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Prospects Of Church Planting In A Pluralistic Religio-Cultural Milieu: In The Context Of North- East Nigeria

Ilami Ozegbe, PhD

Lecturer in Mission Studies and Church History
Baptist Theological Seminary Eku, Nigeria
Email: ilamiozegbe@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study is to investigate the prospects of church planting in a pluralistic religio-cultural milieu with particular reference to the North East Nigeria. Nigeria society is made up of people with diverse religious beliefs, cultures and practices. It is no gainsaying that religious pluralism had made Northeastern Nigeria a region of crises. This challenges the church in its effort to carry-out the mission mandate of planting churches. Through qualitative analytical methods, this paper notes that some religious fundamentals and cultural inclination do not promote tolerance or freedom of religion in Northeastern Nigeria. The study clarifies the concept of pluralism, religio-cultural milieu and church planting, and identifies the challenges the church faces in her attempts to proclaim the gospel and plant churches. Among other things, the paper proffers the prospects of planting churches in the face of religious pluralism in North East Nigeria.
Keywords: Prospects ,Church Planting, Pluralistic, Religio-cultural North–East, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century Nigeria features ideological differences, cultural diversity, new philosophy, conflicting belief systems and new patterns of life style. The heterogeneous nature of Nigeria in terms of relativism, lack of tolerance, diversity of religions, ethnicity, and political affinity made the country a veritable pluralistic society. The church in Nigeria lived and planted churches in a pluralistic society for a long time; however, religious pluralism has taken over the entire society with a lot of crises that kept the church from its missionary mandate of proclaiming the gospel and planting of churches in Northeastern Nigeria.

The Northeastern Nigeria is witnessing inter-religious rivalry and conflict at a level unheard of in the past. It has become a commonplace to say that Nigeria is a pluralistic society-not merely a society which is made of a variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralistic in the sense that it is celebrated as something to be approved and cherished. However, the more the diversity is praised, the more the church is hindered from planting churches and proselytizing other citizens. The three major religions, namely: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion, are expected to integrate unity; but political instability in the Nigerian state challenges the expectation.

In the words of Chinua Achebe as cited by Adekola, (2019), the most commonly enunciated Nigerian ideal is unity, it is so important to the country that it stands inscribed on her coat -of -arms; but it is so scarce that the blood of millions of Nigerians: men, women and children, are shed every day! The incidents of hostilities in different parts of the country, particularly the North East, have shaken the very

foundation of peaceful disposition and constitute a threat to freedom of movement of citizens, the church and her activities, one of which is the planting of churches. The paper therefore, consider the concept of pluralism, religio-cultural milieu, the challenges hindering the planting of churches and the prospects of planting churches in the North East region of Nigeria.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

The Concept of Pluralism

Literarily, pluralism is derived from the word, plural, meaning more than just one. According to Newbigin (1989, 21-25), "pluralism means a secular society, in which there is no officially approved pattern of belief or conduct". In simple terms, pluralism in a society is the presence of multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural identities and the valuing of all religions as equals." The word is used in combination with various spheres: cultural pluralism, ideological pluralism, intellectual pluralism, religious pluralism, and so forth. Furthermore, pluralism may be classified into four types such as, empirical pluralism, cherished pluralism, philosophical pluralism and religious pluralism. He further asserts that "pluralism refers to the sheer diversity of race, value systems, heritage, language, culture, and religion in many nations of the world". It could be observed that each religion is a valid system which has developed its own myths and symbols, beliefs and practice, liturgies and lifestyles. Each has its own saving process which results in transformation from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness and that each can learn from other religions. The pluralist claims that the various kinds of religions are necessarily exclusively shaped by their distinctive historical and cultural context and that each one holds an authentic but nonetheless imperfect conception of God or ultimate reality, and that there are many parts to spiritual truth and salvation. Furthermore, pluralistic society is characterized by active diversity where citizens can legally and publicly multiple competing ethical views. However, this does not by any means negate the socially approved code of conduct that is generally accepted by the society.

Religio-cultural- the term is a compound word, having two key words - religion and culture. Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, value and attitudes. Religion is a set of beliefs, feelings, dogma and practices that define the relations between human beings and sacred or divinity, (Ishola, 1992). A given religion is defined by specific elements of a community of believers or dogmas, (Hiebert, 1992, 369). Furthermore, Marbaniang (2019) posited that culture and religion are not the same thing but words associated together with various theories that suggest a model of relationship between the two words. One of the views attached religion as the soul of culture. Consequently, this view does not consider the fact that there could be non- religious cultures. This does not rule out the fact that some kind of belief system may be involved in a culture. However, according to (Marbaniang, 2019), "culture and religion are totally separated. The cultural elements must not be confused with the religious elements". Nigerian culture is as multi-ethnic as the people, (Osuji, 2016) Thus, people having differing beliefs can understand culture and only disagree with regard to religious elements or belief-related elements. Such heterogeneity is intense in Nigeria.

Church Planting – Church planting is derived from a Latin word, "*plantation ecclesiae"*; meaning gathering new believers in a community that will be instituted as a church within a geographical location, (Ed Stetzer, 2003, 95). It is obvious from this definition that church planting is not really about physical structures; rather, it is the believers in Christ who are constituted together as the body Christ who meet together for worship. Furthermore, Otto (1984, 8) defines "church planting as the ministry which seeks to establish new churches". And it is carry-out through evangelism, discipleship and gathering the persons into a functioning congregation.

Furthermore, Ebbie (2000, 202) asserted that church planting is a process of bringing men and women to faith in Christ and incorporating them into a growing reproducing Christian fellowships or groups. A process of starting new congregations as the church seeks to obey Christ command in Matthew 28: 18-20. In addition, Wagner (1990, 7) believes that "church planting is the most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven." Church planting in the New Testament is simply starting new churches and

it is a way of bringing new believers into God's kingdom and it is one of the main task or functions of the local church.

NIGERIA AS A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

The Nigeria nation came to be through the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates (brought under a single administrative system) on the 1st of January, 1914, by Sir Frederick Lord Lugard. Before the amalgamation, the Northern and the Southern Protectorates were administered under a separate rule, Bamgnose (2004). Over the years, the Nigerian land map has undergone tremendous changes due to rapid urban population growth, natural increase and cultural landscape, Gugler (1978, 35). The data analysis by the National Population Commission of Nigeria in 2014, shows an increase in the population every year and the result is over-population, (Wizor, 2014). The increase in population brings certain changes within the structure of the Nigerian society as well as in the life of the people.

According to Bamgnose (2004), the "Nigeria society covers an area of about 924sq km with three major ethnic groups; the Hausa/ Fulani in the Northern part , the Igbos in the Eastern part and the Yoruba's in the Western parts." Furthermore, Nigeria is known for its multilingualism with different ethnic groups apart from the three major languages being spoken in various communities. The Edo people ethnic group is predominant in the region between Yoruba land and Igbo land. The Ibibio/Annag/Efik people of the South-Southern Nigeria and the Ijaw of the Niger Delta and many more languages time and space constraint detail analysis in this paper. The range of different ethnic and cultural diversity in Nigeria is high on the scale. However, from observation, there are several distinct groups of languages in Nigeria. For instance; the site for the *Translators Without Borders* put the number of indigenous languages in Nigeria at 500. Other speculations put the number between 450 and 500, (Mojola, 2022). Undoubtedly, one may not be surprised that Nigerian society is a pluralistic one with different ethnic groups, languages, and diverse religious backgrounds.

THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT IN CHURCH PLANTING

Christianity which has led to planting of churches in Nigeria dates back to the 16th century when the Portuguese introduced Christianity in Benin and Warri. Looking at Christianity from that early beginning to the present time, there have been many stages of development resulting in the planting and growth of churches. According to (Clarke, 1986, 29), the Catholic Church dominated the scene in the first period of Christian missionary activities. The Roman Catholic Church has grown and expanded in the planting of churches with approximately 19 million members mainly in the southeast, (Carroll, 2016). The Anglican Church of Nigeria has a claim of 11 million members (Rutty, 2026). The Nigerian Baptist Convention has a claim of 10,000 Churches with about 3,000,000 baptized members and up to 6.5 million worshippers, (Ayokunle, 2016).

The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria has almost 4,000 members in thousands of congregations mainly in Nigeria. The Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ has approximately 1.5 million members, (Rutty, 2016). As it stands, the missionary organizations and denominations have planted large and vibrant churches with great impact. Other include; African Indigenous Churches and comprises of the Christ Apostolic Christ (CAC), founded in 1918-1941; the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), founded in 1925; the Church of the Lord Aladura Worldwide which was founded in 1930; and the Celestial Church of Christ of Christ (CCC), founded in 1946, (Ogunewu, 2012, 383).

Another group of churches came up, the churches are those of the Pentecostal denominations and evolved in phases over many decades ago. The first phase could be dated from 1915-1930, up till 1960 when the movement originated and was characterized by many segments. Another phase was the interaction between the indigenous Pentecostal form and the foreign denomination Pentecostal Churches– The Faith Tabernacle from the USA and the Apostolic Church Britain. This gave rise to the Apostolic Church founded by Joseph Babalola. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church founded by Moses Orimolade and Abiodun Akinsowon, the Church of the Lord (Aladura) founded by Josiah Oshitelu, the Celestial Church of Christ, founded by Samuel Bilewu Oshoffa among others, (Adetunji 2013, 104).

Others include; the Assemblies of God Church 1949 and the Foursquare Gospel 1955. Within this phase, some homegrown Pentecostal churches were planted. Notable among these churches are: The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), founded by J.O. Akindayomi in 1952- a former member of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, the Victory Gospel Church (1958) and the Gospel Faith Mission, 1962, (Ayegboyin & Ukah, 2002, 68-86). Another phase was from 1970 to 1980 and witnessed the emergence of African initiated Neo-Pentecostal/ Charismatic Churches which were largely the products of Charismatic revival in the Nigerian's higher institutions of learning. It was a time when Campus Christianity was at its peak and the Universities of Ibadan and Ife (now O.A.U.) became the centers of Pentecostalism, Churches developed around this period with a renewed emphasis on regeneration and holiness as pre-requisites for Spirit baptism. Included in the category are Deeper Life Bible Church (1982) from Deeper Christian Life Ministry founded by W. F. Kumuyi; the Church of God Mission founded by Archbishop Benson Idahosa; the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, founded by D.K. Olukoya and the Living Faith Church (a.k.a. Winner Chapel) from Faith Liberation Hour Ministries of David Oyedepo which advanced into a church in 1984 and the Rhema Chapel International Ministries, (Adetunji, 2013, 104).

In the 20th century, a new wave of church planting emerged from the puritan and evangelistic tradition that gave way to faith claim, prosperity ministries, deliverance and healing. Several churches have been planting in Nigeria from different ministries and denominations too numerous to mention. The mandate to evangelize and take the gospel to the entire nook and cranny of the society is not a debatable issue for the church in Nigeria. However, planting of churches in the North East of Nigeria have undergone some setbacks due to banditry, kidnapping and high level of hostilities in the area.

PLURALISTIC SOCIETY AND CHALLENGES OF CHURCH PLANTING

The challenges of religious pluralism are manifested in various ways and varying degrees in all Nigeria. The country has demonstrated a high propensity for religious conflicts in the past decades, accompanied with tension and animosity that have generated in the relationship between groups in the country. Presently, the hostilities in the different parts of the country have shaken the foundation of peaceful disposition. The insecurity challenges, large- scale violence, crises and tension caused by the Boko Haram insurgency, the Fulani bandits and other social vices in the North East is a threat to the church. Missionaries encounter difficulties in reaching out to people in the rural areas. Insecurity is a threat to peaceful co-existence in Nigeria and particularly among the residents of the North East.

Christians living with Islamic fundamentalists are threatened, men, women and children are martyred on a daily basis, The Sharia law which originated in one of the North-West states (Zamfara State) is another issue in the area. Muslims are not allowed to claim any form of religious conversion; to do is to invite capital punishment, (Ajani, 2011, 49). The aim of every religion is to win converts into their fold. This craving for making converts of other people has regularly resulted, not only to the use of words and persuasion, but to the use of armour with the goal of sub-dividing the other and gaining territorial advantage. But, what is overlooked is that genuine religious freedom that includes the right to convert and to encourage others to convert is highly constitutional.

There is a new trend of hatred and intolerance arising from growing insecurity and a sense of shrinking space for survival is seen in the North East. In Nigeria, both adherents of Christianity, Islam and Africa Traditional Religion live side by side together. According to Abdul-Hamid (2012, 37), the voice of the Muezzin wakes the Muslim at dawn, just as it does the Christian, reminding each of them that prayer is better than sleep. At each Christian anniversary, be it Easter or Christmas, Christians host Muslims to reception in their homes, where they all share the joy of the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. Christians pay their Muslim friends reciprocal the visit during their festivals such as *Eid al - Fitr* which refers to the annual Muslim celebrations that follow the end of Ramadan fast and the celebration that commemorates Abraham's abortive attempt to sacrifice his own Ishmael in obedience to God's command. But, the nature of tolerance people talk about has changed. Toleration of diverse ideas demands people should not discuss beliefs in faith and should also avoid standing against the opinion of others in religious

matters. If any religion claims superior in some matters, a line has been crossed and resentment is immediately stirred up: pluralism has been challenged. Furthermore, Neuhaus (1983, 50-51) posited that philosophical pluralism has set in place certain "rules" for playing the game of religion - rules that transcend any single religion. When philosophical pluralism is allied with the popular mood and notion of progress, those who disagree are often pictured as persons of a bygone era. The pressure to conform is enormous since the notion of 'progress' has been the watchword of most cultures. As far as one makes out, philosophical pluralism is now the dominant ideology, and it has enormous challenges to the Christian mission, carrying out evangelism and planting of churches.

Although, Christianity has never existed outside of culture and religious pluralism is not a new experience for either the Old Testament Israel or the New Testament Church. Both were born into the context of religious pluralism. The emergence of the Gospel within the matrix of Judaism, its expansion of the gospel in a Hellenistic milieu, the early Christian expansion in pagan Rome,- are examples of the church in a pluralistic setting. Christian apologists, Christian theologians and believers in Christ Jesus are conscious of the fact that cultural pluralism exists, hence the mission of the church and the planting of churches is to be pursued in a complex and changing reality, (McGrath 1989, 361). Thus, the Edinburgh 2010 calls for different mission patterns to explore relevant praxis- oriented missiologies that provide the church to witness Christ meaningfully, (Oborji, 2010). A life engaged in witness is the true mission.

PROSPECTS OF CHURCH PLANTING IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA

The rapid spread of religious pluralism is one of the most noticeable signs of the time. Nigeria society is faced with what may be called a desegregation of religions. No religion is confined to a particular continent or country or town any more (Forman, 1977, 69). What were once called the religions of the East is vibrantly alive in the West. So, it is an invitation to break through self- sufficiency and move with the mandate of the Great Commission.

Dialogue and Building a more Fraternal Society- Over the years, a significant experience has been in Christian Muslim dialogue, but misconception and biased attitudes still prevail. According to Forman, (1977, 69). Intra-religious and inter-religious dialogues are privileged means for building the "civilization of love." Dialogue among religions is a way of creating civilization of love, not causing harmful misunderstanding." But, this inter-religious dialogue is becoming more and more of a sacred duty. In this troubled world so frequently marked by poverty, violence and exploitation, the church in Nigeria served as a vanguard of truth, justice, eternal security and freedom. The church is not merely a voluntary association of individuals but an organization driven by the purpose of evangelizing, planting churches and transforming society.

The church in Nigeria as a religious institution is called to witness to others the love of Jesus Christ. God's liberating, correcting and restorative measure to the fallen *sinful* and needy world and this task has to be in the form of preaching, teaching, evangelizing, planting churches, helping the needy and living the Christian life. It is about carrying out the mandate of Jesus Christ in (Matthew chapter 28:19-20), "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." The witnessing character of the church implies both vertical and horizontal relationships. To witness to the divine call is vertical and being witness into the world is horizontal.

The gospel incorporates ethnicity, culture and social groups, which was what the Early Church discovered. Although they began with de facto segregation, the Holy Spirit opened their eyes through performances of miracles, through teachings, and through all that they had seen Christ do. As the Holy Spirit opened doors, they walked through them one after the other until the composition of the church changed from a sect of Judaism to a universal Church, (Bavinck, 2016). The churches have to be stimulated and to re-conceptualize the gospel and the missional calling in the midst of religious diversity. But, to bridge this gap, dialogue between cultures and religions must be seen as a sacred duty incumbent upon all Christians who are committed to planting churches toward the fulfillment of the great commission and the building up of a society worthy to live in.

Religious Tolerance - As earlier mentioned, there are three major religions in Nigerian; Christianity, Islam and African Indigenous religions. Each of these religions worships God differently and relates to the Nigerian society differently. It is not gainsaying, that the three major religions can regulate and reshape citizens; behaviors encourage moral living and discourage immoral/ unethical actions which can promote intolerance in a pluralistic society. In addition (Adekola, 2019), stated that the word "tolerance depicts the mutual understanding and cooperation between groups with different ethnicities, religions political ideologies and economic status," it is a process of developing a culture of peace that eliminates violence and coercion.

The current understanding of religious pluralism allows for religious freedom to prevail. This includes tolerating adherents of other faiths within the rubric of peaceful co-existence. The expression of pluralism means the acknowledgment of other religious expressions to a certain degree. This kind of tolerance by the Christian community comes from the sense of inner security and the understanding of what the Church is called to be.

Genuine Christians Responsibility –The Christian responsibility is to bring people of all religions, ideologies, with varied interests to build up Nigeria. Amidst such a challenging situation we have in Nigeria, particularly, in the North East, the genuine Christian witnessing will play a major role in showing the love of Christ and social welfare of the people. Thus, the Christian message has to be re-interpreted and re-appropriated in the light of the common inter- cultural, inter-religious, inter-human contextual realities with local initiatives and support systems that will continue the mission of the church and planting of churches.

Despite the current realities, Christianity has a unique contribution to this world and a mandate to fulfill. The idea is not to show forth mighty deeds but to become aware of God's mighty deeds and to witness to humanity. The biblical basis for this understanding of mission and planting of churches is found in Acts 1:8 "… and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." The church is not called to 'do' but 'to be'. As far as the apostles are concerned, to be a witness meant 'risky' because it bears directly on the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:22, 2:32), therefore their witness had the same content as the 'Kerygma' (Gladstone , 2010). So there is an urgency of a living witness in order for the mission to be fruitful. Lings and Murray (2003) call it, "fresh expressions of the church". It is a new approach with emphasis on "flexibility and variety," in witnessing and planting churches. This Strategy is for the existing church body, renewing itself in its creative margin and the aim is primarily directed towards people who do not yet belong to the church.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the prospects of church planting in a pluralistic religio- cultural setting. Efforts have been made in this paper to define pluralism as the sheer diversity of races, value system, heritage, language, culture and religion in Nigeria, with specific interest in the North East region where religious crises is on the increase. The study revealed that church planting is one of the most rewarding things to advance the kingdom of God. However, Pluralism presents a unique challenge in effective witnessing of the gospel and planting of churches in the North East of Nigeria. The paper largely discusses dialogue and building of a more fraternal society that will promote peaceful co-existence and genuine Christian responsibility that bring about the effective witnessing of the gospel and planting of churches in the North East of Nigeria.

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