

CHRISTIANITY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN IGBOLAND: A FOCUS ON THE ANGLICAN CHURCH IN AWKA

AFUNUGO, KENECHI NNAEMEKA

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RELATIONS

NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY AWKA

Email: nk.afunugo@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

The study examines the contributions of the Anglican Church to community development in Awka Town. The study employs both the primary and secondary means of data collections. The required hypothesis and deductions are drawn strictly on the qualitative analysis and synthesis of the collected data made via culture centered and phenomenological approaches. Adopting the structural functionalism and the Symbolic Interactionism theories on community development: Findings portray that the Anglican Church in Awka apposite to the Diocese of Awka (Anglican Communion), have made remarkable socio-economic impacts in community development in Awka town. This includes amongst others, inculcating of core values and quality moral lifestyle on the residents of Awka town; establishment of academic institutions of higher learning and skill acquisition centers; enhancing the formation of local vigilantes; and the institution of Millennium Micro-Finance bank in Awka community. The study concludes by recommending that concerted efforts should be employed by both Christian churches and government authorities in Igbo Land towards embarking on capacity building which enhances both human and community development. Government authorities are equally enjoined to aid in financing Christian churches projects with core socio-economic values within Igbo Communities. Christian churches through their teachings and preaching should enlighten the populace in the Igbo enclaves on attaching sound, quality and positive moral symbols on issues in the society, as this will promote diligence in community service as well as ensuring sanity and perpetual development of the Igbo regions.

Keywords: Community Development, Christianity, Anglican Church, Igbo Land, Positive Impacts, Socio-Economics, Core Values.

Introduction

Christianity has always contributed immensely to nation building from the time immemorial. Brooke and Numbers (2011) and Johnson (2000), reckon Christianity is deeply intertwined with the history, formation and development of western societies. They intimate that the church has been a major source of social services; an inspiration for art, culture and philosophy; and an influential actor in her politics and religion throughout her long history.

In Nigeria, the role of the Christian churches in National Development can never be overemphasized. Asadu (2021), Ede (2020) and Azuakor (2020), expose that Christianity has been inculcating in its adherents uncompromised moral values, respect for human life and dignity through adequate education and social tasks in respect of Nation building in Nigeria. Additionally, they affirm that Christianity has equally made great strides in the areas of education, agriculture, healthcare and rural development in Nigeria. They conclude by streamlining that Nation building is part of the agenda in the Christian Churches missionary work in Nigeria.

The art of Nation building starts within the local communities pertinent to community development. For instance, in Igbo land, Christianity is genuine and has made great impacts in community development. Christianity enhances social justice, equality and promotion of people's welfare in Igbo land. Egwuonwu and Mgbemena (2019), Nmah (2017), Ezeokeke (2018) and Nmah and Nwadiolor (2012), delineate that irrespective of the fact that there still remain areas to be covered by Christianity pertinent to community development in Igbo land; the Christian churches have actually contributed immensely to community development within the Igbo regions. They declare that Christianity aided in civilization and raising of elites in Igbo land. They intimate that Christian missionary activities introduced new values, new ways of acquiring status and various strands of socio-economic advancement in Igbo land.

Efobi (2016), Daily Post Staff (2011), and Nwaiwu (2021), maintain that Christianity aids in the community development in Anambra State. They are all of the view that Christianity brought light to the Igbo societies. They cite the academic progress and sanity restored in secondary and primary schools in Anambra State since its handover to the Christian missions, as well as the assistance of the Christian Aid in Anambra State in Sponsoring ECID, a multi-country program funded by UKAid from United Kingdom, which aims to build the effectiveness of civil society in accessing, gathering and presenting data and improving the use of evidence by the government; as instances.

This study exposes the contributions of the Anglican Church to community development in Awka via the positive impacts of the Diocese of Awka, Anglican Communion. It advocates for sponsorship of Christian projects geared towards community development by the government authorities in Igbo lands; the concerted efforts of both the Christian churches and the state towards capacity building which enhances both human and community development; as well as attachment of core values to symbols representing basic and important issues in the societies which will facilitate devotion and commitment of individual in the community towards societal growth and development.

The Concept of Community Development

Lotz (1977) defines community development as a conscious technique or process to solve social change problems: He maintains that "community development is a process that enables communities to collectively confront and act on their common values and problems" (p. 16). This implies that every individual person gets involved in community development since it is geared towards addressing social problems and issues which equally affect everyone within the community. Community development is not actualized in isolation.

Hamilton (1992) gives a definition that exposit that community development involves capacity building which facilitates human development and creative intelligence. He renders his definition thus:

A planned and organized effort to assist individuals to acquire the attitudes, skills, and concepts required for their democratic participation in the effective solution of as wide a range of community improvement problems as possible in order of priority determined by their increasing levels of competence. (p. 29).

Finally, Tamarack Institute (cited by Hasan, 2022) posits a geographic perspective definition of community development as "a group of people in a locality initiating a social action process (that is, planned intervention) to change their economic, social, cultural and environmental situation" (p. 3). In general terms, Hasan defines community development as the process of bringing people together to achieve a common goal related to changing the quality of life. The

elements in the definitions as portrayed by Hasan are that community development is a process; it is collective action, thus people act together. It is focused on actualizing a common goal, and it equally bothers on the improvement of people's quality of life. These various definitions cited so far exposit a deep insight into the concept of community development. This will place this study in proper perspective.

The contribution of the Anglican Church to Community Development in Awka Town

The institution of the Anglican Church in Nigeria, and in Igbo lands in particular was actualized through the missionary enterprise of The Church Missionary Society (CMS). Adiele (1996), Ogidi Anglican Community Meeting (1992), Diara (2003) and Okonkwo (2022), all concur that the missionary enterprise of the CMS which gave birth to the Anglican communion in Igbo land resulted in the eradication of the murder of twins, burial of slaves alive with their dead masters, sacrificing of maidens in Onitsha to appease the river goddess and many other related evil and superstitious practices. Besides, it equally aided in the establishment of schools, hospitals, and seminaries which eventually effected the training of priests all over Igbo lands.

The contributions of the Diocese of Awka Anglican Communion to the community development in Awka Town especially within the Arch-episcopal ministries of late Most Revd. M.S.C. Anikwenwa (Former Bishop of Awka Diocese, Anglican Communion and Archbishop of the Niger Province) and His Grace the Most. Revd. Alexander C. Ibezim the incumbent Bishop of Awka Diocese, Anglican Communion and the Archbishop of the Niger Province are numerous. They can be streamlined as follows:

- **Inculcation of core values, good and quality moral life style on the residents and citizens of Awka Town:** This is actualized via public enlightenment campaigns; crusades held at various village squares within Awka Town; seminars organized for both youngsters and adults at various village Town Halls within Awka Town and via the sermons preached by the Awka Anglican Diocesan clergy from various churches pulpits within Awka Town on every Sunday services. Egwuonwu (2018) equally affirms that a careful study of the synod Themes of the Diocese of Awka, Anglican Communion would clearly posit the vision and efforts of the Diocese at nurturing a holistic evangelism in the society. Thus she is concerned with public morality, public institution, facilities, and the quality of life of the people at large. These themes are selected and chosen to address local, national and international issues that are not in accordance with God's plan for mankind as contained in the bible.
- **Establishment of Academic Institutions of Higher Learning and skill acquisition centers:** Okafor (2023), Book of Tributes (The Most Revd. Maxwell Samuel Chukwunweike Anikwenwa) (2023), and Ireoba (2022), register of the establishment of Mary Sumner Vocational Center for skill acquisitions, Millennium Nursing College for Training of qualified nurses, Paul University and Institute of Theology, as well as the Renaissance Modern Polytechnic within Awka community. All these were courtesy of the Diocese of Awka, Anglican Communion.
- **Establishment of Secondary Schools:** These includes: Bishop Crowther Junior Seminary School, St. Paul's Secondary School, Queen's convent, and Alexander College Awka; all these are located within Awka town. Moreover, almost all the Anglican parishes within Awka town have either a primary or secondary school.
- **Establishment of a Financial Institution:** This was made feasible in the establishment of the Millennium Microfinance Bank at Zik's Avenue Awka. This is a laudable achievement of Archbishop Ibezim; it aids micro-business visionaries in starting up their business as well as grants loans at reasonable interest rates to all and sundry.

- **Giving Aids to the needy as well as assisting small scale business owners in sustaining their business:** A good number of Anglican churches in Awka Community engage in this welfare scheme at intervals. Most Anglican Parishes in Awka assisted both members and non-members via palliatives during the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020. Archbishop Ibezim equally assists indigent persons during the EL-SHADDAI Program which holds every first day of the month at the Cathedral Church of St. Faith's Awka.
- **Enhancing the formation of local vigilantes to beef up security in Awka Town:** Archbishop Ibezim in his inception of office as the Lord Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Awka encouraged all the Anglican Churches in Awka to form vigilante services. He equally advised that it should be extended to all the villages within Awka community in order to beef up security within Awka environs.
- **Hospital Visitations and Assisting indigent sick persons in paying Hospital bills:** Most Anglican Churches in Awka get involved in this philanthropic enterprise. The Chapel of the Healing Cross located inside Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu Teaching Hospital (COOTH) Amaku, Awka and St. Barnabas Church Ifite, Awka at intervals cook and share food for admitted patients in COOTH, and equally pays hospital bills for indigent sick persons and even some nursing mothers that just delivered new born babies. The women ministry in the Anglican Diocese of Awka equally engages in this welfare scheme.
- **Establishment of Medical Facility and engagement in free medical outreaches:** The chapel of the Healing Cross and Revd. Ezugo Chinonso Charity Foundation engage in free medical outreaches respectively at different locations within Awka communities at different intervals. People are attended to by medical Doctors, specialists and nurses; and equally given medications and treatments for free at these free medical outreaches. The Anglican Diocese of Awka equally established Faith Hospital and Maternity located at UNIZIK Temp-Site Awka.
- **Establishment of an Orphanage:** The Anglican Diocese of Awka has an orphanage that takes care of motherless children and orphans located at UNIZIK Temp Site Awka.
- **Engagement in Public Kitchen Services:** Some churches like St. Christopher's Obinagu Awka, chapel of the Healing Cross, and Rev. Ezugo Chinonso Charity foundation engage in free sharing of cooked food at various locations like Aroma Junction, Kwata Junction and Eke Awka axis within Awka town at various intervals.
- **Prison Ministry:** The Diocese of Awka has a chapel (Chapel of compassion), located inside Amawbia, Awka Prison. The Anglican Diocese of Awka conducts outreaches which includes counseling, feeding and tending to the needs of these prisoners via this chapel.

These are some of the ways through which the Anglican Church contributes to community development in Awka Town. This posits that the Anglican Diocese of Awka effect a holistic ministry which includes discipleship, education, health, social welfare, women and youth ministry, among others-these are core elements of community development which is the nucleus in the art of nation building.

The Structural Functionalism Theory on Community Development

Structural functionalism theory on community development conceives society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability and growth. Joan (2015) declares that the theory is a framework of building that perceives society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. Parsons and Shils (2017) acknowledge that Herbert Spencer and Robert Merton are at the forefront of this theory.

Kingsbury and Scanzoni (2009) maintain that the structural functionalism theory asserts that people's lives are guided by social structures, which are relatively stable patterns of social behaviour. Thus social structures give shape to human lives: For instance, the family, the religious organizations and various governmental parastatals gives shape and forms peculiar worldviews and orientations of individuals. This theory instructs that all the social structures in the society ought to be working together for the progress, development, growth, peace, stability, sustainability, tranquility and solidarity of each given milieu or habitat.

This equally reflects that the church should not exempt herself from the social problems and needs of the community: The government of each given milieu should work in synergy with the church towards the community development of each given enclave. All the social institutions in every locality must be deeply involved and engaged in the art of nation building. Hence, Joan (2015) insists that structured-functionalism emphasizes the formal ordering of parts and their functional interrelations as contributing to the maintenance needs of a structured social system. This indicates that the function of any institution (or recurrent social activity) is the part it plays in the maintenance of the larger structural whole.

The Symbolic Interactionism Theory on Community Development

This theory seeks to understand human's relationship with their society by focusing on the symbols that help individuals give meaning to the experience in their life as well as activities surrounding them. Nickerson (2023) exclaims that social scientists consider symbolic interaction theory as a framework for building theories that perceive society as a product of everyday human relations and interactions.

Carter and Fuller (2015) exposit that the symbolic interactionism theory on community development focuses on how social interactions and people assign meanings and importance to things around them based on interpretations of their interactions with others. They express that the symbolic interactionist perspective is based on the notion that people make sense of their social worlds through communication and social interaction: Implying the exchange of meaning through symbols and language.

Crossman (2020) delineates that the proponents of symbolic interaction theory argues that the meaning individuals ascribe and attach to the world around them depends on interactions and relations with people, ideas and events. He suggests that peoples understanding of the world and how they interact with their society is dependent on what they learn from their relationship and interaction with others rather than the objective truth or the ideal stance. Thus symbolic interactionists believe that man's society is socially constructed by the meanings man attach to social interactions, activities and events; this in turn forms their general opinions towards each issue and their world view as well.

This theory according to Nickerson (2023) is associated with George Herbert Mead (1803-1931) and Max Weber (1864 - 1920). Since Crossman (2020) maintains that the symbolic interactionism theory relies on the symbolic meaning that people develop and build upon in the process of social interaction; and since the theory analyses society by addressing the subjective meanings that people impose on objects, events and behaviours: Subjective meanings thus given primacy because it is believed that people behave based on what they believe and not just on what is objectively and ideally true. This study then affirms that all efforts geared towards activities and issues pertinent to community development should be defined in positive and gainful terms. The definition of situations regarding community development must be streamlined in an attractive sense to get the attention of every human person in the society.

Symbols regarding or representing events pertinent to community development like last Saturday of the months clean up exercise, the Christian churches engagements in capacity building, core values, sanctity of life, human rights promotion, aesthetic values, and state developmental agenda should have virtue oriented significances attached to them. Such symbols must be streamlined to bear positive and valuable impression to get every human person in the society dedicated to its actualization.

Towards the sustainability of the Christian Churches engagement in Community Development in Igbo land

The contributions of the Diocese of Awka, Anglican Communion to community development in Awka Town are a laudable one. This study proposes the following steps to enhance continuity and sustenance of the engagement of Christian Churches in community development in Igbo land:

- **Concerted efforts should be employed by both the Christian churches and the government authorities in Igbo land on embarking on capacity building:** This will facilitate the involvement of everyone in the society on community development. It will minimize an over reliance on outside experts as sources of knowledge, resources, and solutions to community issues. It will equally encourage local people to take action on local issues themselves. Strengthened confidence, skills, knowledge, and resources that increase from capacity building efforts on one project may enhance a community partner's ability to envision and take action on other projects. Capacity building efforts are sensitive to the particularities of local culture and context, and, as a result, often lead to more feasible and appropriate community solutions than approaches that lack a capacity building focus.
- **Government authorities should assist in financing Christian churches projects with core socio-economic values in Igbo land:** This should serve as an encouragement to Christian churches to keep up the good work apposite to community development. This is equally better than promoting and sponsoring reality shows that breed immorality among the youngsters in recent times.
- **Christian Churches in Igbo Land should always capitalize on projects that wield economic value:** Instead of always building big edifices that may end up becoming a liability owing to high cost of maintenance as well as lack of maintenance culture; Christian Churches in Igbo Land should rather start investing in human along with community development.
- **Christian churches through their teachings and preaching should enlighten the populace in Igbo communities on attaching sound quality and positive moral symbols on issues in the society:** This will promote diligence in community services, as well as ensuring sanity in Igbo land. This is one of the major propositions of the theory of symbolic interactionism.
- **Every Christian church in Igbo land should learn to regard the community where each peculiar Christian church is located as an extension of their congregation:** This will facilitate the Christian churches engagement in community development: Since a church's mission field goes beyond its membership to include all the people created by God. This will get the church even connected to individuals who had never set foot in the church's building: They will equally be engaged in the act of community building. This is one of the major propositions of the theory of structural functionalism.
- **Every Christian church in Igbo land should learn to show deep love, compassion and concern for the peculiar communities wherein they are located:** They should completely avoid being judgmental. Christian churches in Igbo land should embrace on expansive concept of community.

- **Christian clerics should get themselves acquainted with Artificial Intelligence:** This has the potential to effect positive changes in the society including; enhanced productivity, improved healthcare and increased access to education. It will equally help solve complex problems, make the daily lives of individuals in the community better and more convenient: It will also aid in saving time and elimination of biases.

Conclusion

This study has expounded on the contributions of the Diocese of Awka, Anglican Communion to the community development in Awka Town. It is evident that Christian churches are actively involved in community development in Igbo land as perceived in this study. This equally instructs that the duty of community development is not for the secular government alone. It should be a joint effort of both the church and the state as instructed in the theory of structural functionalism.

The mission of the Christian church cannot be termed “holistic” if it does not include and involve community development. The injunction of Jesus Christ in Mark 16:15, signifies going into various situations and circumstances that mankind finds themselves in the world; and making positive impacts in the socio-economic affairs of human milieu. The lessons from this study will go a long way in making Christian churches in Igbo land trail blazers, pace setters and the light in thick darkness wherever they are located in Igbo land and beyond.

Recommendations

This study recommends the following additional ways through which the Christian churches can equally contribute in community development and service in Igbo land.

- Christian churches in Igbo land can assist people in the community to get jobs through their influential members. They can help individuals in the community retrieve sensitive information so they can be properly equipped to apply for jobs with the position prospects of being employed. They can easily sustain themselves and their families through this means.
- Christian churches in Igbo land should create forum for listening and counseling individuals in the societies. Sometimes, people just need someone to listen to them and they just get healed and equally stands firm. This enhances bonding and building of peoples trust on the church.
- Christian churches can create sports teams and streamline leagues for the community wherein they are domiciled. This will maintain solidarity and tranquility in the community. Christian churches can equally organize community events like holding get together during valentine day or festive periods apart from normal outreaches like open air crusades and revival programs.
- Holding parenting classes where advanced and experienced parents can lecture young parents via experience on how to train children and direct youngsters in the way of God is recommended by this study. More so, Christian churches in Igbo land can equally hold addiction recovery classes to counsel and restore sanity on the lives of drug and alcohol addicts; since the battle for such cannot be won in isolation.
- Finally, Christian churches in Igbo land can contribute to the community development by engaging in environmental stewardship. This can be actualized through organizing clean up exercise in the communities. This is the easiest way of inculcating the act of maintaining clean, healthy and habitable environment within Igbo societies.

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