

RELIGION AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES: REINVIGORATING THE DIACONAL MINISTRY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN NIGERIAN CHURCHES

AKPANIKA, EKPENYONG NYONG (PhD)
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Calabar
Calabar
en.akpanika@unical.edu.ng & ekpesakpanika@hotmail.com

&

EMMANUEL WILLIAM UDOH (PhD)
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Calabar
Calabar
Emmanueludoh@unical.edu.ng & revemmaudoh@yahoo.com

Abstract:

At the very beginning of the New Testament, the locus of Christianity was associated with the poor, the widow, social outcast, and persons of low cultural background. This made the New Testament message a holistic one. Holistic because its mission linked up preaching with social services, social welfare and social justice. It was a mission that addressed the physical welfare as well as the spiritual needs of the people, witnessing to the people alongside their welfare needs (Acts 6:1-7). However, Churches in Nigeria are yet to adequately embrace this diaconal practice in her evangelistic approach. The main thrust of this paper is to examine the state of the diaconal ministry of the Church in Nigeria and see how this can be invigorated for effective pastoral care and sustainable development for indigent persons within the Church and the immediate community. The paper adopted the qualitative research method using hermeneutical and historical approaches. The study argues that the overbearing desire for wealth by some Church leaders and founders are responsible for the diminishing impact of diaconate ministry in most Nigerian Churches and recommends the reinvigoration of diaconal ministry to help cushion the effect of increasing poverty in Nigeria occasioned by religious violence, ethnic clashes, insecurity, unemployment and COVID 19 pandemic.

Keywords: Diaconate, Poverty, Pastoral Care, Ministry,

Introduction:

In the broadest sense, the mission of the Church is to proclaim the salvation of God in Christ to the world. In essence, the Church is required to fulfil its primary role of witnessing and preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God and redemption as taught by Christ. To fulfil this role, the church is expected to render services in the same manner as Christ went about doing good (Isa. 60: 1-3, Lk. 4:18-19). His interest to share in the pains and sufferings of the people was evident in His ministry. This makes the task for effective diaconal ministry a critical need in the body of Christ today, especially in Nigeria. The biblical injunction to care for the poor, the weak, the aged, the widows, orphans and strangers is gradually losing grip in the 21st century Nigerian Churches. The confinement of ministry to Word and Sacrament and neglecting the physical needs of the weak, the poor and the orphans in the face of increasing poverty, pains and suffering poses a serious challenge in Nigeria. The presupposition is that the biblical pattern of holistic ministry that cared for the poor and the weak is neglected despite the increasing need for it. Hence, the challenge of reinvigorating the diaconate ministry that will cater for the need of the poor and indigent persons in Nigerian society internally displaced by religious violence, ethnic clashes, unemployment and COVID -19 pandemic.

The role of the church as a community of love as exemplified in Acts 4:32 where the poor, the aged, orphans and indigent people shared all things in common cannot be overemphasized. Gwamna (2008:29) opines that "to claim the love of Christ and fail to minister to the deep needs of people is a truncated, if not a false gospel". Gwamna observation undoubtedly, emphasizes, the diaconate ministry as part and parcel of the church's ministry. Divorcing the welfare need of the people in preaching the gospel is truncating the gospel. N. S. S. Iwe (1986) argues that "if kerygma (preaching) is what generated faith with the penetrating action of the Holy Spirit, it may undoubtedly be asserted that it is Diakonia which test the faith" (1986:162). By implication, the proof of faith and the success of kerygma (preaching) if not translated into Diakonia (service) – good works for the service of God and humanity is dead. That is to say that Christianity at all times must give testimony not only in words but also in action and deed. This is so because; the diaconate service is the whole mission and life of the Church. It is on this note that invigorating pastoral care in African Churches becomes important.

Clarification of Terms and the Origin of Diaconate Ministry:

Dowdle (2007:4) alludes that a proper understanding of the history of diaconal ministry in the 21st century will put the church's response in the right perspective. For him, the biblical record, as well as a study of church history, reveals that the human condition has not changed over time. People will continue to need comfort in times of grief, guidance in times of confusion, a direction in times of wandering, healing in times of suffering, reconciliation in times of conflict and admonishment in times of disobedience. The diaconal ministry will continue to be one of the primary functions of the church, no matter how technologically advanced the society may be. This is because people will continue to look up to the Church as their first source of help and assistance in times of trouble.

The term Diakonia has a wider application in Scripture and specifically designated to those whom the church has appointed to distribute alms and take care of the poor, and serve as stewards of the common chest of the poor (Mcneill 2006:1061). Their origin, in the situation and office, is described by Luke in the Acts 6:3. For when the Greeks started a rumour that their widows were being neglected in the relief of the poor, the apostles, making the excuse that they were unable to fulfil both functions (preaching the Word and serving at table) asked the multitude to choose seven upright men to whom they might entrust this task (Acts 6:1ff). This was the kind of deacons the apostolic Church had, and which we, after their example, should have (Mcneill 2006:1061).

John Calvin (1984) expanded the meaning of diaconate ministry when he said that the ministry is not limited to those who care for the poor, not just by dispensing or organizing alms but also reaching out to the underprivileged in the society, victims of injustice, helping the marginalized, the slain, victims of various crimes and bad governance. He opines that we must not only look for those who are victimized but we also look at the root causes, of these problems. Likethe story of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), we must ask, what make the road from Jerusalem to Jericho unsafe.

In essence, diaconate ministry is that aspect of Church ministry laid with the responsibility of rendering help, food, money, and other valuables to people who are in need especially the poor. It the ministry concerned with showing kindness and sympathy towards people who are suffering or in want. According to the New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology (1995:78), Diaconate service is the practical outpouring of the church's concern for every day and ultimate needs of its members and the wider community (1995:78). Explaining the meaning and nature of the Diakonia Ministry, Gregorios (1988) argues that Christians are saved to serve. This service does not apply to God alone but the people in the society. He asserts that Diakonia also implies the adoption of the holistic ministry of Christ to the world which involves care for the sick and elderly, the poor, the weak, and indigent persons.

The practice of the diaconate ministry spans from the first century. Iwe asserts that right from the first appearance of Jerusalem community in Acts of the Apostles; there were sparkling examples of Diakonia, a

"form of a witness by good works of charity and good example" (1986:162). According to him, "the word Diakonia covers such actions of love as the collections and handing over of monies for the community at Jerusalem; the pastoral assistance given to some needy members of the early church and the general service of love which Christians as saints showed to one another" (1986:165). In the words of McKee (1989: vii), diaconate ministry literally means the Church's ministry or service to the world. She posits that the ministry of the Church will be irrelevant without the diaconate ministry of sharing for the troubled world.

The diaconate concept of Christian ministry is, therefore, that arm that provides services such as relief for the needy and the widows, welfare services for the poor, vocational training for indigent members and adult education for the illiterates, mobilization of doctors and nurses for the health care of its members. It calls for love, care, guiding and providing for the sustenance of the "flock" including advocacy for the poor and indigents in the society. Part of the Church's responsibility to the people is to speak for the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the oppressed, the widow and orphan in our society. This welfare service also includes advocacy for women, children, widows, peace-making ministry, church and society initiatives and human rights advocacies. Negating these assistances to the poor and emphasizing on the building of cathedrals at the expense of members and communities in a society where people are displaced by natural, man-made, religious violence; increasing poverty, and its attendant malady, is truncating the gospel. The purpose of the diaconal ministry especially in the New Testament was to improve the welfare needs of indigent church members within the church.

In general, every action that was geared towards building up the Christian community especially in assisting the needy members whether in cash or kind was viewed as a diaconate service. He opined that the early Christian community under the apostolic leaders evolved an enviable pattern of life that was full of good works, mutual love and selfless service that became a model within the Church setting. For this reason, kerygma (preaching) and Diakonia (service) became the two potent media of spreading the gospel throughout the early church. Even the early church fathers are said to have encouraged the spirit of diaconate. For example, Clement is said to have urged and admonished local pastors to assist their troubled members with a "great deal of purity of life in the light of the impending end of the world". Richard Baxter described diaconate ministry as the "sum of practical theology" (Dowdle, 2007:5).

Theoretical Framework:

In this study, the endogenous development theory will be adopted. The endogenous development model is associated with Ray (2000) Lowe and Allanson (1996). The model emphasizes the importance of concentrating on utilizing local resources of the church as the central triggers in designing strategies for improving the wellbeing of members. This paper theorizes that the resurgence of church-based welfare has the potential to improve the wellbeing of both members and non-members. This theory is based on the assumption that local faith actors with activities relating to social welfare and humanitarian services are brokers of human development. Researchers have found that among the prime motivators of social welfare are the religious commandments concerning charity and that accessibility and utilization of church resources can potentially improve the living conditions of members. Based on this theoretical synthesis, the merging of development efforts for socio-economic wellbeing and evangelism is significant for the resurgence of the Diakonia Ministry.

Diaconate Ministry in Biblical Perspectives:

There are many biblical passages both in the Old and New Testaments that supports the diaconal ministry. In the OT God instructed the children of Israel never to neglect or be insensitive to the plight of the poor, the widows, the orphans and the aged. The rich were to take care of the poor, the orphans, widows and the aged within their bounds. They were to be included in the daily and yearly provisions especially during their feasting and harvest seasons. The rich were not to harden their heart against the poor or treat them with disdain (Exo. 23: 3, 9, 11; Deuteronomy 15:4, 11). In 2 Samuel 12:1-10 Prophet Nathan confronted King David for his oppressive act to the poor. This was a clear indication of God's disapproval of any form of an oppressive or manipulative act against the poor. To checkmate this, the Jewish welfare scheme in the Old

Testament, the tithe system in Deuteronomy was not only limited to the Levites and Priests but included strangers, orphans and widows (Deut. 10: 17-19).

Ajah (2012:29) alludes that the Deuteronomic laws protected and provided for the poor and disadvantaged, which included debtors, indentured servants, escaped slaves, foreigners, orphans, widows and Levites, as well as animals and even convicted criminals (Deut. 10:8-10, 16:11-14; 24:19-21; 27:19). Foreigners were to be treated with love and respect as one of Israel's duties to God, the same context as loving and serving God. The humanitarian duties toward the disadvantaged in Deuteronomy were based on Israel's similar experience of deprivation in the past (Deut. 10:19; 15:15; 24: 18, 22).

So by implication, God's special love and care for the children of Israel as of when they were in bondage in Egypt should be extended to the poor, the strangers and the less privileged. He swore not to forget them (Ps. 82: 2-4, 9:12, 10:12). He pitied and comforted them (Ps. 34:6, Isaiah 49:13). He cared for them and caused Moses to seek social justice for them (Deut. 10:17-18, 2 Sam. 22: 28, Amos 2:6, 4:1). There were also many warnings issued against oppressors of the poor (Ex. 23:3, Lev. 19:5, 23, Deut. 14: 15, 25, Mk 2:2). The judges were instructed to give full protection to the poor and maintain the rights of the poor (Ex. 22:3, Deut. 16:19, Ps. 82:3). Financial interests were not to be exacted from the poor (Ex. 22:25, Lev. 25: 36, Deut. 24:19). The tithe of the third year was the benefit of the poor and the needy (Deut. 14:28-29, 26:14) such that poverty should not exclude anyone from the joy of the festivals (Deut. 16:11-12, Ex. 9:22). They were allowed to present less expensive offerings at the temple (Lev. 12:8, 14:21, Lk. 2:24). The prophets spoke God's word of condemnation on kings and ruling elites whose injustices disrupted this order (Zeph. 3:1-3) and brought their reign to an end.

In the New Testament, Acts 2:44 believers freely and voluntarily shared their goods, meeting each other's needs. In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus reminded his disciples the need to react positively to human needs. Lk 10:25-28, 16:16:19-31, John 17:14:16 all suggest the concept of Diakonia. The Church is called to do the same especially as it prays for God's kingdom to come on earth.

This is a direct opposite of what is happening in most Churches today in Nigeria. The Church rather than assist the poor and the weak as exemplified above, leaders are busy milking, manipulating and amassing wealth for themselves and their family at the detriment of the poor that they are meant to help. Diaconate ministry is a call to feed the lamb and not to milk the lamb, it is a call to tend the sheep and not to drain the sheep. It is a call to shepherd the sheep not to be a hireling or a thief. This practical unit of caring for the indigent members is neglected in most church and calls for reinvigoration. Keryma as a missionary means has its value, but this value would not be fully realized if it is separated from Diakonia.

According to Iwe (1986), keryma and Diakonia may be viewed as two aspects of the same mission of disseminating the Good News. Christianity must give testimony not only in words but also in action and deed (1986: 162). Social action of helping, assisting and encouraging people to meet with their various challenges, crisis and the changing situations confronting them on daily basis is part of Christian responsibility. The primary function of the church as a community of love is to dispense love, guide and instruct their people through regular plans of visitation, counselling and fellowship. In the face of increasing challenges, suffering, pains and religious violence, the Church should rise to her responsibilities.

Martin Bucer believes that if a church is indeed a community of love, then ministers must guide and instruct their people through a regular visit. He advised that one should not confine Christian teaching and exhortation to the church service and pulpit because they are many who interpret and understand it for others rather than to themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to instruct the people at home and give them individual Christian guidance. Today, people need help in so many areas –spiritually, socially, politically and economically. In daily living, a lot of Christians struggle with indecisions in need of help. As a lawyer or a doctor is a counsellor for an estate or the body so is a pastor a counsellor for the soul.

DogaraGwamna (2008) alludes that the obligation to care for the poor and the weak, which dominated Israelite legislation and preaching of the prophets was not just a humanitarian reflex or a simple reaction to social justice and human goodness. It was more of relating, at the human level, the mercies of God towards the weak and the oppressed, which further was a reflection of Yahweh's attitude to Israel. Affirming this same attitude as part of his ministry, Jesus enjoined his disciples in Matthew 25: 42-43 to feed the hungry, care for strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison and concludes that anyone that renders these services for the poor, the less-privileged will highly be celebrated and richly rewarded. James realizing the importance and necessity of caring for one another asserts that the proof of faith and the success of keryma (preaching) is in the practical application of good works to the physically needy people within the Church and the public in general. According to him:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead (James 2:14-17 NIV). Christians are to be known by their fruits and not by their preaching. "Therefore by their fruits, you shall know them" (Matt. 7:20).

Diaconal Ministry in Nigerian Churches:

Nigeria like any other African nation is ravaged with many social, political, economic and religious crises. Besides, stories of insecurity, terrorism, war, violence, poverty, corruption, bad leadership and other forms of instability are almost a daily occurrence in most of Nigeria. On daily bases, people are internally displaced from their ancestral homes as a result of religious violence and terrorism. Many go hungry, homeless, sick and in need of the necessities of life yet it is difficult to find one who cares or are willing to assist.

In times like this, the church cannot pretend to be ignorant about the sufferings and pains of its members and the people in general. The need for the Church to act as a prophetic voice for the poor, the weak and the aged as exemplified in both the Old and New Testaments cannot be overemphasized. It is the Church's responsibility to act as the Nathan, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Habakkuk for those socially disadvantaged, politically oppressed, economically exploited and dehumanized by the rich and the powerful political class.

Central to the transforming role of the church is its obligation to speak with a prophetic voice to abusive powers. It is part of its 'kingly rule' as vice-regent of the God of justice. In the face of these challenges, the Church can do more than kerygma (preaching) by engaging more on diaconate ministry by providing or rendering help, food, money, and acting as a prophetic voice to people who are within their churches. Diakonia is a ministry concerned with showing kindness and sympathy towards people who are suffering or in want. God commanded the children of Israel as a community of love never to neglect her duty to the weak, the oppressed, aged, the orphans and the strangers. This was a way of presenting a holistic gospel to the people; that is a gospel that cares for the spiritual and the physical needs of the people. The Church as a living body has to feel for the sick, mourn with the dying and assist those suffering from a different ailment. The Church as a prophetic voice should speak for the voiceless and condemn the physical, social and economic problems that cause pain and devastating insecurity in most communities and societies.

The diaconate ministry is a means of providing loving support and a sense of belonging to poor and neglected members within the church and beyond the confines of the Church. Jesus himself inherited this legacy of care for the poor and put it into practice. He made friends with the needy and fed the hungry. He told his disciples to sell their possessions and give alms to the poor. He also promised that in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the homeless and visiting the sick, they would be ministering to him (Lk. 12:33, 14:12, Matt. 25:35-40).

This concept that was obvious in the Old and New Testaments churches is gradually losing grip in contemporary Nigerian setting despite the increasing number of indigent members in the Church. Today the Nigerian churches seem to be existing purely for economic and selfish aggrandizement; some pastors and

churches are busy milking, manipulating and amassing wealth for themselves and their families at the detriment of members.

Factors that Calls for Reinvigoration of Diaconate Ministry in Nigeria:

1. Increasing Poverty in Nigeria:

The word poor or poverty means different thing to different people depending on the context of the usage. For instance, according to Gustavo Gutierrez (2008:17) the word poor "means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are a person". DogaraGwamna (2008:17) defines the term poor as one who is in need, one whose sustenance depends on others, one who lacks the minimum satisfaction necessary for subsistence and therefore cannot attain fully the necessities in life towards human fulfilment. The poor are simply dehumanized. He alludes that the poor are the unheard voices and the burden bearers in all human experience and aspirations.

From the biblical perspective, every gift in the church was used to equip members for strategic ministry to the society. But today ministry is becoming individualistic and self-centred without a voice in the social, economic and political affairs in the society in which it is operating.

2. Lack of Shepherd/Flock Relationship in Nigeria:

The shepherd idea is dominant in the entire Bible. In Hebrew, the word shepherd is used as a metaphor or symbol to describe some lofty vocations that were human service-oriented. Such services like that of a priest, a prophet, a prince and a king. In the contemporary church setting, Ministers of the Gospel have taken several names or titles like Bishop, Presbyter, Reverend, Preacher and so on, to mean the same as a shepherd.

Harold Taylor (1983) in his book *Tend My Sheep* gives us a very simple meaning of the term shepherd from the agricultural point of view and points out that the essential duty of a shepherd among others is to guide, feed, care and protect his flock for productive and valuable purposes. He opines that in guiding his flock, a good shepherd takes his flock to good pastures, a safe resting place, provides water, cares for all their needs and repairs their sheepfold. He concludes that a good shepherd must always put the welfare of the flock before his comfort, guarding and protecting them against wild animals and thieves and carefully nursing anyone that is sick or weakly until it is restored.

In recent times, this principle of shepherding has been neglected by the Nigerian church leaders. As a result, members run from one church to another, like sheep without a shepherd, looking for pasture or care. In doing so, the sheep stray and are lost to wild beasts, hence the need for reinvigorating of the system.

3. Ignorance about Titles and Spiritual Responsibilities:

In the Bible, titles and offices are used to define an office that had superintending functions whether in political or religious matters. Newton opines that it conveys the idea of "to look upon, to consider, having regard to something or someone" (34) implying caring or watching over others, especially those in need. The Epistles uses the word overseer, bishop and elders interchangeably (Titus 1:5-7, 1Tim. 3:1-7, 1Peter 5:1-3) but the major function of an overseer, bishop or elder was to care, watch and superintend over the people under their care. They were to maintain order in the Church and to exercise spiritual oversight on the people.

From the above, it is obvious that preaching is a passionate ministry. Passionate because it deals with the very nature of God and expresses itself in the love of God for humanity through His son Jesus Christ. The pastorate is, therefore, a calling of men and women who are passionate about sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and action. Pastoral care is the practical aspect of the Gospel that is concerned with the alleviation of human sufferings and the outpouring of the Church's concern for the poor, the needy, the aged and the less-privileged. In today's Nigeria Church leaders take these titles upon themselves without understanding the responsibilities attached to it. Some bear Apostles without apostolic vision; prophets

without a prophetic gift; pastors without pastoring gift and so on. There is therefore the need to ensure a holistic ministry in the church in Nigeria.

4. Increase in Social Problems in the Nigerian Society:

There is no gainsaying that the level of poverty, disease/sicknesses, conflict and violence in the Nigerian society is so alarming that even church members are affected. Many people are homeless, jobless, orphans and widows/widowers, underemployed and so on. These persons are found in our neighbourhood, the situation is very glaring and needs urgent attention. One way Christianity can truly serve its purpose in such a society as ours is to increase its practical love for the needy in society. That is why reinvigorating diaconate ministry becomes imperative.

Challenges to Effective Diaconal Ministry in Nigeria:

Emphasis on Prosperity Gospel:

The placing of emphasis on self-enrichment to a very large extent has blinded the minds of some churches leaders in Nigeria against the need for genuine love for neighbour (diaconate). According to Donatus Pius Ukpong (2008:182), "Pentecostalism with the message of abundant life and blessing is making material prosperity a yardstick of authentic Christianity. Poverty is fast becoming a signal of sinfulness, to the extent that some people consider those who are poor as sinners, not born-again." For the Pentecostals, it is the prosperity of members of a church that shows whether the church is worshipping God rightly or not. Church members are therefore expected to abound in wealth and prosperity as testimonies of their divine encounter and visitation. This emphasis has neglected the diaconal ministry which traditionally supported the needy members of the church as exemplified in the New Testament praxis. They are less open and supportive of members who have special needs and problems.

Clerical Flamboyant Lifestyle:

It is certain that when ministers begin to focus more on the acquisition of wealth and living flamboyantly, other aspects of the ministry will have to suffer. Some Church leaders are over-concern with self-importance and preoccupied with self-aggrandizement to the neglect of this primary role of the Church. They are preoccupied with the accumulation of wealth and spirit of competition to maintain and increase their level of affluence, conspicuous consumption and profligate living. Material successes are becoming a yardstick for measuring the validity of ministers. This flamboyancy is based often on the quality of physical structures erected by the ministers. According to Ukpong (2008:181), "Pentecostal ministers have created a kind of 'ministerial jealousy' in Nigeria. This cancer in the Pentecostal world is spreading wide in Nigerian Christendom." Furthermore, the challenge of living good and giving the best to God encouraged in Pentecostalism is having negative effects on the churches, whose Master had no place to lay his head in the world... thereby subjecting Himself to the charity of committed friends (Ukpong 2008:182). This is true of Nigerian churches, where some church founders drive exotic cars, fly in private jets with a fleet of bodyguards and living mansions unapproachable to the poor members. These vices are partly responsible for the neglect of the diaconal ministry and impede the place of diaconate ministry in the church in Nigeria.

Commercialization and Business Oriented Nature of Churches Today:

Today, many church leaders in Nigeria are business-oriented than people-oriented. They invest in education, marketing, hotels, real estate and other money yielding ventures. These are done primarily to make a profit with less emphasis on providing services for the people and uneducated masses in the country. The universities own by Christian Churches charge high fees, making it difficult or out of reach for members whose offerings funded the institutions. The quest for profit has denied "neighbours" of genuine or true Christian love expressed through diaconal ministry. This act is also a deviation from the Medieval Christian practice of almsgiving and generosity. Almsgiving in worship, following the model of Acts 2:42, makes church worship both a symbolic and a practical bridge between Sunday and the rest of the week.

The Liturgical Context of Diakonia:

Many churches in Nigeria have ignored or not taken into consideration the relationship between liturgy and service. According to the Reformed tradition, the only true worship is that which God has commanded; scripture is the only source of revelation of God's will, and thus the right way of worshipping must be found in the Bible (Calvin Institutes 1:99-120, 1:11-12). The ministry of the church is first to God (leitourgia - worship) and the service to the neighbour (Diakonia – love). In this case, the one flowing inevitably from the other. However, most churches have deviated probably as McKee (1989:28) explains, "Because (perhaps especially in modern times) the wholeness of the Judeo-Christian vision of leitourgia-Diakonia has become difficult to explain clearly...". This perceived theological challenge has led to the neglect of diaconate service in the church in Nigeria.

Lack of Ethical Witness to the Gospel:

This laxity often contradicts that may be described as the manifesto of Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry. This manifesto is found in Luke 4:18-19 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and to release the oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." According to Ndukwe, "These disappointing legacies of the Christian faith puts heavy pressures on the Nigerian Church to reform our theological vision for ministry, reflections and practices to engage in a meaningful Christocentric reconciliation" (111).

Lack of Willingness to Suffer:

The conditions for authentic Christian diaconate involves the willingness to suffer from those whom one seeks to serve and to save. Genuine diaconate should involve not only giving money or material or services; more than these, it demands taking upon oneself the suffering of others. It demands laying aside the sense of self-sufficiency of the server to feel and take on the sense of helplessness and needs experienced by the served. This self-giving is an acid test which is lacking in genuine Christian diaconate in Nigeria. The church leadership are not willing to give all it takes to relieve the poor, weak, widows, orphans within their community and neighbourhood of these suffering. This lack of willingness inhibits the concept of true Christian diaconate in Nigeria.

It is on this note that Ndukwe (2011) in his view on the state of the Church in [Nigeria], argues that the Church has disappointed the world and therefore calls for rebranding. One of the major areas of his rebranding campaign is in reconciliation among communal communities, peacebuilding efforts by the church, and the show of the love of God for the society. Lubaale (2010), adumbrates that the church in [Nigeria] if it adopts Diaconal Ministry will recover its transforming power in the lives of people and its prophetic voice in the society. Nordstokke (2010), in his view on Diaconal Ministry, argues that it transforms, reconciles, and empowers the church as an instrument for holistic ministry. Chan (2013) suggest that the Diaconal Ministry should be used to serve as an instrument of solving communal tensions both in society and in the church, thereby bringing reconciliation when properly implemented.

Conclusion:

This paper argues that the Church that is called to be the light and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5: 13-14) is gradually losing its spiritual significance and social influence because of its neglect of the diaconal ministry as a result of its proclivity for money and material things. The excessive desire to get rich quick has turned the Church into a commercial venture where members are milked, drained and manipulated in the name of God. A return to the biblical praxis of holistic ministry which was the characteristics of the OT and NT perspectives of ministry will place the church in a better light and cushion the effect of poverty among Church members and their immediate community occasioned by religious violence, economic factors and COVID 19 pandemic. The Church as a community of love should be a place for the poor, the rich and the

aged; a place for the have and have-not, docile and indocile, for the healthy and the sick, for the physically fit and for the indigent. As Churches increase today, humanitarian assistance to millions of people within and outside the church community who are suffering from various pains and violence should also increase. Rather than amassing wealth and building Cathedrals for personal interest and selfish aggrandizement, the church in Nigeria should be people-oriented than building oriented. There is a serious need to reinvigorate the diaconate ministry in the Church. The mission of the Church cannot be complete without social action.

Recommendations:

Churches to increase their involvement in Diaconate and Pastoral care to their members:

Nigerian Churches should increase their involvement in diaconate service and Pastoral care to their members. In a society where people are displaced by natural, man-made and religious violence, the church cannot pretend to be ignorant about the suffering and pains of its members. In times like this the Church need to act as a prophetic voice for the poor, the weak and the aged as exemplified in both the Old and New Testament.

The Churches in Nigeria should be people-oriented than building or investment-oriented

Nigerian Churches should develop social welfare programmes geared towards meeting the physical needs of its members rather embarking on gigantic building projects and cathedrals at the expense of their members. Christianity is a historical faith that calls for distinctive social ethics that is all-inclusive and holistic. The ministerium of the early church was not limited to kerygma (preaching) or Didache (teaching) as the case is in most churches today but included paraklesis and diaconia services. These two catered for the physical provisions and distribution of welfare needs for needy members.

Church Leaders should see the need to establish homes for juveniles, orphans, the aged and street children:In the face of increasing poverty, pains and suffering, juvenile crimes and abandon babies, churches in Nigeria should step up their welfare services towards meeting the needs of the people. Churches should be encouraged to establish more homes for the aged, orphanages than building Cathedrals. This will help in solving some societal problems and reduce crime rather than having more churches without a corresponding effect on society.

A certain percentage of offerings collected every Sunday should be devoted to diaconate Ministry: The Old and New Testaments Church gave credibility testimony not only in words but also in action. They helped, assisted and encouraged people with various challenges to meet up with their needs. This was part of their Social responsibility to the people. Welfare provision should adequately be provided in the Church, a percentage of churches tithes and other offerings should be devoted to the catering of the poor as was instructed in the Deuteronomic laws. Concerned for the poor, the needy, oppressed, the hungry, orphans, the aged and the less-privileged should be revisited.

Diversification and specialization of Ministry:

Diversification and specialization of ministry among pastors will help meet the increasing challenges of our time. For instance, in the Western world, you hardly can find one pastor playing the role of "Jack of all trade". Over there, you find three to five pastors in the same parish playing different roles with different responsibilities. One could be called worship pastor, another, youth pastor, yet another, music pastor and the resident pastor, all working together to achieve a common goal.

References

- Ajah, Miracle, (2012) "The Purpose of Tithe in the Old Testament" International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition, Vol. 4, P 24-32
- Schreiter, Robert and KnudJordgensen (2013) *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. B. Eerdman.
- Calvin, John (1984) *The Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving*. Geneva: Wm B. Eerdman.
- Chan, K. (2013). "Tensions and Reconciliation Between the autonomous Christian Community

- and the China Christian Council/Three-Self Patriotic Movement" in *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*. (Ed.) Robert Schreiter and KnudJordgensen. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.
- Clinebell, H. J. (1966) *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling: New Resources for Ministering to the Troubled*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Clinebell, Howard J (1966). *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling*, New York: Abingdon Press.
- Dowdle, Stephen L.(2007) *Helping the Hurting in your Church: A Practical Guide for Pastors and Lay Leaders*. Florida: Creation House.
- Fennema, C. Eric (1998) *Doing Home Visitation: Extract from Ordained Servant*. Vol.7, no.2. pp. 32 – 34.
- Gregorios, P. M. (1988). *The Meaning and Nature of Diakonia*. Geneva: WCC Publications.
- Gwamna, J. D. (2008) *Perspectives in African Theology*. Plateau: ACTS, Bukuru.
- Iwe, N. S. S. (1986) *The Early Christian Beginnings*. London: Merlin Books Ltd. Devon.
- Lawrence, Errol A. (2008) *Building Relationships through Pastoral Visitation*. www.Ministrymagazine.org
- Lubaale, N. (2010). "The Emerging Church in Africa and Holistic Mission: Challenges and Opportunities" in *Holistic Mission: God's Plan for God's People*. (Ed.) Brian Woolnough& Wonsuk Ma. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.
- McKee, Elsie Anne (1989). *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today*. Grand Rapids: Wm Ndukwe, Olo (2011). *Among the Nations: Rebranding the Christian Church for a Disappointed World*. Enugu: Agbotech.
- Nordstokke, K. (2013). "Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation and Empowerment" in *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*. (Ed.) Robert Schreiter and KnudJordgensen. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.
- Olikenyi, G. I.(2001) African Hospitality: A Model for the communication of the Gospel in the African Cultural Context, SteylerVerlagNettetal. Opportunities" in *Holistic Mission: God's Plan for God's People*. (Ed.)Brian Woolnough&Wonsuk Ma. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.
- Robert Schreiter and KnudJordgensen (2013) (Ed.). *Empowerment in Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.
- Stott, John R. W. (1961) *The Preacher's Portrait*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Stott, John R.W. (1982) *Between Two Worlds*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Taylor, Harold (1983) *Tend My Sheep, Applied Theology 2*. London: SPCK.
- William, Clebsch and Charles Jaekle, (1983) (qtd, in Taylor, H. *Tend My Sheep, Applied Theology 2*. London: SPCK. World. Enugu: Agbotech.
- Wright, W. C. (2000) *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Influence and Service*. UK: Paternoster Press