



The Church's Leadership Role in Nigeria: A Critical Examination of its Historical Impact and Current Challenges

OBRUCHE OMOSOMUOFA, CHIYENUM UCHENEBI UDORO
Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Nigeria.

Abstract. While it may not be farfetched to assert that the church consisted of the cradle of leadership in Nigeria and indeed Africa, it is more perturbing to say that the church has drifted from its noble position to chasing after fantasies. The rationale behind this phenomenon remained enigmatic. It is believed that Christianity has in no small measure affected the polity through meaningful leadership in various capacities in Nigeria, however, it is regrettable to say that the church has shy away from its assignment. It posed serious problems on what measure the church should adopt in reclaiming its leadership mandate. The paper thus examines heuristically the position of the church and her impacts in Africa, taking a cursory look at the Nigeria experience. Leadership is fundamental to all aspects of human endeavour and cannot be handled with levity, hence it becomes paramount to critically examine these fledging leadership tussles that have bedevilled the country in recent times. The paper seeks to establish that religious leadership has a stronghold in the nation's politics. The discourse captured salient areas such as the concept of religion, leadership and the impact of church leadership in Nigeria. To achieve this goal, therefore, the historical and phenomenological methods of religious research were deployed. It also adopts the transformational leadership theory which examines transformational leaders as those connected to their followers in such a way that it raises the level of motivation and morality committed to a collective good. The paper concludes by recommending the values of Christian leadership espoused by the church should be imbibed to revamp the lacuna already created in the country. It advanced for the adoption of Christian leadership traits and values as a panacea to effective leadership structure in the Nigerian polity.

Keywords: Church, Leadership, Nigeria, Transformational Theory

1. Introduction

The church has played a fundamental role in the leadership of not just Nigeria but Africa in general. While it may not be farfetched to assert that the church consisted of the cradle of leadership in Nigeria and indeed Africa, it is more perturbing to say that the church has drifted from its noble position now chasing after fantasies. The rationale behind this phenomenon remained enigmatic. The church (*ekklesia*) is a community of people(s) which is bounded by common life principles and precepts that make them different from the rest of the other members of the society. It is in a sense a counter-community, "not a task forces whose members' mutual social contacts stem only from the common task itself", "not a periodic encounter of otherwise unrelated individuals".

According to Ellen, the church is a paradox. It appears enfeebled and defective, yet God works in it. It is undisputed that the *ekklesia* in all ages has been an agent of transformation and has brought a salvific and redemptive plan of God to humanity; where dedicated men and women have devoted their lives to selfless service to God and humanity, and where the highest ideals of human history have been enshrined and cherished. These men/women who served God in the church also hold vital positions in the community because of their noble lifestyle, which is seen across the society at large. According to Abogunrin (1986), leadership is a dynamic, reciprocal process of personal influence wherein a manager or leader affects the attitudes and actions of others in order to reach or obtain organizational objectives. Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ, outlines the requirements for church leaders in the Pastorals to guarantee long-term development and survival even before contemporary ideas of leadership were developed. The church has played a significant role in Nigeria's development, particularly in education and healthcare. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, missionaries established

schools and hospitals, creating a foundation for public education and healthcare. These contributions were instrumental in setting the stage for Nigeria's formal educational and healthcare systems.

Additionally, the church has been a moral compass, influencing societal values and ethical standards. Studies have shown that early missionary activities helped shape the moral and social structure of many Nigerian communities. Accordingly, Olupona (2014), averred that the missionary-driven establishment of schools laid a groundwork for Nigeria's formal educational sector. The question that comes to mind at this juncture is that, where has the church got it wrong haven laid a solid foundation for development in Africa and Nigeria in particular?

2. Conceptualizing the Church

The Church in this work is conceptualised as the assembly, gathering together or association of followers of Jesus Christ. Simply, the church is construed as a place where like-minded persons converged with a sole aim of worshipping or fellowshiping.

According to McKim, the term "church" in the New Testament essentially means "assembly." It may be found in two verses of the canonical Gospel of Matthew, twenty-four verses of the Acts of Apostles, fifty-eight verses of the letters of Paul the Apostle, two Hebrews letters, one James letter, three John third epistles, and nineteen Revelation pages. Unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity are the four traditional notes of the Christian Church (p. 2).

In the phenomenological sense, a number of organizations refer to themselves as churches, maybe due to their desire for fellowship. According to Harper, the term is used to refer to local communities in the New Testament and, in a broader sense, to refer to all believers. Although opinions on what constitutes orthodoxy differ, only orthodox Christians are traditionally regarded as belonging to the real Church. Based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who was regarded by Christians as the Son of God and the Messiah, the early Church was established in Roman Judea in the first century AD. Scripture, which commands Jesus' followers and apostles to proclaim and teach the kerygma to the dying generations, is consistent with the common belief that the church started with Jesus' apostles. Originating from the Jewish faith of the first century, Christians welcomed Gentiles without compelling them to completely embrace Jewish practices (such as circumcision). The similarities between Christianity and the Jewish faith include the Proselytes, God-fearers, and the Noahide Law. According to others, Christians were swiftly

expelled from Jerusalem's synagogues due to disagreements with Jewish religious authorities.

It is important to note right away that the church is Christ's body. The Bible makes no mention of the church being like or resembling a body. According to 1 Corinthians 12:27, the church is the manifestation of Christ in the world. Christ came from His lovely kingdom in order to devote Himself to it. Christ is clearly the head of the church, according to the New Testament. Christ's headship alludes to the source of the church's vitality rather than authority and the right to rule. Christ provides the body with the nourishment it needs to survive (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Col. 1:18). It serves as the community's eye.

3. What does leadership entail?

The definition of leadership is mostly determined by the author's perspective on the idea. Accordingly, "there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept," according to. Traits, behaviours, influences, interaction patterns, role linkages, and occupancy of a job are the first things that spring to mind when we consider defining the word. A leader should exhibit the following qualities: the ability to influence others' thoughts, guide behaviour, communicate with society's members, have positive relationships with others, and be able to hold a position of influence in people's lives.

According to Jacobs (1970) leadership may also be defined as "an interaction between persons in which one presents information of a sort and in such a manner that the other becomes convinced that his outcomes will be improved if he behaves in the manner suggested or desired." Terry in his definition, leadership is only an influence mechanism, meaning that followers are impacted by the leader's lifestyle when they conduct similarly to the leader. According to leadership is "the initiation and maintenance of structure in expectation and interaction." Leadership is "the relationship in which one person, the leader, influences others to work together willingly on related tasks to attain that which the leader desires"; Katz and Kahn (1978) define it as "the influential increment over and above mechanical compliance with the routine directives of the organization "Leadership is defined as "effectiveness in getting ideas accepted and in guiding a group or an individual to accomplish a task" by Bray, Campbell, and Grant (1974) Leadership is "the art or process of influencing people so that they will strive willingly towards the achievement of group goals," according to Koontz and O'Donnell (Koontz et al., p. 661). Leadership, whichever it is defined, is the

capacity to impose the inferior mentality regardless of the inferior's preference.

4. Church Leadership

The phrase "church leadership" has to be clarified now that we know what the church and leadership are. The act of influencing or serving others in the cause of Christ so that they might fulfill God's plans for and through them is known as church leadership. It is not based on materialistic ideas of success, like a passion for wealth or authority. When Jesus emphasized the value of helping others, he spoke out against this. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them," Jesus replied, calling them to Himself. It will not be that way among you, though; if someone wants to rise to prominence among you, let them serve you. In the same way that the Son of Man came to serve, not to be served, and to give His life as a ransom for many, let whomever wants to be the most important among you be your slave. (NKJV, Matthew 20:25–28).

In order to have the intended effect that may change society, Christian leaders are required to venture outside of the church and into the larger public sphere. He contends that the church can only successfully encourage good leadership in society if it can demonstrate a thriving leadership culture within its own ranks in a way that reflects the traits and style of leadership exemplified by the Lord Jesus. One may argue that Ngara's efforts represent a daring move toward resolving the enduring problem of subpar leadership on the African continent. He presents a compelling argument that poor leadership and the church's inability to have a greater public voice are to blame for the main issues facing African nations. When Jacobson (2000) asks the important question, "Who takes the lead?" he lays forth a compelling argument for why church leaders must fulfill a public role. All things considered, leadership is essential to the daily operations of all human endeavours. The purpose of it is to influence the followers' life and enforce conformity. As demonstrated by our role model, the Lord Jesus Christ, Christian leaders are required to take the lead in exemplifying the whole characteristic of effective leadership.

The Roles of the Church in the Society

For most Africans, and especially Nigerians, the church is an important aspect of their lives. Most of the time, leaders who are dispersed around the country are not from the missionary schools that the Christian missionaries in Nigeria founded. In one way or another, these leaders have deviated from the established values of the missionaries who provided

them with support. As a result, these so-called leaders who have attended the missionary institutions exhibit poor governance and leadership qualities. In his work "New Testament Churches," Edwards gives us twelve pictures of a local church in the New Testament. These twelve pictures also show how the church is portrayed and its functions in Nigeria in the twenty-first century: assembly of the saints; church of God; church of Christ; cultivated field of God; building of God; temple of God; body of Christ; chaste virgin consecrated; little flock; house of God; lampstand and pillar of the truth. The church has these aspects. In the context of all the other images of the Christian community and society at large, they are "meanings of the image of the body of Christ".

According to the aforementioned, the church is a gathering place for the saints, illustrating their need to shine so that others might see them in society. Christ owns and governs this church, and anything less is only an anomaly and a lie. Whether the church's reaction is transformative and successful is the question. The church's duty includes being a community-sensitive church that considers the "community," the "church," and the "Bible." It makes an effort to align with the two universes and attributes. It does this without trying to threaten any of them. As the "salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13), this model seeks to preserve the human being that God created in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) and assist that person in reaching his full potential in managing the network that surrounds him, possessing "territory over the fish of ocean... over all the earth..." and being a good steward of his local network. It is a hope of expanding God's vision in the human heart and a vital reclaiming of everything that God has created.

On the grounds that this is a legitimate and unadulterated church (James 1:27), a congregation that does not ignore the weightier matters of the law: equity and benevolence and confidence that should be done (Matthew 23:23), it is linked to bringing the network to Christ-similarity as the primary priority (Philippians 2:5-11), in word (Matthew 28:19-20), and in works of instructing, teaching, sympathy, and great deeds (Matthew 4:23-24; Acts 10:38). On the other hand, how will the salt be made if it loses its flavour? According to Matthew 5:13, "it is slacker yet to be tossed out and stomped all over by men." What is being discussed is this "additive" work or the topic of "intelligence". Additionally, as intelligence is the proper application of knowledge gained via understanding, this raises the question of whether the congregation's wisdom is discernible in today's public sphere. "Contribute its part to a network, and to take a solid hold of the fortresses of the chance of our locale" is what a knowledgeable congregation will do. Its

position is "out and stomped all over by men" if the congregation is never useful in its church again by preventing it from decaying. When one observes that the congregation is becoming less relevant and knowledgeable about the world, isn't that what's happening today? Therefore, some of the functions that the church plays in the society include:

- Integration Process: Church-Community
- Building Relationships
- The actual practice of compassion
- A genuine concern for the other person
- An authentic heart-to-heart communication
- A commitment to seek a win-win resolution of problems
- A determination not to win at the expense of anyone else
- Should anyone lose, everyone should share the loss.
- Drug-Rehabilitation centre
- offering a holistic programme to the community
- Drug-Rehabilitation Centre (Home for Boys)
- Six-month intern programme,
- Bible study,
- counselling, sports and recreational activities and
- family support system.

5. The Church and Leadership

Politically, socially, economically, academically and otherwise, we have Christians leaders spread all over the facets of the Nigerian polity. In Nigeria for example, we have leaders who have led the nation for several years in various capacities. One popular example is the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo; the former president of Nigeria from the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). He is a Christian leader; but if adjudged by the ways and manners with which he carried out his administrative functions in the country, can we say he led in Christ manner? This is a question or a food for thought for any Christian who wants to make restitution for his/her life. It is unarguable that the word "corruption" took a centre stage in his administration. Leadership is not about oppressing people or bossing them around as the Gentiles do but about serving and impacting people in Church and Society to please God according to the will of God and the goal of God's Kingdom as revealed in the gospel according to Mark 10:42-45.

If a Christian leader is a person with a God-given capacity and responsibility to influence a specific group of God's people towards God's purposes-then values centre around those purposes. Values provide the shared roadways on which Christian leaders

exercise their influence and on which followers respond. Many variables affect leadership effectiveness, yet values provide the constrains for all of them. Leadership effectiveness as posited by Elliston depends on many influences, but values provide the paths for these influences. Shared values provide the criteria for both what ought and what ought not to be done. Biblical values undergird selection criteria, the development process, and the bases for evaluating spiritual leadership. These values fit interculturally with only the specific local forms changing as the values are expressed. They serve as the criteria for judging how well or appropriately a spiritual leader function (Elliston 1992). Several of the more important values which undergird the concept of Christian leadership are summarized below:

- We see Christians who record betrayals that are difficult to talk about.
- Christian leaders should function as servants.
- They are to be evaluated primarily by the criteria of the servant model of leadership lived and taught by Jesus as the norm for Christian leaders.
- Christian leaders should behave in ways which are above reproach in their communities.
- Christian leaders should be distributed within the church, with different persons leading according to their particular spiritual gifts.
- Christian leaders should not base their leadership on their own rank, status, or power for personal gain.
- Christian leaders should contribute to the purpose, fullness and functioning of the Church.
- Christian leaders should reproduce themselves through others, by such means as contextual preparation, discipleship, empowerment and legitimization.
- Christian leaders should be selected for a particular purpose based on the person's calling, demonstrated commitment, and competence.

5.1 Transformational Theory of Leadership

Transformational theory of leadership posits that transformational leaders are those connected to their followers in a way that they can raise the level of motivation and morality which is committed to a collective good. Its essence is to transform the followers to a reasonable level of good. As Stone et al. may have it, transformational leadership theory was initiated by Burns (1978). Their main concern is to motivate and mould people towards progress and development. This leadership theory has become

extremely popular concept in recent times. He/she transforms the personal values of followers into support for the vision and goals of the organisation by cultivating an environment in which relationships may be built and by establishing an atmosphere of trust and vision sharing.

Transformational theory of leadership has four basic features, which are, idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. Based on his/her idealised or charismatic influence, the transformational leader becomes a role model who is respected, admired and emulated by followers that underlie transforming and transactional leadership. This no doubt additionally gives driving force to vision sharing. Transformational leadership leads with forensic examples in such a way that they lead with inspiration. When we talk about inspiration, the transformational pioneer persuades others by "giving importance and challenge to the supporters' work".

As opined by Stone et al., combining idealised influence and inspirational motivation could give rise to charismatic inspirational leadership. This is where the church leadership functions to give heeds too the numerous challenges bedevilling the society. Hence, whereas intellectual stimulation is helpful to the followers' efforts to be innovative and creative, individualised consideration helps the transformational leader to give personal attention to the followers' needs for achievement and growth. Similar to Burns, Bass views transactional leadership as an exchange of rewards for compliance. However, Bass defines transactional leadership in broader terms than Burns does. According to Bass (1985), it includes not only the use of incentives and contingent rewards to influence motivation, but also clarification of the work required to obtain rewards. Bass views transformational and transactional leadership as distinct but not mutually exclusive processes, and he recognizes that the same leader may use both types of leadership at different times in different situations.

Scattered in the scripture are transformational leaders who made impact through their lifestyle and their bold courage. The researcher therefore, decides to employ transformational leadership theory knowing its intricacies towards bringing followers to bear and making them to follow by the pace set by the leader.

We read in the scripture a proactive leader-Nehemiah; what made Nehemiah the man of the hour when the king needed to choose someone to become his trusted confidante? His almost coleader? His personal assistant? A team member? His bodyguard at least when it came to a willingness to sacrifice himself for

the king's life as his wine tester? Or, what qualities did Nehemiah exhibit throughout the book of Nehemiah that made him such a great leader? The church being the eye of the society must exert its full potential towards making sure that the essence of its formation is not forfeited but fulfilled. The quality that makes for effective and proactive leaderships is found in Nehemiah. Hence, he was able to face head long the likes of Sanballat and Tobiah (Nehemiah 4:1-3). We live in a society where trust and truth are elusive and no one wants to entrust sensitive ideas and commodity to his neighbours. This is the hour that Christians are supposed to showcase to the world what Christ the great leader taught and how He carried out leadership task. Leaders are to live a life that transform and mould the nation and allow the love of Christ lead through them.

6. Where is the Church in the Nigeria of Today?

In recent years, church leaders have taken active roles in social justice advocacy, including anti-corruption campaigns and supporting the rights of marginalized groups. For instance, church organizations have been vocal about governance issues, demanding transparency and accountability from the government. During the 2023 election, we found that the church took some measures in educating their members of the necessity to get their PVCs and not to be disenfranchise during the voting process. The worry here is that, of all leaders in the country there are Christian leaders who corruption has been traced to while in office. Scattered in the scripture are leaders who with their various position helped in promoting peace and tranquillity in the society. King Solomon is renowned for his wisdom, which he used to administer justice and maintain peace in Israel. His request for wisdom to govern Israel (1 Kings 3:9-12) illustrates his dedication to just and effective leadership. His famous judgment in the case of two women claiming the same child (1 Kings 3:16-28) is a prime example of his ability to resolve conflicts fairly, which helped maintain societal harmony.

Solomon's peaceful reign is celebrated in 1 Kings 4:24-25, where it is noted that "every man under his vine and fig tree" lived in safety. His reign reflects the value of wisdom and justice for societal peace. Joseph, as a high official in Egypt, played a vital role in maintaining societal peace and stability by preparing for a prolonged famine. Through his foresight, he stored grain during years of abundance and distributed it during the famine, ensuring that people both within Egypt and in surrounding regions survived the crisis (Genesis 41:46-57). His administrative wisdom

preserved many lives and prevented social unrest. Joseph's leadership provided peace in a time of potential disaster, showcasing how responsible stewardship and care for society can foster stability.

Moses was a foundational leader who guided the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom. He not only led them through the wilderness but also established a judicial system to handle conflicts (Exodus 18:13-27). By delegating authority to capable leaders, Moses ensured that justice was accessible, reducing tensions and promoting peace among the people. In Exodus 18, Moses' delegation of judicial responsibilities to appointed leaders illustrates the importance of organized governance in maintaining peace within a community. Jesus emphasized peacemaking as a core value, both in teaching and practice. He encouraged people to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44), promoting reconciliation over revenge. His role as the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6) was characterized by fostering unity, forgiveness, and love among people, ultimately establishing a model of peace for Christian leadership. In the Beatitudes, Jesus states, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). His emphasis on forgiveness, reconciliation, and service shaped the community and promoted peace.

The regret of today Christian leaders in position of power with history of corruption and misuse of power. It is regrettable that many churches in Nigeria and across Africa have strayed from their core mission, adopting secular rules and standards instead of adhering to biblical principles. As noted in an interview with Iriwieri, today's Nigerian leaders often display behaviors worse than those of non-believers who once sought these positions of influence. Church and political leaders alike seem to have abandoned the tenets of biblical leadership, resulting in policies and actions that make life increasingly difficult for the masses. Even members of the judiciary, who are part of various congregations, are now seen subverting justice. This situation calls for a serious examination of the church's role, as it is meant to be a standard-bearer and an anchor of hope for the people.

When Christian leaders campaign for elected positions, they often promise to change the narrative and uphold moral standards. However, once in office, many begin to follow influences that contradict the values they initially professed, disappointing those who elected them. As Tietie suggests in an interview, any Christian leader who attains a political position and is found to be more corrupt or ineffective than their predecessors should face disciplinary action

within the church. Furthermore, such individuals should not be entrusted with any sensitive leadership roles in the future.

7. Conclusion

The paper examines the Church and her leadership impact in Africa taking a cursory look at the Nigerian Experience. The church still remains one organization that impacts the nation, and so the society looks at the calibre of persons being produced in the church as either standing to be a solution or a cog to the wheel of progress in the polity. The laws with which great nations are being governed are drawn from the bible, hence it is expedient that those who study and read the holy book must lead with examples as exemplified by role models in the bible. The church of the 21st century Nigeria is faced with diverse leadership challenges which calls for re-examination of the life of great leaders in the bible like that of Moses, Joshua, Nehemiah so as to be well equipped of the task that lies ahead for it is seemly so to do. The society is in dare need of exemplary leaders and so, to effectively model the behaviours which are expected of others, Christian leaders must first be clear about their own guiding principles. Christians must find their own voice and then they must clearly and distinctively express their values.

8. Recommendations

The values of Christian leadership espoused by the church should be imbibed so as to revamp the lacuna already created in the country.

There is need for the adoption of Christian leadership traits and values as a panacea to effective leadership structure in the Nigerian polity.

Christian leaders at the congregational, denominational and ecumenical levels should accept the responsibility in the holistic empowerment of both Christians and non-Christians in Nigerian society and engage alongside them in the socio-political and economic transformation of Nigerian society.

Pastors, evangelists, deacons who found themselves in position of leadership in the country must be prepared to undergo our Lord's leadership training programme like James and John in order to experience conversion and a change of heart

Christian leaders must stand tall to nip evil and all forms of corruption in the bud for this is the height of it all in the contemporary Nigeria.

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