

## **Historical Analysis of Ecumenical Development in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

The attempt to embark on this study was borne out of the desire to trace the origin of ecumenical efforts in their local and global contexts. Among many Orthodox Christians,<sup>1</sup> it is generally accepted that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement began with the Encyclical of 1920 that emanated from the Patriarch of Constantinople but historical record disproves this assertion and shows that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement has its roots in the Protestant missionary movement of the 19th century. In addition, this paper argues that ecumenical engagements were driven by the desire of Evangelical Protestants to achieve a "unity in fellowship" amongst themselves for greater success in the mission field. This contradicts the notion that ecumenism arose out of the desire for "unity in truth" or doctrinal agreement. This research becomes necessary so that the historical facts of ecumenism from global context would be put in proper perspective in order to avoid the implication that any distortion could have on ecumenical development in Nigeria which is a fall-out of the World Missionary Conference that held in Edinburgh in 1910. The objectives of this study are to bring to the fore the synergy that existed among some Protestant churches that championed ecumenical developments in Nigeria and to articulate that mission is the force that drives ecumenism both globally and locally. Using historical and sociological approaches in this study, the paper submits that since the emergence of organized ecumenism in Nigeria, there has been a paradigm shift from sustaining the legacies and vision bequeathed by the founders because modern ecumenism leadership seems to be more interested in playing politics by their actions thereby causing more disunity among the Christians in Nigeria.

*Keywords: Historical Analysis, Ecumenism, Nigeria*

### **Introduction**

The Church in Nigeria as a worshipping community was not created by Nigerians. The Church came into existence through the missionary enterprise of missionaries from Europe and America but unfortunately this was brought in different shades and leanings, which made adherents of the Church in Nigeria, belong to one denomination or another. But Church leaders noticed the competition for converts among the churches. Hence attempts were made very early at unity and co-operation. That apart, the threat of Islam and political bigotry in religion in Nigeria made it all the more necessary and urgent for all churches to come together to present a united front to challenge the common opponents of Christianity which threatened the survival of the Church in Nigeria.

### **What is Ecumenism?**

It is an initiative that promotes greater unity among Christian denominations so as to realize Jesus's priestly prayer in John 17: 21 "that all may be one". It is an attitude of recognising other churches as one based on our common belief and confession in "one holy, catholic and apostolic church". For our witness to be strong in the world and for

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<sup>1</sup> Orthodox Christians have been erroneously referred to especially in Nigeria as members of Historic, Mission or Mainline Churches, that is the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist Churches among others. Orthodox Christians are found today in Europe, Alexandria and Palestine having similar doctrines and liturgy with the Roman Catholic Church.



Christianity to make impact in the society, churches must come together as a body of Christ to evangelize because no denomination can evangelize the world alone. Ecumenism does not connote organic unity but recognises diversity of Christian denominations, traditions and liturgies.

The word ecumenism expresses the nature of the modern movement of the church which aims at greater unity of the body of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Meagher defines the concept from its Greek etymology *oikoumene*<sup>3</sup>, meaning the inhabited earth, to connote the interfaith movement striving for mutual respect, toleration and cooperation among the world religions. But Oshun posited that ecumenism presupposes the possibility of mutual interaction among Christian communities cutting across the regional, denominational, ethnic, language, political and social divides.<sup>4</sup> While Meagher's position refers to the broader meaning of ecumenism, Oshun's definition expresses the narrower meaning of the concept. 'Ecumenical' which means worldwide has both traditional and modern applications. Traditionally, it applied to those creeds and council of churches that were universally accepted in distinction from local creeds and synods. In its modern application the word 'ecumenical' denotes an ideal of universality. It points to what the separated churches of Christendom have in common despite their divisions and to their will to attain the unity they ought to display. In Christianity, the term refers to the movement or tendency towards worldwide unity or cooperation. In other words, ecumenism refers to the movement in the church towards the recovery of all believers in Christ, regardless of the differences of creed, liturgy and polity that may be found in their various denominations.

### **Frameworks of Global Ecumenism**

Ecumenism was not an effort that emerged in a vacuum. It thrived on existing associations that were formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that made conscious moves at world unity before the current organized ecumenical bodies. These include the World Students Christian Fellowship, Sunday School Movement, YMCA and YWCA. All these had passion for unity among Christian denominations in Europe and began to engage in discussions geared towards mending the broken fence created as a result of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformation. However, the first World Mission Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 seemed to have made an ecumenical impact because it brought together world Christian leaders, theologians and missionaries to reflect on the division already caused by different missionaries on the fields with a view to charting a course in order to realize unity in the body of Christ.

Among many Orthodox Christians today it is generally erroneously accepted that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement began with the Patriarchal Encyclical of 1920 titled "Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it is also believed that the movement for Christian unity arose out of a search for "unity in truth" and doctrinal

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<sup>2</sup> A.S Oyalana, "Oneness in the Spirit: The Goal of Ecumenism in Nigeria" in Ademola Shola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ, The Nigerian Experience*, (Lagos: Wellspring, 2000), 82.

<sup>3</sup> P. Meagher (ed), *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Religion*, (Washington D.C: Corpus Publication, 1978), 1159.

<sup>4</sup> C.O Oshun, "The Experience of Christ Apostolic Church" in Ademola Shola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ, The Nigerian Experience*, (Lagos Wellspring, 2000), 150.

<sup>5</sup> "Church and Unity" in Melisande Lorke and Dietrich Werner (eds) *Ecumenical Visions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), 190.



agreement. But historical record disproves both of these assertions beyond a shadow of a doubt. History shows that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement has its roots in the Protestant missionary movement of the 19th century and its inspiration in the desire of Evangelical Protestants to achieve a “unity in fellowship” amongst themselves for greater success in the mission field. Willem Saayman, a Protestant scholar of missiology, puts it succinctly thus; “the ecumenical movement does not derive simply from a passion for unity, it sprang from a passion for unity that is completely fused in mission”.<sup>6</sup> The union of mission and ecumenism, however, was not something arrived at quickly or painlessly for the Protestant world. It grew slowly in the soil of global confessional alliances and comity. Agreements among the Protestants in the second half of the 19th century, sustained by the international student movements and missionary conferences, became a new paradigm of ecclesiastical unity – for the conversion of the world.

The spirit of unity was rising upon the divided Protestant world like a phoenix out of the ashes. This sense of fraternity was given an organized expression by Christian individuals belonging to different Churches, namely, the “Evangelical Alliance” in London in 1846. Eight hundred Evangelical leaders belonging to no less than fifty-two Protestant denominations were in attendance. The Evangelical Alliance was an organization which aimed at making the “invisible Church visible,”-“that the world may know.” As T.V. Philip<sup>7</sup> has written, “they shared an experience that marked them off decisively from all others and gathered them together in the fellowship of an invisible church of Christ to which all ‘vital’ Christians belonged”. For them, if the theologies could divide, experience could unite. They moved the ideas for the “week of Christian prayer,” the plan for the first International Missionary Conference, and surveys of the missionary work throughout the world, which would anticipate those that later appeared in *The International Review of Missions*.

The passion for evangelism gave rise to the passion for unity, expressed both on the practical level, toward greater missionary success, and on the theoretical level, in the evangelical conception of the church as being invisible and of unity as being a matter of the heart; spiritual not organic. Protestant historian Ruth Rouse has this to say about the evangelical missionary societies: “They were not ecumenical in objective but they were ecumenical in result. They created a consciousness of unity, a sense of togetherness amongst Christians of different Churches.”<sup>8</sup> Though rarely formulated,

the fundamental conception of Christian unity which lay beneath their common striving was that all true Christians share the life in Christ, that they are one by virtue of that sharing, and that this oneness is the essential Christian unity.

The ecclesiological framework in which the ecumenical movement was forged, formed, developed and exists to this day is, with slight adjustments, the product of 19th

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<sup>6</sup> Saayman, Willem, “Unity and Mission”, Pretoria: University of South Africa: *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today*. Preparatory Paper No. 1 for the WCME Conference in Athens, May 2005.

<sup>7</sup> T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh to Salvador: Twentieth Century Ecumenical Missiology: A Historical Study of the Ecumenical Discussions on Mission*, (India: ISPCK Christian SahityaSamithy, 1999), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neil (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517 – 1968*, in *Ecumenical Bearing of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council*, (Geneva: WCC, 1993), 353.



century Evangelicalism. Apart from this historical fact there was a suggestion for the formation of the League of churches or communion of churches by Vissert Hooft, following the formation of the League of Nations in 1919. This dovetailed into the emergence of the Life and Work Movement in 1925 to address the effect of the First World War because there was strong consciousness to evaluate the contributions of churches to the war. So the focus of the movement was to render service in unity in line with its motto 'doctrine divides but service unites'.

All these efforts culminated in the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948. WCC is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ. It seeks to advance towards this unity, as Jesus prayed for his followers, "so that the world may believe." (John 17:21). At inception the WCC brought together 349 churches, denominations and church fellowships in more than countries and territories throughout the world, representing over 560 million Christians and including most of the world's Orthodox churches, scores of Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran and Reformed churches, as well as many United and Independent churches. While the bulk of the WCC's founding churches were European and North American, today most member churches are in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Middle East and the Pacific. Of the 349 WCC member churches, more than one quarter are based in Africa (27%), nearly one-quarter are based in Europe (23%) and one-fifth are in Asia (21%). By church tradition 28% of the WCC member churches are from the Reformed tradition, 16% from the Lutheran tradition and 11% from the Methodist tradition.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is the broadest and most inclusive among the many organized expressions of the modern ecumenical movement, a movement whose goal is Christian unity seeks to fulfill the following;

- Promotion of common witness in work for mission and evangelism;
- Engaging in Christian service by serving human need, breaking down barriers between people, seeking justice and peace, and upholding the integrity of creation; and fostering renewal in unity, worship, mission and service.

### **Ecumenical Development in Nigeria**

With the Great Awakening/Evangelical Revival Movements in Europe which informed the founding of missionary bodies and denominations, the gospel was presented to Africans as dictated from "home" and so we have replicated in Africa a Church that was fragmented right from its inception. Hence Ayegboyin argues that Christianity in Nigeria is a widely scattered family of denominations, all of them professing some kind of faith in Christ.<sup>9</sup> In his taxonomy of churches, he submits that there are probably not less than six main church traditions now in Nigeria. These are the Roman Catholics, the mainline

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<sup>9</sup> Ayegboyin Deji, *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, (Lagos: Wellspring Publication, 2000), 17.



Protestant congregations, the Ethiopian or African Churches, the Indigenous African Churches, the Pentecostals and the neo Pentecostal assemblies.<sup>10</sup>

Taking all these into considerations, an observer of the religious scene in Nigeria would describe Christians as a divided family with conflicting beliefs, standard of beliefs and introversions in character. The Catholic tradition has maintained right from early times the famous axiom: *Extra ecclesias nullasalus*, meaning "Outside the Church there is no salvation".<sup>11</sup> Or, in the words of Origen "Let no one persuade or deceive himself: Outside this house (that is, the Roman Catholic Church) no one will be saved".<sup>12</sup>

In consequence of this position, the Roman Catholic Church refused to participate officially in ecumenical discussion or action; a stance that subsisted till probably late 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria. The implication was that on the mission field, Catholics and Protestants presented two rival social groupings struggling with each other for positions of power and influence. The Catholics accused Protestant missionaries of leading easy lives with their families and more importantly of lacerating each other through many sects.

The Protestants on the other hand maintain that the Catholics have missed the way. They, contrary to the Roman Catholic tradition, insist on the principles of *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), solo Christ (Christ alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone) and the priesthood of all believers to show that they are uniquely on course. On the mission field Protestants accused Catholics of preaching man's word, instead of God's, of despising the dictates of conscience, adoring Mary and indulging in the fetishism of medals.<sup>13</sup>

This division dented the image of Christianity at inception and made it possible for Islam to make significant incursion into the lives of Nigeria. Because Christianity was bereft of one voice, the political powers did not accord it the recognition as it did to Islam. Probably this was one of the reasons why the Colonial government placed embargo on the evangelization of Northern Nigeria by Christian missionaries at that time with the claim that the area was both politically and religiously organized.

Similarly, Hope Waddel consulted with the Baptist at Fernando Po (now Bioko) before moving to Calabar to establish the Presbyterian Mission in 1846.<sup>14</sup> In the 1850s and 1860s, the Wesleyan Methodist Mission At this juncture however, despite the aforementioned, there were noticeable manifestations of synergy among some missionaries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the southern and north central parts of Nigeria which predates the Edinburgh Missionary T Conferences of 1910. Evidences abound that inter-denominational cooperation was displayed by the leading missions in the country. For example, on the Christmas day of 1842, Thomas Birch Freeman - Methodist missionary

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<sup>10</sup> DejiAyegboyin, *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> John Onaiyekan, "Christianity and other Religions: Contemporary Theological Currents in the Catholic Church and Reflections on the Nigerian situation", I.A.B Balogun (ed.) *Religious Understanding and Cooperation in Nigeria*, (Ilorin: NASR, 1978), 168-206.

<sup>12</sup> *In Jesus Nave*, 3:5

<sup>13</sup> Deji Ayegboyin *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> G.E. Igwe., *Church Union in Nigeria*, (Enugu: Ark Publication, 2000), 3.



and Henry Townsend an Anglican missionary worshipped together in the Methodist Church at Badagry.<sup>15</sup>

The Methodist Mission had its station adjacent to the Baptist Mission compound in Lagos. The two bodies developed an intimate relationship to such an extent that Rev. R.H. Stone of the Baptist Mission and his counterpart became closer personal friends. Thus when Rev. Stone went on furlough in 1869, the young and growing Baptist congregations as well as the bamboo chapel of the Mission in Lagos was committed to the care of the Methodists.<sup>16</sup> The very survival of Baptist work during the seven years of the absence of Baptist missionaries in Nigeria was due to the fostering care and loving counsel of the Methodists and Anglicans. For during that period, both Missions exhibited their affection to the plight of their Baptist counterparts. In Lagos, during the time of inertia when the Baptists had no minister, the Wesleyans kept the Baptist pulpit regularly supplied with preachers and even baptized the new converts.

Furthermore, it would be recalled that it was the CMS and Wesleyan missionaries who hosted Rev. Bowen during his eighteenth-month stay in Abeokuta between 1850 and 1851.<sup>17</sup> That afforded him the favourable atmosphere needed to study the Yoruba language that was to help him when he began his full evangelical assignment in Ijaye and Ogbomosho. In the same vein, Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the Church Missionary Society, while returning from a trip of his Missions on the Niger in 1872, passed through Ogbomosho where he found a group of believers worshipping under a large wild fig tree amid ruins of the old Mission station. He was surprised to find believers so far in the interior and upon inquiry was informed that they were Baptists. On reaching Lagos, he informed Mrs. Sarah Harden of his discovery and urged her to write the Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Virginia, for missionary recruits. At about the same time, the Wesleyan missionaries living in Lagos wrote to the Board requesting that Baptist workers be appointed.

Another evidence of the ecumenical nature of the Missions was the relationship that existed between the Anglican and the Roman Catholic Missionaries. Crowther was said to have extended the bond of friendship and brotherhood to the Missionaries of other denominations in his days. Typical of such gesture was his offering of free accommodation to the Catholic Missionaries who arrived at Lokoja in 1884.<sup>18</sup> They were housed at the Holy Trinity Anglican Church as a take-off point for their Mission work. Crowther was said to have been driven by the conviction that working together will speed up the work of Mission, since no single denomination can evangelize the entire nation. This action fostered unity between the Anglicans and the Catholics in Nigeria, a factor that was responsible for Christian unity in later years in the establishment of the Bible Society. The most spectacular of inter-denomination cooperation, understanding and assistance occurred when Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther an Anglican, in 1885 willingly gave the

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<sup>15</sup> M. Oduyoye, *The Planting of Christianity in Yorubaland 1841-1888*. (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1969), 25.

<sup>16</sup> L.M. Dural, *Baptist Mission in Nigeria*, 97.

<sup>17</sup> S.M. Mepaiyeda, "Ecumenism in Mission Churches as a Typology for Unity among the Contemporary Nigerian Christians", in Fatokun S.A. et al (eds) *Ecumenism: The Nigerian Experience*. (Ibadan: End-Time Publishing House Ltd, 2010), 79.

<sup>18</sup> Duke Akamisoko, *Samuel Ajayi Crowther in the Lokoja Area*, (Ibadan: Sefer Books Ltd, 2002), 84.



Roman Catholics under the leadership of Father Joseph Lutz a parcel of land given to him by the Obi of Onitsha.<sup>19</sup>

All the aforementioned relational collaborations among the missions at the inception of Christianity could be referred to as precursors of modern ecumenism in an organised form. This assertion is validated by the fact that majority of the stakeholders that formed ecumenical movements several decades later, came from those missions that later metamorphosed to churches.

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is highly remarkable in the history of practical ecumenism in Nigeria. This could be traced to the efforts of some Protestant missionaries who apparently influenced by the multi-denominational, international conference in Edinburgh, in 1910, organized a conference of missions in Nigeria at the instance of the Scottish Presbyterian Mission at Calabar to discuss missionary matters. The feelings expressed turned out to be in favour of close fellowship and co-operation between the missions. Present at the meeting were Anglicans, Qua Iboe, Primitive Methodist and the United Free Church of Scotland. During the preliminary session at this first ecumenical meeting in 1911, Mr. A. W. Wilkie made this memorable statement:

We are not here primarily to establish in Africa, Presbyterianism, or Methodism or any other ism, but to preach Christ and take a lowly place, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God, in laying the foundation of a Church, which shall not be foreign to the African.<sup>20</sup>

At this meeting there was the quest for unity of action, prayer for unity and exchange of pulpits. This meeting turned out to be a significant event in the history of Church Union Movement in Nigeria. By 1923, the quest for “unity of action” had come to stay. It was borne out of the fact that the “Evangelical Union,” as the Calabar assemblage came to be called, organized a conference, which was wider in scale than that of 1911.<sup>21</sup>

The four bodies, namely Presbyterian, Niger Delta Pastorate, Primitive Methodist and Qua Iboe Mission that formed the Evangelical Union now invited the Yoruba Mission (Anglican); the Wesleyan Methodist, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRCM), the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), the Basel Mission and the British and Foreign Bible Society to be part of the Movement. The Union thus formed resolved to meet annually. In 1931 this union flowered into the prestigious Eastern Regional Committee of Christian Council. This galvanised, some seventeen years later, into the formation of a Christian Council in South-Eastern Nigeria. This was the beginning of organized ecumenism in Nigeria.

A similar milestone was reached in 1929 when the Christian Council of Nigeria was formed with a view to promoting the Great Commission, and work towards ecumenical unity. Its inauguration was a major and monumental event in the history of Christianity in Nigeria with Rev. Canon S.I. Kale (An Anglican Priest, later Bishop) emerging the

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<sup>19</sup> G.E. Igwe., *Church Union in Nigeria*, (Enugu: Ark Publication, 2000), 4.

<sup>20</sup> A.S. Oyalana, “Attempts at Church Ecumenism in Nigeria 1909-1965,” in *Orita*, XVIII, 1988, 38-39.

<sup>21</sup> Deji Ayegboyin, *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 21.



President at inception.<sup>22</sup> Initially comprising between 10 and 13 members, CCN expressed functions included:

To foster and express the fellowship and unity of the CCN, to foster the realisation of its oneness with the Church throughout the world and to keep in touch with the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches in Geneva.<sup>23</sup>

Section 2c states further its two vital duties:

(1) To serve as the medium through which the Church may speak on such matters as social, moral, religious, educational and the like as (they) affect the Christian course (or cause?) in Nigeria and where necessary to take action;

(2) To discuss all matters tending to affect the stability and expansion of Christianity in Nigeria and to foster studies, conferences and other activities to this end.

By 1935, the Eastern Nigeria regional Committee of the Christian Council of Nigeria produced a draft Basis of Union which drew very much from South Indian Scheme. It was in the spirit of Church Union that the Anglican, Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches teamed up to bring their ministerial training together under one roof in 1948 with the establishment of Trinity College which was initially situated at Awka but later moved to Umuahia, a more central location in 1950. For the entire nation, a committee for Church Union was set up in 1947 and the cooperating Churches were the Anglican, Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches.

The scheme, despite denominational differences among the cooperating Churches, almost sailed through. All was set for the inauguration of the proposed Church Union on 11th December 1965 but suddenly, the entire project collapsed. Since then efforts at Church Union in Nigeria have been elusive. Each of the cooperating Churches did not only retreat into its shell, to continue its missionary work, but the situation also led to distrust and competition for ascendancy among the cooperating Churches.

It suffices to say that the failure of the Church Union project was caused by combination of factors. Prominent among the factors was selfishness on the part of some ministers of the cooperating Churches as regards sharing of episcopal offices among them; the fear of losing high status previously held as well as those who felt sidetracked and unrecognized in the new scheme by way of higher appointment worked tenaciously to ensure that the Church Union project emerged still born.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, despite the abortive efforts at instituting an organic ecumenism through the church union project, on the initiative of Christian Council of Nigeria, various cooperative projects were undertaken which in one way or another brought the Churches together. The first of these was in the field of education in which a need for a common policy in the vast educational commitments of the Churches had been the immediate inspiration of the founding of the Christian Council itself. The West led the way when the

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<sup>22</sup> J. Atuluku, *An Introduction to Ecumenism and Religious Dialogue*. (Abuja: Dolie Prints, 2014). 37.

<sup>23</sup> Deji Ayegboyin, *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> J.O. Adeloye, "One Hundred Years after Edinburg Missionary Conference: The Journey so far with Nigerian Churches" in Fatokun S.A. et al (eds) *Ecumenism: The Nigerian Experience*, (Ibadan: End-Time Publishing House Ltd, 2010), 6.



United Missionary College (UMC) for the training of women teachers was established in Ibadan in 1928 by the joint effort of Methodists and Anglicans. In Lagos area, there followed the establishment of the Protestant Teacher Training College for men at Yaba and a Secondary Commercial School at Apapa in both of which Baptists also participated. In Igbobi College at Yaba, Methodists and Anglicans cooperated to establish the college. The East had the Women's training college at Umuahia which all the three uniting Churches supported and a Union Secondary School for girls. Other cooperative efforts include the trade schools at Abeokuta and Aba and the Rural Training Centre, all these enterprises were established by the congregations of the uniting churches.<sup>25</sup>

Though all the larger Churches have their hospitals and small medical units including some quite outstanding leprosy work, medical work had not been quite outstanding Christian enterprise in Nigeria as that of education. The one major united enterprise in this area is the Queen Elizabeth Hospital at Umuahia.

Another obvious field for concerted effort and action was the production of literature. The then CCN literature Secretary, Canon A.J. Stephens, have invaluable service to the Nigeria Church Union Committee and its Standing Committee as its editor, and the Daystar Press of the CCN founded in 1960 undertook all its work of publication. Other cooperative activities can be seen from the staff of the CCN which includes a Social Action Secretary and A Visual Aids Secretary. The Study Centre which was at Ibadan where members of many Churches in many walks of life could come together to confer on common problems, is another such joint venture.

The most important development of all is that of united ministerial training. This began at Awka in 1948 for Methodists, Presbyterians and Anglicans of the Eastern sector of Nigeria and moved to the present site at Trinity College, Umuahia, in 1950. In the West, previous Methodist and Anglican institutions combined in 1958 to form Immanuel College of Theology which after occupying temporary quarters at Kudeti, Ibadan, moved in 1964 to its present site next door to the University of Ibadan. For the United Church, it will be of great importance that the younger generation of its ministers be trained together. The joint theological colleges have since served as fertile grounds for ecumenical training, practice and sharing of resources.

Other cooperative enterprises of the CCN through mutual trust, understanding and recognition of others included the Trade Schools opened at Abeokuta in 1945 and Aba in 1946; a Rural Training Centre opened at Asaba in 1946. Its Evangelistic Campaigns through engagement in Islam in Africa Project (PROCMURA) is aimed at helping Christians to witness to Muslims. Its Social Action Department deals with issues on social, economic, and community developments. There are also the Home and Family Life Department, Institute of Church and Society and Commission on Relief and Rehabilitation. In addition was the establishment of inter-denomination churches which included All Saints Church, Jericho, Ibadan; Immanuel Church (Ashi, Ibadan); Immanuel College Chapel (Methodist & Anglican) and Chapel of the Resurrection (University of Ibadan).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> S.M. Mepaiyeda, "Ecumenism in Mission Churches as a Typology for Unity among the Contemporary Nigerian Christians", in Fatokun S.A. et al (eds) *Ecumenism: The Nigerian Experience*, (Ibadan: End-Time Publishing House Ltd, 2010), 79.

<sup>26</sup> Deji Ayegboyin, *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience*, 23.



With the passage of time the impact of the CCN became dwindled and in the face of lack of effective common platform by the various Christian bodies in the country, each denomination acted independently until the formation of Christian Association of Nigeria which emergence was politically and apologetically motivated. The association resulted from the meeting of a group of Church leaders of diverse denominations at the National Catholic Secretariat, Lagos, on August 27, 1976. CAN is designed to defend the general interest of Christians in the nation as it serves as the watchdog of the spiritual and moral welfare of the nation.

According to Enweron, what is now known as Christian Association of Nigeria was an adaptation of Christian Association of the North formed in 1975 amidst Sardauna's phenomenon in the area. He puts the claim thus:

To a large extent, what is known today as CAN was started in the North by Christian who saw what the Sardauna was doing. He wanted to Islamize the North and the Christian in the North came together as a group to resist the Sardauna's Mission.<sup>27</sup>

Its Constitution spells out its objectives thus; "To promote understanding, peace and unity among the various peoples and strata of society in Nigeria through the propagation of the gospel".

Its Membership comprises five main blocks: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigerian (CPFN) / Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) / *Tarayya Ekklesiyoyin Kristi a Nigeria* (TEKAN) and Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC). Virtually all Christian denominations in Nigeria have today come under one umbrella, CAN. Through its national and state leaderships, CAN has over the years expressed the desires, anxieties and hopes of Christians. The association's pronouncements have gone a long way to call genuinely concerned people to reason in the area of dialogue, evangelism, education, social, economics, religious and sensitive political issues.

Above all, the awareness of a common challenge to Christian mission has brought about the cooperation of other denominations with the Anglican and Methodist churches. For example, the recent wave of persecution of Christians in various parts of Nigeria has brought about some forced unity against a common enemy. Consequently, the Christian Association of Nigeria became more virile and alert, howbeit, politically.

### **Observation and Recommendations**

It is a known fact that today some church leaders see their membership in ecumenical bodies as a way of realising their selfish ambition and promoting their denominational interest. This has serous negative impact on the ideals of ecumenism. The largesse of annual pilgrimage being sponsored by the government and other monetary gains that accrue to ecumenical bodies have created rivalry among Christians in the country. We have records of some Christian leaders whose rapport with the political powers became a cog in the wheel of ecumenical activities in Nigeria. This is an aberration to the principles of pure ecumenism. We should remember that we cannot serve God and mammon. Ecumenism leaders are supposed to behave like apologists defending the cause of

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<sup>27</sup> J. Atuluku, *An Introduction to Ecumenism and Religious Dialogue*, 42.



Christianity and advocating for justice for the downtrodden rather than serving as stooges to political or traditional rulers.

It is also observed that many Christians still show apathy to ecumenism and advanced various reasons to support this attitude but such people need to be reminded the benefits of ecumenism thus: it fosters unity – united we stand, divided we fall; promotes Christian brotherliness; serves as a platform to correct heresies and excesses of some churches; removes undue competition among churches; serves as a pressure group in protecting the rights of Christians; opened inter - religious dialogue between Muslims and Christians to fashion ways of living together in harmony; helped and still helps to heal past wounds and scars created by sectarian nature of Christianity and led to the conduct of interdenominational worship especially on issues of national, state and local importance. Through ecumenical bodies e.g. CAN, Christians have presented a united voice on national burning issues such as: Nigerian membership in the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), the passage of Sharia Law, homosexuality, abortion and most recently Government's imbalanced policy on CRK in education curriculum etc.

This paper therefore recommends that the activities of ecumenical bodies in Nigeria should be mission oriented in line with the vision of founding fathers. They should be more concerned with the advancement of Christianity by deploying all their resources to the evangelisation that is laced with socio-economic programmes. This will not only impact lives in the society but present Christianity as a practical and living religion.

### **Conclusion**

The present disunity among some denominations is absurd and scandalous in the face of the pastoral prayer of Jesus in John 17 verse 21 which is imperative for all Christians. We should note that the early church was not only all about diversity, but also there were elements of unity. The unity of the Apostolic College (The 12 apostles remained united as a reference body of the Christian communities); the reality of tradition, Eucharist and sound doctrine; the affirmation of our faith in the Creeds-belief in the Church universal which is most widely used in the Christian liturgy and the Confession of the Unity of the Church as espoused in the Epistle to the Ephesians: "There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (4. 1-6).

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