

**THE CHURCH IN THE NEXT 500 YEARS, THE CASE STUDY OF THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION**

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**Abstract**

*The history of humanity is divided into two by the birth and death of Christ (AD and BC). Similarly, the history of Christianity can be divided into two by the reformation championed by Martin Luther. This epoch event which took place 500 years ago saw the Roman Catholic Church split up and Western Europe was no longer united by one Christian religion. In these 500 years, many remarkable changes had taken place: on the positive side the church had grown tremendously in size and structure across every nation, while on the negative side the break up within the church continues unabated and at the same time the standard of faith seems to be on the downward trend, which has caused grave concern for many especially in the Anglican Communion. Without any doubt a major development in human civilization now is the advancement in information technology and its impact in changing the entire human culture and socialization which cannot exclude the church. As a result, the Anglican Communion will witness many transformations in the next 500 years. This paper is premised on Maxwell Conceptual Framework (2004) which is a comprehensive analysis of past events using primary and secondary sources. This is in tandem with sociological and historical methods used in this research. This paper posits that the Anglican Communion and its leadership should make this church dynamic in preaching of the word and in the administration of the sacraments.*

**Keywords:** Church, Next 500 Years, Roman Catholic, Transformations, Anglican Communion

**Introduction**

October 31, 2017 marked the 500 years that a great reformer Martin Luther famously rebelled against the Roman Catholic Church with his 95 theses which acted as catalyst for reformation. The role of Luther in the Reformation of the Roman Catholic Church of the 16<sup>th</sup> century cannot be over-emphasized as the Reformation was the time in history when the Roman Catholic Church split up and Western Europe was no longer united by one Christian religion. This gave birth to the Protestants. The Protestant Reformation was the 16th-century schism within Western Christianity initiated by Martin Luther, John Calvin and other early Protestants. The efforts of the self-described "reformers", who objected to ("protest") the doctrines, rituals, leadership and ecclesiastical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, led to the creation of new national Protestant churches. The Reformation was precipitated by earlier events within Europe, such as the Black Death and the Western Schism, which eroded people's faith in the Catholic Church and the Papacy that governed it. This, as well as many other factors, such as spread of Renaissance ideas and inventions, such as the invention of the printing press, and the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire, contributed to the creation of Protestantism (Owen, 2003).

The Roman Catholic Church responded with a Counter-Reformation initiated by the Council of Trent—the most important ecumenical council since Nicaea II 800 years earlier (at the time, there had not been an ecumenical council since Lateran IV over 300 years earlier, a length only to be matched by the interval between Trent and Vatican I)—and spearheaded by the new order of the Society of Jesus (aka Jesuits) specifically organized to counter the Protestant movement. In general, Northern Europe, with the exception

of Ireland and pockets of Britain and the Netherlands, turned Protestant. Southern Europe remained Roman Catholic, while fierce battles which turned into warfare took place in central Europe (Owen, 2003).

The largest of the new churches were the Lutherans (mostly in Germany, the Baltics and Scandinavia) and the Reformed Churches (mostly in Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Scotland). There were many smaller bodies as well. The most common dating of the Protestant Reformation was 1517 (Houghton, 1982), when Luther published *The Ninety-Five Theses*, and concludes in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia that ended years of European religious wars.

### **The Cry for Reformation**

By the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the demand for reformation was very rife from many people with the exception of those benefiting from the rot. The need for reformation arose because of the following reasons. Priests were observed to be publicly drunk in the hotels or traverses and yet were allowed to continue in their ministry without rebuke. A cleric known to be guilty of homicide was seen to escape in a modest imprisonment with bread and water (Houghton, 1982).

Many reformers thought that the Emperor Constantine caused the disaster by his donation of lands and secular authority to Pope Sylvester that the golden age of Christendom had been without ruins when the people acquired wealth. This made the reformation to look backwards.

### **Religious situation in Europe**

Martin Luther's spiritual predecessors included John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, who likewise had attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation began on 31 October 1517, in Wittenberg, Saxony, where Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* to the door of the All Saints' Church, in Wittenberg. The theses debated and criticized the Church and the Pope, but concentrated upon the selling of indulgences and doctrinal policies about purgatory, particular judgment, Catholic devotion to Mary. "The Mother of God", the intercession of and devotion to the saints, most of the sacraments, the mandatory clerical celibacy, including Monasticism, and the authority of the Pope (Chadwick, 2003).

### **Who was Martin Luther?**

Martin Luther was born in November 10, 1483 into a strict German Catholic family. His parents were Hans John and Gretha Margaret who lived in Eisleben where Hans Luther earned his livelihood by mining. He was brought up in a simple but strict manner. He entered the University of Erfurt at the age of eighteen where he greatly distinguished himself in study. He was a light-hearted young fellow, full of buoyant life, he little realized that even at this time God was preparing him for a career of activity which was to astonish Europe, and which was to shake a proud and polluted Church to its foundations. Luther one day came across a copy of the Bible while studying at Erfurt which he had never set his eyes upon before, but as he read he was deeply stirred. The story of Hannah and Samuel and above all, Samuel's calling impressed him deeply. By the age of twenty-two, Luther had completed his course at the university, and then there came a turning point in his life. One of his best friends was killed in a student brawl, and he could not refrain from asking himself, 'What if I had been killed instead of my friend?' On another occasion, as he was travelling home from Erfurt, a rapier he was carrying accidentally severed a main artery in one of his legs. He called upon the Virgin Mary for aid while a friend ran for helpers who bound up the wound and saved his life. On yet another occasion a terrible thunder-storm broke over his head. Stricken with fear he fell prostrate to the ground, crying out, 'Help, Anna, beloved saint, I will become a monk' (Brakke, 2009). Luther kept his vow and after gathering with his student-friends for frolic and song in a farewell party, he presented himself at the door of an Augustinian monastery and asked for an admission. He was received with open arms, for his university learning commended him to the head of the monastery. His father had intended him for a Law career, but he became a monk and a professor of theology instead. A sensitive soul, he struggled mightily with a guilty conscience and an intense fear of God and hell until he realized the doctrine of "justification by faith" while studying the book of Romans - this doctrine with his conviction that the Bible should be the basis of religious life and available to all, became the theological foundation of Protestantism.

Martin Luther was not the first or the only churchman to come to these conclusions, but arrived in a time of rising nationalism and, thanks to the recently-invented printing press, unprecedented written communication. With his 95 Theses against the abuses of indulgences, Martin Luther unwittingly sparked religious and political reform in Germany and founded the Lutheran branch of Protestantism.

With a strong and often abrasive personality, Martin Luther took up the weapons of pen and pulpit against the corruptions of Catholicism on one side and the extremes of the Radical Reformation on the other. He spoke out against clerical celibacy, papal abuses, the denying of the scriptures and the communion wine to non-clergy, the cult of the saints, salvation by works, and other Catholic doctrines. Yet Martin Luther retained many traditional and liturgical elements of the church that other reformers rejected.

Strongly influenced by the writings of Augustine, Martin Luther stressed humanity's sinfulness, God's grace, and the sufficiency of faith in Christ for salvation. He translated the New Testament into German and formulated catechisms in the vernacular, making a major contribution to the development of written German. History remembers Martin Luther as the "Father of the Reformation (Brakke, 2009).

Martin Luther is much less admired for his violent anti-Jewish sentiments, which were later used as anti-Semitic propaganda by the Nazis and have been formally denounced by number of Lutheran bodies.

### **Martin Luther and the Roman Catholic Church**

Although Martin Luther was now a professor at the University of Wittenberg, he still lived in a monastery. He was commissioned to go to Rome in the year 1510 in the interests of the Augustinian Order. He was delighted with his mission, for up to that time he held the conviction that the Roman Catholic Church was the Church, that the Pope was the holy vicar of Christ upon earth, and that Rome 'the eternal city' was the supreme seat of holiness; (Cameron, 2012) but he was miserably disappointed. The nearer he approached the holy city, the more wickedness he observed on every hand, and while in Rome he heard about the wicked deeds of popes and other high dignitaries.

Luther discovered everywhere on his journey from monastery to monastery that the priests were deplorably ignorant, and given to the grossest superstitions, many of them even being unbelievers and blasphemers. Luther was referred to as rebel leader. On 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1517, Martin Luther wrote to Albrecht, Archbishop of Mainz and Magdeburg, protesting against the sales of indulgences. He enclosed in his letter a copy of the "Disputation of Martin Luther on the power and efficacy of Indulgences", which came to be known as 95 theses. Hans Hillerbrand writes that Luther had no intention of confronting the church, but saw his disputation as a scholarly objection to church practices, and the tone of the writing is accordingly "searching, rather than doctrinaire (Estep, 1986). Hillerbrand writes that there is nevertheless an undercurrent of challenge in several of the theses, particularly in Thesis 86, which asks: "why does the Pope whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the Basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?"

Luther insisted that since forgiveness was God's alone to grant, those who claimed that indulgences absolved buyers from all punishments and granted them salvation were in error, he said Christians must not slack in following Christ on account of such false assurances. The 95 theses were quickly translated from Latin into German printed and widely copied, making the controversy one of the first in history to be aided by the Printing Press. Within two weeks, copies of the theses had spread throughout Germany; within two months, throughout Europe and later circulated widely up to England, Italy and France as early as two years after the Reformation i.e. 1519 (Kelly, 2009). Luther became very popular and a toast of everyone most especially the students who thronged in their large numbers to Wittenberg to listen to him. He published a short commentary on Galatians and his works on the Psalms.

His 95 theses are often considered a Charter (Bettenson, 2016); a bold declaration of independence for the Protestant Church. His intention for writing the theses was for the Protestant Church. Luther's intention for writing the theses was for academic exercise inviting fellow academics to a "Disputation on the power and efficacy of indulgences"- the theses official title. The debate was never held because the theses were translated from Latin to German and distributed widely creating uproar. The door in which he pasted his theses served as a bulletin board for various announcements related to academic and Church affairs. He was calling for a "Disputation on the power and efficacy of indulgences out of love and zeal for truth and

the desire to bring it to light.” (Bettenson, 2008). He did so as a faithful Monk and priest who had been appointed Professor of Biblical Theology at the University of Wittenberg which was a very small unknown institution in a small town. Some copies of these theses were sent to friends and Church officials but the disputation never took place. Albert of Brandenburg, archbishop of Mainz, sent the theses to some theologians whose judgment moved him to send a copy to Rome and demanded action against Luther. By the early months of 1518, the theses had been reprinted in many cities and Luther’s name had become associated with demands for radical change in the Church. He had become front page news.

### **What were Indulgences?**

In the Sacrament of Penance, Christians confessed sins and found absolution for them. The process of penance involved satisfaction – paying the temporal penalty for those sins. Under certain circumstances, someone who was truly contrite and had confessed his sins could receive partial or rarely complete remission of temporal punishment by purchasing a letter of indulgence. Luther did not attack the idea of indulgences because in Thesis 73 he declared: “the Pope justly thunders against those who by any means whatsoever contrive harm to the sale of indulgences” but strongly objected to the abuse of indulgences and through this knocked down the pillars supporting many practices in Medieval Christianity (Albright, 2009).

Luther was majorly calling for a debate on the most neuralgic issue of his time; the relationship between money and religion. Indulgences had become the complex instruments for granting forgiveness of sins. The granting of forgiveness in the sacrament of penance was based on the “power of the keys” given to the apostles according to Matthew 16:18 and was used to discipline sinners. Penitent sinners were asked to show regret for their sins (contrition), confess them to a priest (confession), and do penitential work to atone for them (satisfaction).

However, a counter-reformation was carried out by Johann Tetzel within two months and fired back at Martin Luther with his own theses which included his defense especially “Christians should be taught that the Pope by the authority of his jurisdiction is superior to the entire Catholic Church and its 1517 Luther’s post – 95 theses.

### **Characteristics of the Church using the early Church as a case study**

Is the church today still what it was in its early years? By identifying the characteristics of the early church we will be able to answer this question.

What then are the characteristics of the early church?

1. Bold in their telling: When Peter spoke to the Jews in Jerusalem, His point was very clear.
2. Devoted in Prayer and Fellowship: They were devoted to a life of prayer and regular fellowship (Acts 2:42-46).
3. They were filled with the Spirit: This implies that they were carriers of God’s power and presence. .
4. They firmly condemned sinful practices:
5. They were waiting Church: They were eagerly awaiting the second coming of the Lord, and they were very conscious of this in the way they lived and carried out their business daily (Acts 14:21-22; Titus 2:13)
6. Evangelism and discipleship: The early Church was given to evangelism and discipleship making (Acts 8:12; 14-15; 2Tim. 2:1-2).

### **Anglicanism**

Anglicanism refers to the Church of England so far is the background history. An Anglican is a Christian who is a member of the Church of England, or one of its many offshoots in the former Dominions of Canada, India, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, as well as in the former colonial empire in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, Mediterranean and Caribbean Islands (Adetunmbi, 2008). Most of these places have

churches that subscribe to the doctrine of the Church of England as encapsulated in the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Common Prayer Book.

The Anglican Communion is a fellowship or communion of autonomous Christian churches, united by a common history confessing a common faith and a common Liturgy. It is commonly seen as incorrigibly English, a hangover of the British Empire, an anachronism (Beckinwith, 2015). The term 'Anglican' originated in the Medieval Latin designation for the Catholic Church in England, *Ecclesia Anglicana*: a geographical location rather than a theological description. At the Reformation, the Reformed Church of England asserted its identity and continuity with that Medieval Church. However, the term 'Anglican' only developed its modern use in the nineteenth century, first of all as a theological identity marker, rather than a geographical description (Eveso, 2002).

The Anglican Communion is therefore, a world-wide family of churches. There are thirty-eight distinct and independent Anglican churches or provinces, existing in a particular country or spread over a number of countries. Provinces vary in size from the big Churches such as the Church of England (26 m); Church of Nigeria (19.5m); Church of Uganda (8m) and the Episcopal Church of Sudan (5m) to the tiny communities of the Southern Cone of America (22, 490), Mexico (21, 000), the Anglican Church of Korea (14, 558) and the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East (10, 000) (Kevin, 2006). The Anglican Church has over 70 million people spread across over 160 countries in all continents. They speak many languages and come from different races and cultures. Although autonomous, these Churches are unified through their history, their theology and their relationship to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The major items of nexus are the Word of God (the Bible) and Jesus Christ (Adekanye, 2015).

Anglicans trace their root back to the early Church and their separate identity to the post-reformation expansion of the Church of England and other Episcopal or Anglican Churches.

Historically, there were two main stages of development of the Communion. From the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Anglicanism was established alongside Colonization in the USA, Australia, Canada, Netherlands and South Africa. The second stage began in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when missionaries worked to establish Anglican churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

### **An Ex—Ray of the Church in the last 500 years**

The Church generally in the last 500 years has witnessed tremendous growth in the hands of the reformers and leaders of the churches. It is true that the reformers of 500 years ago did not fully grasp the focus as expected but the fruits of their labour have manifested. The following are the features that manifested within these 500 years of reformation as it affected the churches especially the Anglican Communion.

### **Issue of Decline in Religion**

The church really suffered persecution for more than 300 years after its birth in the hands of the Roman Emperor which made Christianity to be declared *religio illicita* until the time of Emperor Constantine who now declared the religion *religio licita* (Boer, 1976). The churches witnessed decline in religion in all the continents of the world most especially in America and United Kingdom. Within the 500 years the Turkey church really suffered a great decline in its history as the population of Christians in Turkey today is less than 2% as Islam has taken over the whole country. The Church in North Africa equally suffered a decline through constant persecution from Islam, lack of pastoral oversight from its leaders and lack of theological exposition. There was a sharp drop in membership and in attendance in the churches (Adekanye, 2015).

Many churches in the Church of England were being closed down and sold to Muslims while many were being converted to pop houses. Budgets were getting bigger and bigger on a daily basis while giving is shrinking and the average age of those who are still in the pews and contributing is getting older and older every day. Many were not able to keep up their church buildings in the western world because of high cost of maintenance and taxes paid to the government; many were not able to pay their priests and pastors adequately while the funding of the Seminaries or missionaries and the wider church structures were not adequate.

New Technologies were changing the way people lived (electricity, telephones, automobiles, modern medicine etc which really remained messy for nearly the entire first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the

New Generation Churches are tilting towards the world in their music. Hardly can one differentiate between Gospel music and worldly music within these 500 years in focus.

### **Landmarks of 500 years of Anglican Communion**

The Church Missionary Society and Society for the Propagation of the Gospel that were vibrant in the propagation of the Gospel in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Anglican Communion from the Church of England became passive in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Many Church of England Churches were been sold off to Muslims while some were sold to pop houses buyers because the Church of England could no longer maintain those structures as they recorded few worshippers in those churches. This situation made the Church of Nigeria to inaugurate the Church of Nigeria Missionary Society (CNMS) in 1996 by late Archbishop Abiodun Adetiloye, the then Primate of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) to take the gospel back to England because England has compromised their faith.

The Anglican Communion suffered a major setback within these 500 years of reformation. Anglican Church which happened to be one of the leading churches among the Protestant reformation could not maintain its focus especially the Church of England and the ECUSA (Episcopal Church of the United States of America) as they promoted homosexuality and lesbianism which made the rest of the Anglican Communion especially in the Global South decided to sever relationship (Adetunmbi, 2008). This broke the communion and made the leaders of the Global South and other Provinces to form a parallel Conference to Lambeth which they called Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2014). They affirmed the authority of the scriptures and condemned the Western world Anglican Communion. The consecration of Gene Robinson – a confessed homosexual as bishop in ECUSA torn the church apart and since 2003 (Adetunmbi, 2008), the communion has not been the same as it used to be. Many Anglican dioceses and Provinces were not self sufficient financially and this was why many of them look on to the Western world for financial assistance for sustenance.

The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) gave the lead by setting the pace for the rest of the Global South by organizing the first “All Anglican African Bishops’ Conference” held in Lagos in 2004; consecration of bishop Martyn Minns for Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA) which has now given birth to some dioceses in both America and Canada today; consecration of bishop Abiodun Taiwo Oloaoye as a Commissary Bishop to the Diocese of Democratic Republic of Congo. It also gives the lead for the annual Divine Commonwealth Conference (DIVCCON). The Church of Nigeria within these few decades was declared the fastest growing Church in the Anglican Communion worldwide by Archbishop Robert Runcie, the former Archbishop of Canterbury in a visit to Nigeria in 1997.

### **The Church today**

Can it be said in all honesty that the characteristics listed above are still present in the church today? When we look at the Church today, what do we see?

1. An apparent lack of sufficient will to punish sin adequately
2. A people centered rather than a God centered Church. A church whose motto now appears to be “Customer is always right”
3. A prayerless church that also lacks proper understanding of the word of God and so is unable to teach and preach it effectively.
4. A church that seems to have come up with a different requirement for membership other than that laid down by Christ.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The church is supposed to provide solution to the socio-political problem of the world. It should provide help for the communities especially those who need assistance by impacting the lives of those that come to their communities anew most importantly those who are not of the Christian faith by mobilizing money for them, giving them furniture, feeding, and accommodation. They should realize that the only that the church has is the good news of the gospel which should be preached with serious passion. They should make this church to be as strong as ever in the preaching of the undiluted word and in the administration of the

sacraments. If the church today has deviated severely from what Christ designed His church to be then the ministers assigned with the task of ministering to the people should be held fully responsible. And it is also ministers that God will use to restore His church back to what it should be. New technology makes transmission of information faster than ever before; this should help the cause of the gospel but should also be careful of the manipulators of the social media.

Five hundred years ago, the church of Christ had to deal with all those difficulties and more. In the midst of it all, God brought about the greatest renewal of the church since the Apostolic era—the Protestant Reformation.

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