

MISSIO DEI AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN AFRICA: A REFLECTION ON THE METAPHOR OF COMMUNITY¹

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of the missio Dei as it affects the Christian missionary enterprise in Africa. It offers a brief overview of the theocentric understanding of mission as a holistic approach that does not dichotomize between humanity and creation but rather affirms the wholeness of existence in the African primal world view. Secondly, the implication of the missio Dei for the ethno-religious diversity in Africa and the Nigerian nation in particular, is explored. Thirdly, a call for a new missional hermeneutics, especially on the metaphor of community, is advocated. The essay argues that the way to proceed is by focusing on Jesus, the heartbeat of whose ministry was reconciliation, compassionate response to human needs, and whose actions show forth the horizon of the coming world of shalom – justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: *Missio Dei*, Ethnic Diversity, Church, Community

Introduction

Because of their importance to this paper, we wish to start with two scriptural references. In John 13 verses 34 and 35, Jesus is quoted to have said to the disciples:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love another.

In his Epistle to the Church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul wrote:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ...and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors... (2 Cor. 5:17-20 NIV).

¹ Like Israel of old and the New Testament *ekklesia*, today's Church is missiologically and theologically called to be a new and alternative community for God. In *The People Called*, Hanson (1987:69) reminds us that psychological or sociological methods alone are inadequate to uncover the essential key to the early Israelite notion of community.

It was not the deliberations of Hebrew philosophers over *summum bonum* of all life that issued forth in the founding principles of the Hebrew community, but the encounter with the God who delivered slaves from bondage. Israel understood community essentially as a response to God's gracious act of salvation. Israel was called into existence as a people when it was called forth from bondage to be a nation of priests consecrated to God's redemptive purposes.

The challenge to the Church in Africa is to equip its members to offer effective ministries to deal with endemic ethnic and religious conflicts, and to create harmony out of the continent's sociopolitical disorder. This will require a reconfiguration of our notion of community which has been dealt with by Onwunta (2006) in his doctoral dissertation, *Ethnicity and Missional Strategies within the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria*.

From the above texts, it is clear that the theme of love and the concept of reconciliation were at the heart of the mission that Jesus inaugurated and Paul propagated during the early days of the Christian movement. Thus it can be argued that from the outset reconciliation propelled by love is the crux of the mission of God in the world. However, this is not the way the Church has always lived and expressed the Gospel, especially in Africa. To a large extent, Africans experienced the Gospel not only as a liberating and reconciling tool but also as a tool of colonialism, racism, classism, exclusivism (Phiri 2004:21) and schism. In Nigeria, the plethora of Christian denominations attests to the sense of division and rivalry that came with the transmission of the Gospel by the early missionaries. Thus coinciding with the ethnic factions that were already existing in the land, Christianity's denominationalism seemed to have provided an impetus to the unending divisions and jealousies that have continued to haunt the various groups in the country. There is today little doubt that this scenario has affected the mission of the Church and raised the challenge for an authentic mission that focuses on reconciliation rather than on division and competition.

In the light of this state of affairs, contemporary African theologians are thus opting for the understanding of mission as "Church with others", and "*Missio Dei*" as expounded by David Bosch (1991). This new understanding is an attempt to locate mission in Africa both as a holistic and an engaging enterprise. Therefore the aim of this paper is to highlight the point that, in the African setting, it is through an African reading of the Scriptures, particularly in African languages, and by paying attention to the resonances of the biblical categories into the African primal world-view, that the desacralising impact of the Gospel can be experienced afresh (Bediako 2004:104). Moreover, theocentricism in mission has to replace ecclesiocentrism so that there can be a community of reconciled people in the continent. Furthermore, this paper highlights the importance of acknowledging that all humans, regardless of their language or tribe, are created in the image of God. It is an acknowledgement that requires a process of change that analyses the African worldview and how people's identities are constructed, especially in communities. In this paper, we have chosen to highlight how our concept of community which derives from our ethnic worldviews have shaped our identities in the Church and enhanced our sense of ethnic solidarity while constituting a hindrance to the *missio Dei*.

Mission as *Missio Dei*

Martin Kahler said "Mission is the mother of theology" (Bosch 1991:16; Guder 2000:21). Guder explains how, in 1952, Barth drew the attention of the Church to the fact that mission is not that of the Church but God's. This insight brought a major shift from ecclesiocentric missiology to theocentric missiology. Guder (1998:4) explains it further:

This ecclesiocentric understanding of mission has been replaced during this century by a profoundly theocentric reconceptualization of Christian mission. We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather mission is the result of God's initiative rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation. "Mission" means 'sending' and is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's action in history...God's character and purpose as sending or missionary God redefines our understanding of the Trinity.

This means that theology should be practised, not with an eye on the Church and its actions, but with the purpose of discerning God's will. God is a sending, missional God who reaches out to the entire creation. Bosch (1991:391) explains:

Since God's concern is for the entire world, this should also be the scope of the *missio Dei*. It affects all people in all aspects of their existence. Mission is God's turning to the world in respect of creation, care, redemption and consummation.

Thus a holistic approach to mission would not dichotomize but rather see humanity and creation as belonging to a whole. Hence, we notice that in Africa there is no division between the sacred and the secular. In his book, *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre*, Onuora Ossie Enekwe (1987:49) draws attention to the fact that:

Wholeness is an important aspect of African religion, and this is particularly relevant to Igbo as well as other religions where the sacred is manifested not so much by separation as by unity. Thus man finds his fulfilment not as a separate individual but as a participant in a family or community...the whole of life is sacred for it is saturated with being.

Indeed, social life is at the same time penetrated and permeated by religious life. As Mbiti (1969:2) once put it:

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the House of Parliament.

It is common knowledge that in traditional African society, there is an underlying commonality among the traditional religious practices of the people. Also, there is a regular rhythm in the general pattern of the people's beliefs and practices. This regular rhythm is the universal belief in the Supreme Being as an integral part of the African world view and practical religion. E. B. Idowu (1973:104), an accomplished African scholar of Yoruba extraction, posits thus:

We find that in Africa, the real cohesive factor of religion is the living God and that without this factor, all things would fall to pieces. And it is on this ground especially this identical concept that we can speak of the religion of African² in the singular.

It would only amount to an effort in futility to attempt separating the things of religion from those of government, daily life, civil ceremonies social structure of birth, marriage and death. Revealing the extent of this homogeneity among the Yoruba of Nigeria, Idowu (1962:6) also remarked that:

The real keynote of the life of the Yoruba is neither their noble ancestry nor in the deeds of their past heroes. The keynote of their life is their religion. In all things, they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and the all-governing principle of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life belongs to the Deity... through all the circumstances of life, through all its changing scenes, its joys and troubles, it is the Deity who is in control.

This is why, for instance, a casual glance at the religious map of Nigeria will appear to confirm the impression that the areas of greatest Christian influence overlap almost exactly with those of primal religions and cultures. In the words of Sanneh (1989:182), 'this overlap is for reasons other than historical coincidence.'

Furthermore, Sanneh (1989:182) draws attention to the fact that one of the first and most detailed accounts of the connection between African culture and the success of Christian religious activity is the work of John Peel (1968), a British sociologist. In his

² While we do not intend to enter into the debate about whether the nomenclature should be African traditional religion or religions, we would say with a measure of confidence and without apology that religion permeates the African life and activity. And this is our concern in this paper.

book *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, Peel provides an articulate and lucid account of the Yoruba appropriation of Christianity, showing the continuity of indigenous Yoruba themes in the new Christian setting. Peel sets the stage with a description of Yoruba society before going on to consider in detail the rise of African Churches and the role of certain religious subjects such as prayer and vision, medicine, and holiness. Next he explores the activities of the new Churches and the role of praying bands and other charismatic aspects. Against this rich religious background, the author delves into the sociological basis of the new Churches. Sanneh (1989:182-183) explains:

In the patient and open-minded way in which Peel analyzes the phenomenon of prophet movements, we learn a great deal about necessary backup of indigenous culture whose insights and values have persisted into the new religion, with the mutual transformation of numerous common elements. Peel is rare among social scientists in conceding the primary importance of indigenous religion in the Yoruba social system, and instead of seeking to emasculate it into sociological abstraction, infers from it details of social behaviours and political organisation. As a result he is able to present a coherent account of the interrelationship between the various parts of the Yoruba social and religious world...

On the other hand, it is this type of sociological enquiry into the Igbo religious world that, for instance, led the Scripture translators to adopt the name of the Supreme Being of the Igbo, *Chineke* or *Chukwu* for the *deus revelatus* of the Bible. Thus, the very possibility of Scripture translation, as well as the elements that come into play through it, demonstrates that an African 'incarnation' of the Faith is valid too:

Translation assumed that the abstract Word of God would find its true destiny when embodied in concrete local idiom, lending credence to the theological insight that the Word of God has always carried the burden of the incarnation, and that its historical manifestation in Jesus Christ concentrated and made visible a process that is occurring throughout history (Sanneh 1983:165-171).

Sanneh's description of this whole process is the comprehensive term, *Missio Dei*, the encompassing divine initiative through the pre-Christian tradition, the historical missionary transmission and indigenous assimilation. Sanneh (1983:165-171) posits:

Missio Dei sustained traditional religious enterprise by bringing about a convergence with Christianity ... so that *Missio Dei* activated by the stimulus of historical contact with the West, has fused with local religious enterprise and acquired a concrete reality.

This implies that the Church does not limit God in doing his mission in any local context but instead facilitates it. Bosch (1991:519) puts it thus:

...mission is quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus ... wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.

One may then argue that if the mission of Jesus is a liberating mission, the incarnational witness of the Church therefore ought to bring liberation rather than bondage to the world. So in practical terms, we may further ask: What then is the role of the Church and of believers who ought to be the new humanity in the world? What is the mission of the Church and believers in Jesus Christ who now live in societies of multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic groups like in Nigeria? How can the redeeming mind of Christ in the Scriptures be enabled, through the medium of mother tongue Scriptures, to penetrate, for instance, into the ethnic Efik/Igbo consciousness to tackle the problem of ethnicity at its subliminal source?

In his book *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, Bediako (2004:104) states:

In the African setting, it is through an African reading of the Scriptures, particularly in African languages, and by paying attention to the resonances of the biblical categories into the African primal world-view, that the desacralising impact of the Gospel is experienced afresh. Since the roots of sacralisation in African tradition lie in *religion*, it is in terms of *religion* that it can be adequately encountered. It is as *religion* that the Christian Gospel is able to meet the African world in depth.

In the Nigerian context, for instance, this means that there must be a new configuration of community that engages the people's primal world-view which visualises the community as "a closed, sacral, tribal unit at the head of which is the sacral monarchy, that is, the chief who is the mediator between the tribe, the Supreme Being and the cosmic powers" (Crafford 1996:5). Thus, the Igbo concept of *Umunna* (*kinsmen*) which refers only to the descendants from the same biological father would have to assume a new social meaning according to the Scriptures. In this connection, the Church in Nigeria and in the entire continent faces a challenge to raise to consciousness in the wider society, the connection between the Church's message of righteousness, love, justice, and the search for sustainable unity. This implies that the Church has to be a new community whose members (that is, *Umunna* or kinsmen) are not just those who "... become God's children by natural means, that is, by being born as the children of a human father; [but] God is their Father" (John 1:13 GNB).

This type of configuration is both urgent and demanding on the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria – a Church that lives in a context of ethnic and religious conflicts (Onwunta 2006). For as the Church carries the burdens of a divided people in its membership and also struggles to grow in its mission, a missional revisioning is imperative. Thus the burden of division and disunity impels it to be a new missional community characterized by the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. Undeniably, the Church is challenged to be an example of the new humanity that God has created through the Cross of Jesus Christ. Bediako (2004:106) explicates:

As the first-fruits of the new humanity, created through the reconciling – by the Cross – of hostile groups (Ephesians 2:14), the Church must manifest the victory of the Cross in the concrete realities of [its] existence in the society, and demonstrate that [it] has begun to be liberated from bondage to the 'powers' that rule human existence and the cosmic order in that context. Christian conversion and Christian conviction need to find concrete expression in relation to the 'elemental forces' – ethnicity, race, social class, culture and customs – that shaped individual and social identity and destiny in the older order.

Engaging the elemental forces in order to reorder and reshape the present individual and social identity requires an understanding of the context in which the Church operates.

Ethno-religious Diversity and the Nigerian Nation

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation with 140 million people³ and the ninth largest supplier of oil in the world. The population is constituted by more than 350 ethnic/linguistic groups (Onwunta 2006:76). Geo-linguistically, there are three national languages spoken in

³ Note: estimates for the country explicitly take into account the effects of excess mortality due to AIDS; this can result in lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality and death rates, lower population and growth rates, and changes in the distribution of population by age and sex than would otherwise be expected (July 2006 est.). See The World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ni.html> accessed on 13/4/2007.

the different regions of Nigeria – Hausa in the North, Yoruba in the West and (South-West), and Igbo in the East (and South-East). The religious landscape is both complex and complicated: the nation is about equally divided between Christians and Muslims. According to Jenkins (2002:173), estimates of the exact balance vary: some give Islam a 50-40 predominance; others suggest that each faith claims about 45 percent of Nigerians, with the remaining 10 percent following traditional religions. Complicating this picture is that the religious groups are not equally distributed: the north of the country is chiefly Muslim, the east is largely Christian, so each group can aspire to impose its standards in the respective areas. This distribution also means that, as in Sudan, religious alliances coincide with ethnic groupings, the northern Hausa are solidly Muslim, the Eastern Igbo are Christian, and the Yoruba are equally divided between the two faiths – Muslim Christian rivalries have often led to violence.⁴

Imam Sani Isah of Kaduna's Waff Road Mosque, a local leader in Christian-Muslim relations, likes to say that from a religious point of view, Nigeria is Saudi Arabia and the Vatican rolled into one. In other words, it's a volatile mix of tens of millions of highly motivated Muslims, and a roughly equal number of devout Christians. There's really no such thing there as the spiritually lukewarm; according to the latest *Pew Global Survey*, 92 percent of Nigerians regard religion as a "very important" force in life <http://ncrcafe.org/node/966> ; <http://ncrcafe.org/node/967>

Among other things, Nigeria is destined to be a Catholic powerhouse in the 21st century. It will be the ninth largest Catholic country in the world in 2050, with 47 million members, and because Nigerians speak English, they're poised to be the "voice" of African Catholicism in the global media culture. But Onaiyekan, the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria, has defined Nigeria as "the greatest Islamo-Christian nation on earth," by which he meant that it's the country with the greatest concentration of both Muslims and Christians within the same boundaries. While the two groups tend to be regionally segregated – Muslims in the north, Christians in the south – they also live side-by-side in significant numbers all across the country, making Nigeria a unique laboratory for the possibilities of Christian/Muslim co-existence <http://ncrcafe.org/node/966> ; <http://ncrcafe.org/node/967>

Politically, Nigeria was put together as one nation by the British at the beginning of the 20th century when Lord Frederick Lugard, a British colonial administrator, and the Colonial Office in London, amalgamated the then northern and southern protectorates of Nigeria in the year 1914. "On this date, the Nigerian nation was created. Before then, there was no entity known as Nigeria (Okafor 1997:1)". Nigeria became thus an amalgam of many ethnic groups.

Apart from the aforementioned major ethnic groups, there are other ethnic nationalities called the minorities. The more prominent among the minority ethnic groups are the Tiv, the Edo, the Efik, the Ibibio and the Ijaw. The Efik are mainly found in Calabar, which is located along the Lower Guinea Coast in the Bight of Biafra, separated from the Bight of Benin by the Niger River Delta. It was among these people and in this area that Scottish

⁴ In 1966, tens of thousands of Christian Igbo were massacred in the north, forcing survivors to flee to safe areas. These events strengthened the Muslim hegemony in the north, and reduced the remaining Christians to clear minority status. Between 1967 and 1970, the Christian East tried unsuccessfully to secede from Nigeria, leading to a bloody civil war that claimed perhaps a million lives. Although religion played an important part in detonating the war, the conflict was not a pure Muslim-Christian affair. Christians formed perhaps half of the federal Nigerian army, and the federal leader (Yakubu Gowon) was a well known lay Christian. But the destruction visited upon the secessionist east, then known as Biafra, was a catastrophe for the country's Christian population including the Presbyterian church of Nigeria whose bulk of membership resided and still reside in this part of Nigeria (Jenkins 2002:173).

missionaries arrived in 1846 to establish the Church that later came to be known as the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria. Though the Ibibio share geographical proximity and cultural affinity with the Efik, “it is worth noting that the establishment of Presbyterianism among the Ibibio did not take place until about fifty years from 1846” (Udo 1996:29). Meanwhile, in 1888, the Scottish Mission moved with the Gospel into Unwana, which is a neighbouring Ibo area, thus making it the second ethnic group to welcome the Scottish Mission into Nigeria. Of the many ethnic groups in Nigeria, it is only among the Ibo (a major ethnic group) and Efik/Ibibio (two minority groups) both located in South Eastern Nigeria that Presbyterian Church has concentrated its work for almost 160 years. With the infighting between these groups in the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, the challenge is how to evolve a missional strategy that can enable the Church reach the other ethnic nationalities and language groups that constitute the majority of the Nigerian population.

A Call for new Missional Hermeneutics in Gospel and Culture Engagement

David Bosch (1991) has said that there is no “cultureless gospel”. Therefore African theologians endorse African theology’s initiatives of taking African culture seriously when doing theology. However, we should also be wary of treating African culture as being at par with the Gospel. We need to acknowledge that African culture, like all cultures of the world, is a construction of our communities. And just as communities create cultures, cultures also determine the identities of those communities that create them. Consequently, communities are not usually enthusiastic in accepting particular cultural identities which they do not consider to be their own creation. In other words, people are likely to view others who look different from them to be outsiders while those who look like them are considered insiders and members their community. What this points to is the increasing awareness that the intra- and the inter Church conflicts in many parts of the African continent are result of the little or poor understanding that “the basis of a Christian’s self-identity is essentially religious, not national, social, or cultural in the narrow sense” (Bediako 2001:4). Thus in the Church what counts for some people is not one’s membership in the Church but his or her ethnic affiliation. This makes it difficult for people to have the right relationships with self, with others, with creation and with God. Therefore, we need a new image and model of the Church which is not construed as extensions of the ethnic ghettos. African theologians have to respond to the challenging call to – and the concrete reality of – a new missional hermeneutics of the Church as a community that engenders peace, unity and reconciliation both within the Church and the larger society. This concrete reality is the translatability of the Gospel. And if it is translatability that produces indigeneity, then a truly indigenous [and missional] Church should also be a translating Church, reaching continually to the heart of the culture of its context and incarnating the translating Word (Bediako 1997:122). In our African context, this would mean a new image of the Church as a missional model.

Images and Models of the Church: Rethinking the Metaphor of Community

From his baptism to his temptations, Jesus demonstrated that his mission was to embody the reign of God through living under its authority. According to Guder (1998:103), “The reign of God was present in a radically new way in Jesus because he lived trustingly and loyally under the gracious rule of his father as none had lived before. The Church shares this calling with Jesus, though; its vocation is corporate, not individual. The point is that Jesus, the one who represented Israel, is now represented by the new Israel, the Church.”

To the question: What is the Church? Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp (1993:53) state:

The Church is not a club where people with common hobbies meet. It is not a voluntary association (such as the South African or Nigerian Medical Association) in which members guard and tend to their shared interests. Nor is it simply a helping organization, an Alcoholic Anonymous that people seek out after they determine they have an unmanageable problem. People choose to join AA or a civic club but, in that sense no one really "joins" the Church. The members of the Church are called, gathered together by the God who showed himself in Jesus Christ.

But is it actually possible to grasp at once all the images in the New Testament that refer, in one way or another, to the Church? The records in the New Testament show that there are several images and metaphors used to describe the Church. Minear (1960:28) suggests that "conservatively estimated, there are more than eighty of them, but this number might readily be increased ... if the various Greek words were counted separately." In the same vein, Kalu (2005:12) submits that there are over 96 images of the Church in the New Testament covering a wide range of metaphors drawn from the physical structure of the human body, from the mineral world, the animal world, the vegetable world and the world of nature. Beyond the biblical images are the myriad denominations. The ecclesiological map looks like the shell of a tortoise (Kalu 2005:12). Thus the diversity of images reflects the truth that the Church's nature, ministry and organisation is multifaceted (Van Gelder 2000:107).

Avery Dulles had earlier advanced contemporary ecclesiology with his identification and description of five models of the Church, each of which emphasises one dimension of ecclesial life. Together these models help us to appreciate more deeply the depth of the Church as mystery:

Each model of the church has its weaknesses; no one should be canonised as the measure of all the rest... they should be made to interpenetrate and mutually qualify one another. None, therefore, should be interpreted in an exclusivistic sense, so as to negate what the other approved models have to teach us (1974:36).

According to IHM (2004:215), the model most familiar to most believers is the church as institution, with its visible leaders and hierarchical structure, its dogma, canon law and sanctions. But, thankfully, the church is much more than its structure and rules. It is also a mystical communion of believers, bound together in the life of Christ Jesus in the power of the Spirit. It is a *Sacrament*, a real presence of Christ in the world, bringing hope and salvation. It is especially through the sacraments that this model comes to life.

Two additional models stress the Church's engagement with the world. As a *herald* of the Gospel, it proclaims the Good News of the reign of God alive in the world and the offer of new life given by Jesus to all. The Church is also a *servant*, on its knees after the example of Jesus (Jn13:1-15), seeking to bind up what is broken and helping to bring justice, peace and reconciliation to a divided and suffering world.

Dulles later modified his thinking and proposed that the Church is the "community of disciples":

The theme of discipleship suggests a more modest concept of church than some others we have mentioned (perfect society, Body of Christ, People of God, sacrament of unity...). The disciple is by definition one who has not yet arrived...it is to be still on the way to full conversion... (Dulles 1982:10).

This has important implications for the ministry in our context since “discipleship is the one common factor uniting all Christians with one another (regardless of tribe or language), for no one of them is anything but a follower and a learner in relation to Jesus Christ (IHM 2004:216). As disciples, all must help, using their talents for the benefit of the rest. All are ministers and all are ministered to (Dulles 1982:12). Also, the community of disciples must be a “*discipleship of equals*”. This equality is the basis for true community, *koinonia* that we are invited to embrace and live in.

Ecclesial Communities as inclusive and life-giving *koinonia* in Nigeria

One of the points that has been argued in this paper is that religion in Africa is not primarily for the individual but for the community of which the individual is a part. Indigenous African society does not contain non-religious people because for the African, being implies participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and the festivals of the community. A person cannot detach himself or herself from his or her religion and still be considered human. Therefore to be without religion is to be severed from one’s roots, foundation and security, kinship and that group that makes a person aware of his or her own existence (Onwunta 1993:21). Furthermore, to be a member of the religious community is to be an active participant and not just a spectator in community. This is the rationale behind the active involvement of men and women in the practice of the traditional religion.

Given the fact that the traditional African seeks to live in harmony with his or her God and the other deities and the ancestors from where he or she derives peace, prosperity, procreation and danger, healing, justice and the like, it follows that as of necessity, he or she must develop ways and means by which these could be continually experienced and expressed. The family is the primary place where these ideas are first developed and then translated to the larger society.

In this regard, the Church is the new family where the Christian begins to learn what it means to be a child of God. It is the centre of character formation from where the Christian launches out and begins to participate in God’s mission in the world. Namsoon Kang (2004:5), a Korean theologian, has argued that:

If mission is God’s mission, then missional activity takes its character from the nature of God. This is both simple and complex. It is simple because it is not the doctrine of the church, the polity of its governance, the well-being of our social class, the values of our dominant culture, the benefit of one’s race, gender or sexual orientation that shapes mission; it is the nature of God. It is unfathomably complex because to move from the church to God simply pushes the substances of discussion from what is the mission of the church to our bias of what God is like and intends for creation.

This has implications for what we do in the Church and our various communities in the name of God, especially with regards to leadership in Africa. About two decades ago, the celebrated Nigerian novelist, Achebe (1983:1) in *The Trouble with Nigeria* lamented:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership... the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility and to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.

What Achebe identifies as the acute problem of the nation is invariably the problem of the Church too. Many leaders in the Church are more of ethnic champions than servant leaders in God’s vineyard. Highlighting the dearth of servant leadership in Africa, Hendriks (2004:136) hit the nail on the head:

Misuse of power is endemic in Africa. Presidents want to remain in office for life. They cling to power and simply change the constitution of a country to do so. Church leaders should set an example by demonstrating another kind of leadership: servant leadership and humility.

But what are the indications that Church leaders will be able to rise to this challenge? How can we have servant leaders in Africa? Bediako (2004:102) reminds us that “by the close association of religious (sacred) authority and political power in the person of the traditional ruler, African traditional societies were ‘ontocracies’, sacralising authority and power with the effectual integration of altar and throne.” Our primal world-view conceives of everything, including religion, as power. This explains why many ethnic leaders in the Church still think of leadership as power and not necessarily as service.

Commenting on the testament of Jesus to his Church on the eve of his passion (see John 13:1-15), Teresa Okure of Nigeria (1990) has drawn attention to the deeper meaning we should perceive from the style of leadership that Jesus exercised and enjoined on his followers. Jesus’ preference for the life of service and the imagery of the “waiter at table” are meant to introduce a new understanding of the way in which ministry is perceived in the Church-community. In the Jewish culture as well as among Africans, “cooking and serving food is seen as woman’s work, not a man’s work.” Consequently, Jesus’ imagery of leadership “was not only brand new, it was fundamentally counter-cultural (both politically and religiously) and even offensive to the dignity of the man” (Uzukwu 1999:133). But the deeper meaning that Okure wants us to see in Jesus’ predilection for this imagery is the quality of “mothering” or “caring” which should dominate Christian ministry:

If Jesus freely chose to associate himself with the food-serving ministry of women in the Gospels, it is because his ministry, his life-giving leadership ministry, has a fundamental, natural resemblance to the specificity that is woman’s, seen as “mother of all the living” (Gen. 3:20). Because ultimately “As a woman feeds her child with her own blood and milk, so too Christ himself continually feeds those whom he has begotten with his own blood (Okure 1990:41).

Of course the historical Jesus was neither a woman nor a biological mother. But the African women and especially African feminist theologians like Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Isabel A Phiri emphasize the need to present “mothering as a positive strategy for community life that is to be practised by all women *and all men*.” This is brought out in the Akan Proverb which says, “It is not only a woman who gives birth, a man does also.” This fundamental value of caring or loving is a gift of the self which Jesus instills at the very heart of the community and its leadership. Apparently, it is quite antithetical to the desperate quest for, and flagrant abuse of, power which is rampant in the Church and society in Africa.

We should therefore be at pains to confront this power concept of our primal world view with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Of course this engagement requires focusing on Jesus who summoned a community of people who were simply known as disciples and servants – a band of people that became the alternative community that “turned their world upside down”. Becoming an alternative community is the viable way that the Church in Africa can position itself to stem the tide of ethnocentrism, corruption, HIV/AIDS and all the vices that are threatening the very fabric of our existence as a continent.

Conclusion

We started by exploring love and reconciliation as the crux of the missionary activity of God to which the Church is called to participate. We discovered that the primary essence of the *Missio Dei* is for the wholeness and renewal of humanity and God’s entire creation – a

community where everybody and everything belongs. As a countercultural community, the Church is challenged not only to appreciate the “wholeness element” embedded in our precarious worldview but also to engage in our inherited warped understanding of the concept of community. The way to proceed is by focusing on Jesus, the heartbeat of whose ministry was reconciliation, compassionate response to human needs, and whose actions show forth the horizon of the coming world of *shalom* – peace, justice, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Guder 1998:105). This is what it means for the Church to be an alternative community in Nigeria and Africa today.

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