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## The Church and Social Responsibilities in the 21st Century: Nigerian Situation

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### Abstract

Investigating the most lucrative and fastest organizations that have gained a widespread outreach through digitally enabled and remote logistics, the church happens to be one in this 21st century. Sequel to that, the roles of the church has extended beyond her spiritual mandate to include a significant focus on social responsibilities. The Church as an institution to some measure can boast of certain reasonable financial capability be it privately owned churches or otherwise. This paper through the meaning of social responsibilities, importance, challenges and other strategies examines the church involvements in contributing to the betterment of the society. Through some methods, findings have confirmed the urgent need for the church to engage in social responsibilities. This is especially in connection to the current condition of Nigerian's political negligence and recurring crisis. This paper would give a deep insight on emphasis such as poverty alleviation, education, healthcare and justice etcetera as areas where interventions are urgently needed.

**Key Words:** Church, Social Responsibilities, 21st Century, Nigerian, Situation

### Introduction

Ab initio, the church has historically played pivotal roles in the society not only in the spiritual and moral guidance of individuals but also in overseeing social, economic and political challenges of her members and non-members. Realizable through compassionate

and accommodating inclinations in seeing beyond diverse odds. The church understands the need to appreciate and assist the human person and doing so by extending the hands of love as highlighted through divine precepts in Matthew 25:40 Thus: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of

these my brethren, you did it to me." This captures the description of Karl Marx "Religion as the sense in the senseless world, heart of the heartless world...it is opium of the people." In other words, the church must be responsive to the society.

It is unimaginable and ungodly when the church remains non-challant to the plights of the society, especially on matters that are manageable within her capacity. In this 21st century, there is urgent need for the church to engage actively in social responsibilities particularly in regions embattled with harsh uncertainties. As the world in general faces new challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, technological advancement and social issues. The church mission encompasses rapid response to the needs of the time through the embrace of social responsibilities in upholding their significance in order to make positive impacts in society.

### **Meaning of Social Responsibilities**

Social responsibility refers to the ethical obligation of individuals, organizations and institutions to contribute to the well-being of society. It involves actions that are intended to be of maximum benefits to the broader community. Seeking also to improve the social, economic and environmental

conditions within which people live. Three reputable dictionaries offer distinct yet complementary definitions of social responsibilities. First, Oxford English Dictionary defines social responsibilities "as ethical theories that an entity, be it an organization or individual, has an obligation to act for the benefit of society at large." Second, Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines social responsibilities as "ethical or moral obligations to act for the benefit of society. Third, the Cambridge Dictionary defines social responsibilities as "the idea that people and organizations should be responsible for the impact of their activities on the environment and society."

In all, these definitions underline that social responsibilities involve a commitment to consider the interests of society and the environment when making decisions. It extends to different actors in various fields of endeavour. However, for the purpose of this article, focus would be on the religious circle hence the church.

### **Needs for Social Responsibilities**

Has the church in the contemporary society understood social responsibilities as compulsory aspects in mission? How the church get can measurably involved or is it needful? Are the church leaders and

adherents aware of such duties? Have they perceived social responsibilities as part religious activities or just spirituality? This paper gives detailed insight because there are loopholes in church understanding and participation as regards social responsibilities in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Tyndall (2022), maintains: "That social responsibility is deeply rooted in Christian theology. The church is called to embody the teachings of Christ, particularly those that focus on caring for the poor, marginalized and oppressed" as a compulsory duty, it highlights diverse ways through which the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is expected get involved in social responsibilities in the urban or rural areas. The essence is to help in creating moderate environment for members of the society through poverty alleviation, education, healthcare and empowerment so on. Nevertheless, the reverse frequently plays out because of lack of orientations on the expectations from the church. There are core categories on which brief survey would be based within the church community.

First, the church leaders, this category sees the church as that which should be overly supported by both members of the church and sometimes the host communities because of mere possessive instinct such as "everything in whatever capacity should be done for

God's sake...it is for God, and must be done for God." That's why when people (either direct members or host communities) sometimes express some discomforts, it is tagged as "they are fighting God" little wonder the concept of social responsibilities never appears as a necessity to some in this category. On the contrary, when they eventually get involved, it is mostly for advertorial purposes streamed through viral methods as to garner self-praise or means of securing more followers.

Second, the adherents, majority in this circle are brainwashed, beclouded and unrefined religious participants and flamboyant religious practitioners. Those in the category of beclouded and unrefined religious participation are ignorant of the religious notion that naturally see or conceive God's image in humanity from their immediate environment as to device possible and positive means to promote social ease and good life. Their ignorance is manifested through rancor, greed and avarice resulting in individuals preying on one another for survival in the society.

The second category is the flamboyant religious practitioners. This set misapplies the essence of the religious circle. For them, it is an avenue for exhibition of wealth,

measure class and ranks. The church becomes an avenue and channel of pursuing intending positions when needs arise and recruiting possible loyalties. Individuals with such characteristics barely understand that the church is a community through which humanity can gain respite. It accounts for the reasons that the support they render in the church to them is big deals. It is responsible to understand that, church mission in social responsibilities are cordial and practical manners through which God has assigned man to be his brother's keeper irrespective of tribe, color, race and. If members of the society understand the church as medium of positive collaboration, the society would be happier and safer for all and then the religious teachings would be more practical than theoretical.

### **Importance of Church Engagement in Social Responsibilities**

The import in today's society cannot be overstated when considering the potential positive effects on both individuals and society. Fashola (2021). Emphasizes: "That the church has a divine obligation to actively participate in social and political life especially areas of governance, human rights and equity." This is necessary especially in recent time when the government has

neglected certain duties of her citizenry. The church's involvement in social issues offers numerous benefits:

- In leadership, the church serves as a moral compass in guiding the society in areas of justice, fairness and equality.
- In community building through various social programs, the church helps to create a sense of community, fostering solidarity and support networks.
- In addressing certain systemic issues relating to poverty, inequality, marginalization and corruption etcetera. The church can render helpful support in rectifying those systemic issues that perpetuate social injustice and equity.
- Social responsibilities as practical gospel encourages both individual and collective spiritual growth, as believers are called to act on their faith by helping others.
- Through the means of promoting peace and stability, the church often, serve as mediator in conflicts, promoting peace and reconciliation, especially in diverse or conflict-prone

areas and among families and communities etcetera.

### **Social Responsibilities Urgently Needed in the Current Nigeria Situation**

Giving the currently situation of society, careful observers would definitely confirm that there are unique challenges that require urgent social intervention by the church. Dunlap (2020), emphasizes "That faith should be demonstrated through action, particularly through involvements in efforts to combat poverty, inequality, environmental degradation and other pressing social concern." These include:

**Poverty and Unemployment:** In Nigerian current society, ridden by severe poverty, which keeps driving deeply and gradually dimming sparks of hope for the poor and marginalized. The church is expected to render assistance through obtainable channel from locally and globally, through donations, charity drives and community outreach programs in providing for the society. The distributions of palliatives are no longer sure means of securing sustenance in the current society. With a significant portion of the population living below the poverty line and high unemployment rates, the church is expected to take active roles in providing economic and sustainable empowerment.

This could involve vocational training, small business support because the current situation has gone beyond distribution of palliatives, except for the dependents as matters of chronic ailments and age related concern. Else empowerments through which financial breakthrough would flow should be a watchword for human development in the society. It is high time the church invest in institutions where able-bodied individuals would be gainfully employed through such means, provision of food and shelter for the homeless would no longer pose threats to the members of the society.

**Education:** Education as a matter of importance is delicacy every individual should taste. Education is a very significant tool through which communities, societies, states, nations and the world can take shape. It provides opportunity for humans to unleash their inner prowess in refining the world. Education seeks to provide support for ones talent to its reach manifestation. Unfortunately, the Nigerian situation is such that conceive education as mere acquisition of knowledge and possibly securing a means of livelihood through a white-collar job (government or private) sectors. Education in its full essence is the ember that charges humanity to be in charge of their environment through positive dimension. That accounts

for the commonly used expression proposed by Derek Bok thus: "If education is expensive try ignorance." Derek was a former president of Harvard University. He is known for making remarks highlighting the long-term costs of ignorance compared to the value of education, suggesting that while education may seem costly, the consequences of not pursuing it are far greater. That to say, financial capacity should not be a dictator or impediment to education. Education is a right; it is a positive tool for human development. Education as a useful device was well comprehended and applied by the missionaries, which enabled the rapid spread in the missionary work and achievements in Nigeria. It was through education that African converts appreciated Christianity faster and preferring it against their African Traditional Religion. One cannot claim or tag Africans illiterate. During that period, education was based on activities of immediate environment (informal education). There was no documentation rather events were memorized. It was through formal education that the African scholars appreciated the need for documentation of their cultural heritage, history and religion to mention but a few. Education has solved problems of great magnitude and aided advancement. The church in Nigeria is

challenged to offer educational programs by building schools, providing scholarships to the disadvantaged (children or adults). In Nigeria, access to quality education remains limited, especially in rural areas. The church should invest in educational initiatives, provide scholarships and build or collaborate with schools to create learning opportunities for underprivileged children in the society. Since the Nigerian educational system is such that provides less privileges in most cases with a diverse choice of education which opposes individuals choice. The church should provide facilities through which qualified members of the society can acquire their choice or dream educational intent. Unfortunately, most of the church-owned education outlets are beyond the reach of the common person, who through tithes and contributions made such educational centers a reality. It is truly ridiculous that in the past, most educated elites were trained at faith-based institutions at a minimal or even full sponsorship.

**Healthcare:** Healthcare is an essential need in the society such that every member of the society should be able to receive at will. Nevertheless, in Nigeria it is often inadequate, with many people unable to access proper medical care. The church need to be active in this field by setting up clinics,

organizing health campaigns and collaborating with governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide medical services to the populations. In Nigeria, people prefer religious healing interventions primarily because of the inability to access adequate healthcare. Through this, most Christian miracle-providers prey on the helpless individuals. Healthcare is a critical area where the church must push her energy in ensuring the health stability of a common person in the society.

**Corruption and Governance:** In Nigerian society, Christian leaders to an extent appear apolitical. They are termed as distant participants or pulpit advocates. Their interactions with politicians are mostly during campaigns or thanksgiving moments. Few out of a reasonable number brace the courage in speaking to them in clear terms that would have spiritual impacts. While some do when political matters and negligence have escalated like the current situation. Actually, the church can play a significant role in fighting corruption and promoting good governance. This could involve public advocacy, lobbying for transparent policies and organizing campaigns that educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities without bias. The church leaders through a unified body should

conceive it as mandatory aspect through their social responsibilities in the community. Corruption as a disease not only injured the society, it equally affects the economic growth and other essential services. When church leaders fail to recognize social responsibilities in this area, members of the society suffer severe misplacement of priorities especially in religious matters.

**Environmental Issues:** The society has treated this factor with so much abandon. The Nigerian government in spite of owning parastatal and ministry charged with this responsibility, satisfactory improvements have not been recorded. The church has a responsibility in encouraging sustainable practices and raising awareness about environmental conservation. Nigeria faces numerous environmental challenges, including deforestation, waste management and pollution. The church can engage in advocacy and educational campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of environmental stewardship and sustainability. The members of the society need to be orientated on the dangers that the environmental abuse poses to man. This is because the environment is yet to be recognized and appreciated as inestimable support God has given to humankind and

ultimately deserves to be protected and managed in very special ways.

**Peace and Reconciliation:** These factors are among the primary duties to which the church has been called. In John 20:19, Jesus upon resurrection appeared in the closed enclave where the disciples hid and greeted them thus, "peace be with you." revealing the importance of peace in the gathering and amidst members of the society. Peace and reconciliation are obligations that affect everyone in order to have a progressive society. The biblical injunctions in the sending out the disciples were instructed to speak peace in every home they encountered in Matthew 10:12-13. Romans 12:18 admonishes: "Do all you can to live at peace with all men" this responsibility is to be carried beyond immediate circle, in a country where ethnic, religious and political tensions often lead to violence, the church has a social responsibility in fostering peace-building efforts which serve as a neutral ground for dialogue and reconciliation. Nwagbara (2020), argues "That the church can be effective mediator in resolving conflicts and promoting national cohesion." In fact, the church has to desist from messages that ignite discrimination, segregations and other forms of divisive inclinations in the society while ensuring peace and reconciliation among all.

**Advocacy for Human Rights:** Speaking out against injustices such as corruption, inequality, human trafficking and promoting policies that safeguard the rights of the oppressed is core responsibility to which the church must not relent in overseeing. This is usefully necessary in current system where humans are marginalized in all ramifications. Akinola (2019) emphasizes "The theological imperative for the church to be active participant in promoting social justice, advocating for the dignity of the marginalized and addressing systemic injustices." The church indeed has to speak up for her members through the leaders in ensuring that the populace are not swallowed up in social and political injustice. Aside the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), many denominations within the Christian circle should set up organizations through which the plights of the common person are addressed in the communities and society. In the Holy Roman Catholic Church, such examples are the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) etc. through these church enabled avenues, professionals within the legal team and social workers attain to the needs of the society in ensuring that individuals attain a good life while living in peace and harmony.



## **Challenges and Prospects: The Church's Social Responsibilities in the 21st Century**

The church has been a cornerstone in shaping societal values, moral conduct and community engagement. Dunlap (2020) argues: "That the church by virtue of its moral authority and theological teachings has a unique responsibility to not only preach social values but also to participate directly in addressing the challenges facing the contemporary society." However, in the 21st century, the church must move rapidly beyond the confines of spiritual to social care. As global challenges evolve, ranging from economic inequality to environmental degradation. The highlights of various challenges that the church faces in fulfilling her social responsibilities in the 21st century likewise the prospects to surmounting those hurdles as to maximize impacts are briefly stated as follows.

### **Challenges of Church in Social Responsibilities**

#### **Institutional Resistance to Change:**

Currently, some church institutions, especially in conservative or traditional settings, are slow to adapting the evolving social realities of the modern world. In some cases, exhibit same slow approach to addressing issues that are deemed "too

political" or "controversial" such as advocacy for human rights, social justice, or addressing systemic corruption. The reluctance to engage in such matters limits the church's effectiveness in addressing pressing societal issues. Among such conservative measures is the belief that the church is separated from political involvements. It always poses deterrents to most church leaders to vie and gain occupation of key positions in the political corridor.

**Poverty and Economic Inequality:** In spite of the philanthropic efforts, the church keeps grappling with the issues of poverty and economic inequality. In developing countries like Nigeria, the resources available to churches even among those with large congregations are sometimes insufficient in tackling the root causes of poverty, such as unemployment, recurrent crisis, poor governance and lack of education. This gap between the church's capacity and the scale of social need remains a significant challenge.

**Political and Social Polarization:** In many parts of the world, including Nigeria, the church is caught in the crossfire of political and social polarization. Issues such as religious extremism, ethnic tensions and political corruption often create an

environment where the church's efforts are viewed with suspicion. It is believed that when the church aligns herself with one political side or become associated with particular social causes, their credibility and ability to mediate across divides can be compromised, making it difficult to engage in peaceful social interventions.

**Lack of Resources:** The church, especially in rural areas, claim that lack of resources necessary to effectively attain to the social needs of members of the community and society are insufficient. Without adequate funding, trained personnel, or access to governmental support, it becomes difficult for the church to implement reasonable commitment in handling social programs like education, healthcare and other poverty alleviation projects.

**Infrastructure:** This as a matter of necessity has become the biggest challenge facing most members of the church community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The church owners establish institutions that are capital intensive where good percentage of their members including other members of the society cannot afford. This establishment cuts across education and hospitals especially. In such circumstances, it appears that the church administrators have remained

unfair to the members and host society, rather adjudging their establishments to be more profit oriented.

**Religious Sentimental Issues:** The church's efforts in promoting social justice are being undermined by a corrupt political system. Efforts to improve education, healthcare and poverty alleviation are often neglected by political leaders who prioritize personal gains over national developments. This systemic challenge makes it difficult for the church to have sustainable impacts, even when her intentions and efforts are strong. Another challenge, is the fact that some religious leaders do not reach out as expected when certain allocations for social responsibilities are entrusted in their care especially in collective measures. They often restrict it to the members of their churches as against the general and common good.

### **Prospects to Overcoming Challenges and Enhancing the Church's Impact through Social Responsibilities**

#### **Embracing a Holistic Approach to Social**

**Engagement:** In order to overcome institutional resistance and expand its influence, the church must adopt a more holistic approach to social responsibilities. Fashola (2021), summarizes: "That the church , historically is seen as spiritual

institution, must reclaim its social mandate to actively engage in addressing national challenges such as corruption, poverty, inequality and political instability...." This means aligning its spiritual mission with tangible community development initiatives. For instance, instead of just praying for the poor, the church should actively engage in programs that promote economic empowerment, such as microfinance initiatives, vocational training and community farming projects. Additionally, the church can play a critical role in educating the community on ethical living, social justice and the importance of governance. The church leaders should as well desist from allowing the politicians access to church assembly during campaign exercises, for they conceive such as better media of speaking and convincing the populace who are later treated with so much abandon on the long run. If such campaign activities should be carried out through church platforms, the church leaders should get them into agreements towards assisting the church execute their social responsibilities for all and sundry.

#### **Collaboration with other Organizations:**

Among the realistic ways to tackling the limited resources and infrastructure challenges is through partnerships with non-

governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental bodies and other faith-based institutions. Collaboration amplifies the church's social responsibilities efforts by pooling resources and expertise from different occupations. For instance, churches can collaborate with local and international NGOs to provide health services, free educational opportunities and disaster relief. Graham (2018), recognizes: "That partnerships between faith-based organizations and secular institution, including government, NGOs and businesses can maximize the impacts of social development programs." This can also help the church to overcome the financial constraints they may face on their own especially for those in the rural areas. Instances of such relief and collaborations, is proceeds from the Holy Roman Catholic Church engaged in universal collection known as "Peter's pence." This collection is done universally to assist the Holy Father in assisting and contributing in care of communities all over the world irrespective of tribes, religions and ethnicity. These financial aids are being distributed to different countries of the world in order to assist and comfort the downtrodden and less privileged in those countries. The Nigerian

communities are regular beneficiaries of this outreach.

### **Engaging and Empowering the Youths:**

The church must develop targeted strategies to engage the youths in social responsibilities. This is of utmost concern because of the growing secularization and changing attitudes among younger generations. Dunlap (2020), confirms "how churches as key institutions in modern society are called to actively engage in social justice, community developments and ethical leadership." This way, Church is encouraged to create youth-led social programs that focus on leadership development, community service and advocacy. This is significant in order to achieve environmental sustainability, human rights and poverty reduction. Mentorship programs, volunteerism and social justice education are ways to mobilize young people and ignite their passion for social good. When the youths are made to understand this as not just a humanitarian but also a social obligation, in whichever office they occupy in future, they will always have the interest of the society at heart.

**Governance and Advocacy for Policy Change:** To deal with political and governance challenges, the church must be

actively involved in advocating for good governance and accountability. This could involve non-partisan political engagement. Through this means, voters can cautiously choose leaders who uphold moral values, transparency and social justice. Then the church will be a non-relenting voice for the marginalized groups by advocating for policy reforms that promote equality, health care and education. Religious leaders can leverage on their influence to challenge corruption and promote a culture of integrity in both public and private sectors in the society. Speaking of social responsibilities, there are some the church might not achieve perfectly through their financial strength but through influence. The Church can strengthen their social responsibilities channels by providing education and training to their members. This includes educating the congregation on social issues, leadership development, conflict resolution, and sustainable community development. Church leadership must prioritize investing in the capacity of their staff and volunteers to ensure that social programs are effective and sustainable. For instance, the church should adopt and enhance their interest in training social workers, educators and healthcare providers who can serve as community ambassadors for social change.

**Technology and Innovation:** In the digital age, the church must embrace technological solutions to extend its social impact. Online platforms can be avenues for soliciting supports, fundraising, awareness campaigns and mobilizing volunteers. Technology has become the fastest channel of communication in reaching wider audiences, engaging in evangelization, providing educational resources and offering telemedicine or mental health services. The Church can harness these tools to create innovative programs that address contemporary social challenges especially in the current situation.

**Promoting Ethical Consumerism and Environmental Stewardship:** It is important that the church pay closer attention to the environmental matters. Members of the society need to understand that the abuse of environment has massive implications for man, not only it is ungodly, it also affects the all round welfare and productive capacity of the society. Therefore, the environment must be cared for with maximum attention so that man can have a habitable abode. The church must also address the growing environmental challenges by advocating for sustainability and ethical consumerism. By educating their congregations on the impact of their consumption patterns, the church can inspire more eco-conscious lifestyles. Initiatives like

tree planting, waste reduction and management, sustainable businesses can be part of the church's broader strategy for social responsibilities.

### Conclusion

The church embrace to social responsibilities reflect its commitment to living out the teachings of Christ, who called His followers to love their neighbors and care for the marginalized. Experiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has so worsen the condition of humans that help rendered by the church must go beyond spiritual but engaging in social responsibilities. The church as a moral compass and the opium of the society, must actively engage in addressing the urgent social, economic and political issues facing the society, especially in countries like Nigeria. Through involvement in social responsibilities that checkmates poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, advocacy for justice and environmental sustainability, transformative roles that shapes a society where equity abounds remain a challenge to the church. The urgency of these efforts cannot be overstated because of the direct impacts on the quality of life of people. Nwagbara (2020) encourages: That the church should take a leading role in shaping a more just and equitable society trough its

teachings and practical interventions." Social responsibilities is not only a moral obligation but an opportunity for the church to live out her faith in practical ways while ensuring that the message of love, justice and compassion preached by the church make a meaningful and lasting difference in the society.

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