, and unity as ingredients for nation building. The foregoing argument was captured by the commendation made by the Governor of Ondo State during the opening of the Synagogue Church of All Nation (SOAN) on Friday March 3, 2023 in Akure. He stated that the role of the church in nation building cannot be overemphasized. This assertion inspired the title of this study. It is very important to take note of the values the churches have added to the national identity in area of character development that they have helped to build the nation towards living their own life and also in nation building.

However, this study focuses on the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Nigeria and the various contributions she has made in building Nigeria as a nation. This study is necessary, given that it has not been expressly captured in recent times that the Seventh-day Adventist Church which henceforth shall be identified with SDA is not operating in a vacuum. Much recognition has not been accorded this Christian body within the Nigerian religious, social, economic and political space. The areas discussed on the contributions of SDA Church to nation building are education, health, economy and politics. Then, there would a further step taken to evaluate the meaningful impact this contribution has made in transforming the nation toward achieving the purpose of its existence.

This study is not in isolation because it is believed that the church ‘‘Like its Master…is to serve as the bread of life (John 6:35) that ensures that no one lack nourishment. “In discipleship and imitation of Jesus’ existence and whole life’s work, every action and mission of the church should centre around life, meaningful existence and self-fulfillment of all mankind’’ (Anyawu, 2005, p. 17). The example of Jesus should serves as the bedrock of the intentional operations of the Christian churches because He said, ‘‘I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full’’ (John 10:10). Kalu (2019, p. 3) posits that ‘‘through the church’s redeeming power of faith and love, it should serve as the light of the world, including the last bastion of hope for hundreds of millions of people in many nations. He went further to stress that in a world assailed by materialism and greed, and afflicted by oppression, violence and injustice, the church’s weapon of truth, love and faith are a refuge for the oppressed, the poor and disadvantaged. It is also the voice of the voiceless’’ (Kalu, 2019).

However, as Christians, it is argued that we have a mandate to build the Kingdom of God on earth by developing this nation we call home, contributing to the moral growth of the society, imbuing it with godly virtues of charity and compassion, and promoting the Gospel values of respect for life, integrity, justice, egalitarianism and equity (Sun News online, 13 November, 2019). Apart from interceding on behalf of the nation, the church’s direct impact, particularly by influencing the leaders positively to take the right decisions for the benefit of the citizens cannot be overemphasized (Adesanya, 2022). Consequently, the generic view of the contributions of the Christian Church to national development lays the foundation for singling out the SDA Church for evaluation.

Before delving into comprehensive discourse of the subject in question, there is the need to know whether this study is relevant. To clear this doubt of the relevance of the study, the

SDA Church is fundamentally significant when it comes to her contribution in nation building given the elites the church has raised, of which shall be discussed later on the course of the study.

CONCEPTUALISATION

The concept of contribution

Going by the word contribution, it is ‘‘the part played by a person or thing in bringing about a result or helping something to advance’’ (Oxford Languages). Another entry has it to mean ‘‘the giving or supplying of something that plays a significant part in making something to happen’’ (Merriam-webstar.com). There is also another entry of the meaning that posit ‘’something that you contribute or do to help produce or achieve something together with other people, or to help make something successful’’ (dictionary.cambridge.org). When these renditions are put together one would discover that contribution has to with people working towards a common goal with others in playing a significant part to help in achieving the advancement of something or course. This suggests that SDA Church has her own significant part she has played in advancement of the course of Nigeria especially in the eastern part.

The concept of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is an Adventist Protestant Christian denomination which is distinguished by its observance of Saturday, the seventh day of the week in the Christian and the Hebrew calendar, as the Sabbath, its emphasis is on the imminent Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and its annihilationist soteriology. The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to make disciples of all people, communicating the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angel’s messages of Revelation 14:6-12, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Saviour and unite with His remnant Church, discipline them to serve Him as Lord, and preparing them for His soon return.

The method of its mission activities is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through preaching and teaching the word of God (Matt. 28: 18-20). Others include healing and discipline. The vision of the SDA is in harmony with the great prophecies of the Scripture, we see as the climax of God’s plan the restoration of all His creation to full harmony with His perfect will and righteousness (Working Policy, 2012-2013).

The organizational structure of SDA includes the General Conference, which is its largest unit of the church embracing all church organizational in part of the world. There is also the West-central African Division that operates as the administrative unit that supervises all the activities of the church in Eastern Nigeria and parts of West Africa and part of the Pacific. The third in the structure of the church is the Eastern Union Conference, an administrative unit that supervises the activities of the churches within her jurisdiction.

The concept of nation building

To understand the concept of nation-building, one needs to have some definition of what a nation is. A nation is a group of people or a race who shares common history, tradition, and culture, sometimes, religion and language. The people in a nation generally share a common national identity. The organizational structure of SDA includes: The General Conference, which is its largest unit of the church embracing all church organizational in part of the world. There is also the West-central African Division that operates as the administrative unit that supervises all the activities of the church in Eastern Nigeria and parts of West Africa and part of the Pacific. The third in the organizational structure of the church is the Eastern Union

Conference, an administrative unit that supervises the activities of the churches within her jurisdiction (Stephenson, 2005).

The primary objective of nation-building is to make a violent society peaceful through the following: (a) Security, food, shelter, and basic services should be provided; (b) economic and political objectives can be pursued once these first-order needs are met; and (c) reform generates assistance, which can be overcome only through the skillful application of personnel and money. These objectives need to be scaled to match resources. Not doing so will lead to mission failure (Dobbins, 2003). The preferred objectives for nation-building laid the foundation that should form a broader sense that captures the role of the church.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH TO NATION BUILDING IN NIGERIA

The contributions of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church to nation building in Nigeria can be explained from the following areas including education, health, economic and politics.

Educational Contributions

One significant part of the methodologies by the SDA Church to carry out her gospel commission as noted earlier is teaching. This teaching ideology lays on emphasizes educational institutions, which acknowledges that development of mind and character is essential in God's redemptive plan. The church promotes the growth of a mature understanding of and relationship to God, His word, and the created universe (Working Policy, 2012-2013). In keeping with this mandate, it was observed that the Christian organizations operate schools from kindergarten through university level for the purpose of transmitting knowledge, ideals, beliefs, attitudes, values, habits, and customs to students. The source, means, and aim of Adventist education are true knowledge of God, fellowship and companionship with Him in study and service, and likeness to Him in character development (Church Manual, 2015).

However, Adventist education recognizes that human motives, thinking, and behaviour have fallen short of God's ideal. Education, in its broadest sense, is a means of restoring human beings to their original relationship with God. Working together, homes, schools, and churches cooperate with divine agencies in preparing learners for responsible citizenship in this world and in the world to come. Adventist education imparts more than academic knowledge. It fosters a balanced development of the whole person – spiritually, intellectually, physically, and socially (Working Policy, 2012-2013). It is the educational objective of the SDA church to make sure that ''the formal and informal curricula help students reach their potentials for spiritual, mental, physical, social, and vocational development. Preparing students for a life of service to their family, church, and larger community'' (Working Policy, 2012-2013). Part of the educational philosophy of the SDA church is to ensure that ''the curriculum will promote academic excellence and will include a core of general studies needed for responsible citizenship in a given culture along with spiritual insights that inform Christian living and build community'' (Working Policy, 2012-2013).

Consequently, this methodological approach to the Adventist education and the philosophical position has led the Seventh-day Adventist Church to make a commitment in providing a broad education and spiritual formation for its member, youth and young adults within the context of the Christian worldview. The Church extends this same opportunity to other children and youth outside her denominational circle in the principle of inclusive ideology. This commitment to providing an inclusive broad education as part of the church's

contributions to nation building in Nigeria was the reason for establishing an institution known as Nigerian Training College in 1947 in Ihie, Isiala Ngwa North Local Government Area of Abia State. This institution was built for the training and education of future teachers who will impact Christian education undiluted to both the rural community and nation at large. Furthermore, in February 1953, Adventist High School Ihie was established on the same campus with the first enrolment of 27 students with a Canadian expatriate missionary in the person of Mr. W. G. Futcher as the first principal (John, 2021). This approach of locating the institution in rural area is a way of providing an educational opportunity to the members, has helped a lot of people within the community and beyond to have access to quality education that improved their well-being.

Some of the nationalities have been raised through this educational opportunity that includes but not limited to such individuals or personalities as:

1. Prof. Christian U. Iroegbu (Rtd. University of Nigeria Nsukka Professor of Microbiology).
2. The class of 1960 include late Engr. Uzoma Azuogu (former Director with Mobil)
3. The class of 1962, late Ojo Maduekwe (Former Nigerian Ambassador to Canada), Hon. Emeka Nwogu, (former Minister of Labour and Productivity), Navy Commander Ebitu Ukaiwe (Second in Command to Ibrahim Babangida).
4. The class of 1963, Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe (Former Minority Leader and Senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria), and Elder Okezie Victor Ikpeazu, the immediate past Governor of Abia State (Clifford University Bulletin, 26).
5. The class of 1965 include Prof. Friday Mbon, (University of Calabar Professor of Religious Studies).
6. The class of 1967 has Rear Admiral Chijioke Kaja, a retired Navy Commander under Ibrahim Babangida.

It is very evident from the list above that the Seventh-day Adventist Church through her educational philosophy has made a great impact in nation building in Nigeria. Currently, the SDA Church through its educational system that prepares people for useful and joy-filled lives, fostering friendship with God, whole-person development, Bible-based values, and selfless service in accordance with its mission to the world. It has over 50 Nursery and Primary Schools established in rural, semi-urban and urban communities across Eastern Nigeria. The church also has secondary schools across the Eastern region of Nigeria which include: Owerrinta, Apu-na-Ekpu, Ihie, Ohafia, Elele, Obite, Owerri, and Ogborhill. At the tertiary level of education, the church has also Clifford University at Ihie Isiala Ngwa North L. G. A, Abia State. Clifford University is one of the fastest growing universities in Nigeria.

Health Contribution

One of the methodologies pointed out by the SDA church to carry out their gospel commission to the world is healing. By healing, means affirming the biblical principles of the well-being of the whole person. It also includes making the preservation of health and the healing of the sick a priority through the ministry to the poor and oppressed, cooperating with the Creator in His compassionate work of restoration. ‘‘The Seventh-day Adventist Church has, since its inception, promoted philosophy of health and healing. While developing a system of health care institutions which belt the globe, a health-promoting way of life has been taught to the church membership’’ (Working Policy).

Furthermore, ‘teachings based on broad principles found in the sacred Scriptures and more explicitly expressed in the counsels given by Ellen White (One of the founding pioneers of

the church), have in recent years been increasingly substantiated by the findings of scientific research'' (Working Policy). Accordingly, ''these findings have clearly demonstrated the health superiority of Seventh-day Adventist, especially of those who more closely adhere to the health philosophy of the church. While advocating positive steps to be taken to develop a healthful lifestyle, the church has long required of its members not to use alcoholic beverages and tobacco'' (Working Policy). The church has also joined with and supported organizations involved in temperance programmes to counter the health and social damages done by the use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, tea and other stimulating or depressing and harmful substances.

The mission of the SDA Church includes proclamation to every nation and tribe and tongue and people. Healing is part of the methodology to carrying it out. The church's view on health reflects a theology that holds that all things must be interpreted finally with reference to the Bible. Practically, one should have a sound body and mind to render the most effective service to God and others. According to Adventist theology, the care of the body-personally, socially, or institutionally-is fully an expression of Christian commitment. This theology is particularly compatible with the ideas associated with health reform, for its holistic view of the human being dispenses with the traditionally sharp disjunction between body and soul that influenced the development of biomedicine. The posture of the church on many clinical issues is generally consistent with that of many other Protestant Christian groups. Consequently, with the advent of the SDA Church in Isiala Ngwa in Abia State in 1933, the drive to use its healing methodology to impart the people came in place.

Historically, the church has been a wagon that has the responsibility of providing aid to the downtrodden, and circumstantially displaced in the society. This posits the church's philanthropic and humanitarian involvement. When it embarked on its world mission in the last decades of nineteenth century, it demonstrated that concern by establishing schools and healthcare programs among needy people. This objective was demonstrated in its health missionary impart in Isiala Ngwa through establishment of hospital. As far back as 1963, in order to create opportunity for quality healthcare delivery, the SDA Church through the aid of early foreign missionaries opened a hospital known as Northern Ngwa County hospital at Okpuala Ngwa (Njoku, 2010). The church's missionary goal to use its health ministry to contribute to nation-building has led to the establishment of other standard hospital and clinics namely: SDA Hospital and Motherless Babies Home Aba, Clifford University Clinic Ihie, and ASTEC Clinic Owerri nta.

Economic Contribution

The economic impact the SDA Church has made through its educational and healthcare system is laudable. This is proven through the employment provisions within this framework of members and non-members of the church. It is on record that the schools, clinics and hospital and gospel ministry have a workforce of over two thousand who should have been among the increasing numbers of the unemployed citizens in Nigeria today. It is one of the most profound mission purpose of the church to asserts that ''if the conscience were alive, they would testify of needless appropriations to the gratification of appetite, of pride, vanity, and love of amusements, and seek for the uplifting of humanity from economic woes'' (White, 1936, p. 23).

Political Contribution

It is imperative to take into consideration the meaning of politics as a way to form an understanding of its operations, challenges and expectations as an institution. The correct application of these and similar statements hinges on the accurate meaning of the terms

political and *politics*. Webster's New *International Dictionary* (second Ed.) defines *politics* and *political* in the following two ways: *Politics*: ''the science and art of government.'' *Political*: ''Of or pertaining to polity, or politics, or the conduct of government…. of or pertaining to those who make business…of politics, or politicians in their partisan activities; as, he is actuated by merely *political* motives.'' The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (vol. 6, 225) also states concerning the importance of politics and political goals. Politics frequently has unpleasant connotations. The use of the term in the bad sense implies a milieu hospitable to scheming and manipulations. To delve into the discourse proper, the fundamental question that demands answer is, what relation should Seventh-day Adventists sustain to the question of politics? Is it proper for them to exercise the right of franchise, to go to the polls and cast their votes? It is believed that this is their God-given and undeniable right. And this right they have chosen to exercise through all the years.

Again, there is the need to know if it is right for a Seventh-day Adventist to hold political office? Based on the history of the children of God through the centuries, one must believe that this is consistent with Christian faith and practice. It is not for the church to advise any man to accept political position, nor has the church the right to deny any of its members this privilege and right (Review, March 26, 1936). Furthermore, it has been noted that ''Adventists should not be guided by prejudice in public affairs'' (Tobiassen, 1968, p. 27), and ''those who teach the Bible in our churches and our schools are not at liberty to unite in making apparent their prejudice for or against political men or measures'' (White, 1915).

The participation of SDA Church members in politics must be based on neutral grounds not on partisan basis because it is observed that 'we cannot with safety vote for political parties; for we do not know whom we are voting for. ''It is a mistake for you to link your interests with any political party, to cast your vote with them or for them'' (White, 1915, p. 45). However, since there can never be political participation and activity without political party, it is important to find balance, which should go to mean that although there are political parties, the church ought to refrain from being partisan but accept political programs that are designed for a stabilized approach and ideologies for development. To give more credence to this position of the researcher is this documented resolution: At the General Conference in 1865, the following resolution was adopted under the heading ''Voting'': *Resolved*, 'That in our judgment, the act of voting when exercised in behalf of justice, humanity, and right, is in itself blameless, and may be at sometimes highly proper; but that the casting of any vote that shall strengthen the cause of such crimes as intemperance, insurrection, and slavery, we regard as highly criminal in the sight of Heaven. But we would depreciate any participation in the spirit of party strife'' (Reported in the Review, May 23, 1865).

Consequently, the above balanced position of the church has motivated the SDA Church at least within Abia State to be able to raise some of members who has made enormous contributions to nation-building both at national and state levels in such personalities as: Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe, the former Senate minority leader, Elder Dr Okezie Victor Ikpeazu, the immediate former Governor of Abia State, and Dr Alex Chioma Oti, the current Governor of Abia State as at the time of this research work.

CONCLUSION

The contributions of the Church to nation-building in Nigeria are understood as an integral part of its gospel mandate. As Christians, they "have the mandate to build the kingdom of God on earth by developing this nation we call home, and contributing to the moral growth of our society, imbuing it with the godly virtues of charity and compassion, and promoting the

Gospel values of respect for life, integrity, justice, and egalitarianism, equality and fairness" (The Sun online 13, November, 2019). It also to be noted that the church contributed to producing elites who challenged white dominance in the church and political system and led nationalist struggle for independence.

However, with particular emphasis on the Seventh-day Adventist Church, one can attest that the role it has played in helping to form a society that is working towards high moral and ethical norms through its established institutions within the eastern region of Nigeria can never be overemphasized. In the area of sustaining the health of the citizens through the provision of quality healthcare service delivery through the various hospitals and clinics across board can never be underestimated. Interestingly enough, through other infrastructural development, the church had had a significant effect on nation-building. Compassion, justice, and respect for human dignity all have led significant emphasis in many of her religious traditional roles and set to serve as outstanding guiding principles for people and the larger community of men. These exemplary contributions have posed a challenge to those who have not yet come to terms with the need for their organizations to play their expected role maximally even while they try to improve their lives and that of their neighbours.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This conversation to a reasonable extent has found some other Christian churches wanting in many respects. It is glaring that the inability, if not incapacity of the Church to live up to its Scriptural, doctrinal and spiritual roles and needs of God and the people have been excavated and thrown up. The pulpits are being challenged, including the cassocked labourers in the Lord's vineyard, the congregation and the civil society in general. It is therefore recommended as follows:

i. There is a craving to find a panacea from the church body in the on-going struggle to create a stabilized and suitable environment for a national peaceful coexistence. One way the church body should tackle this ensuing challenge is by exposing falsehood and corruption without championing them both by teaching and practice.

ii. It is also recommended that the Christian Church should stand in marked contrast against common economic and political corrupt practices that could result to failed state with the teaching of Jesus Christ, who told His disciples, ''freely you have received, freely you shall give'' (Matthew 10:8). The Bible record shows that among the early Christians all giving was voluntary, without compulsion or pressure (Acts 11:29, 30; 2Cor. 9:7). The Apostles and others, who took the lead, were not a burden to their Christian brothers nor did they enrich themselves at their brother's expense. They worked with their own hands (Acts 18:1-4; 20:33-35).

iii. It is further recommended that other Christian organisations should take a clue from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as this will motivate them to embark on or improve on their programmes that will aid nation building in Nigeria.

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