Apostle Chibuzor Gift Chinyere Social Gospel through Disaster Management in Rivers State

By

Wokama, Zerubbabel Goodluck
Department of Religion and Cultural Studies
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt
zerubbabel.wokama@iaue.edu.ng
08037074640

&

Lazarus B. Saale
Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts
Niger Delta University Wilberforce Island Amasoma, Bayelsa State
08036725182

Abstract

This paper explores the nexus between Christianity and disaster management in Rivers State with the aim of ascertaining if there is any strategic linkage between the two and proffering policy recommendations, using the social gospel strategies adopted by Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere; the founder of Omega Power Ministries (OPM). The paper is exploratory and descriptive. Predicated on primary and secondary sources, the paper maintains that religion to an extent is integral and indispensable to the issues of disaster and emergency management. In view of the rising incidence, prevalence, diversity, and impact of disaster in Nigeria, as well as the country's appreciable vulnerability thereto, the paper posits that disaster occurrences constitute a veritable challenge to Nigeria's religious sustainability. This implies that success or failure of disaster management in Nigeria holds corresponding implications for the feasible credibility of the religious operators within Nigerian domain. The study further observes that despite the criticality of disaster incidents and their dire outcomes in Rivers State, the issue of effective disaster management strategies is yet to be properly situated and prioritized in her national policies. Hence, the prevailing policy and scholarly thinking in the country have largely failed to clearly underscore the indispensability and strategic importance of religion to disaster

management. This work contends that this scenario adumbrates the misery of Nigerian religious operational conception and administration in disaster and emergency management operations. It is, therefore, recommended among others that professionalism be employed in the religious involvement in the issues of disaster and emergency management following the concept of global best practices in order to save the country from the multiplied effect of uncensored over dose of religion.

Keywords: Disaster, Management, Social Gospel, Pentecostal church, OPM

Introduction

Many Mega Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria are currently involved in the social gospel which is considered to be one of the traditions handed down by Jesus Christ to the first Apostles and early founding fathers of Christianity. The Social Gospel Movement was a pattern of religious movement that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century. Ministers, especially ones belonging to the Protestant branch of Christianity, began the teaching and culture that tie salvation and good works together (Cashman, 1993). This movement is sustained by the argument that true Christians must emulate the life of Jesus Christ. To honor and please God, people must put aside their own earthly desires and help others, especially the indigent ones. Wealth was not to be hoard but must be shared with others especially the less privileged and less fortunate people. Followers of the Social Gospel Movement implemented numerous reforms to help other people according to Jacob H Dorn who cited the words of Washington Gladden (Dorn 1963). One of their most important contributions to society was the creation of settlement houses. Settlement houses provided numerous opportunities for less fortunate people, including access to education, free or low-cost health care, free or low-cost housing, and innumerable other benefits. In Rivers State, the few Mega Pentecostal Churches are already involved in this movement of social gospel which seems to be part of the inherited traits from their Protestant father. One among the various channels the church expresses the social gospel is her involvement in caring for the wounded and suffering members of the society. This ministry centers on alleviating sufferings and pains from the faces of people. As disaster multiplies in our society more agencies and organizations including faith-based organizations are also attracted to get involved in resolving, the problems posed by this hydra headed concept of disaster. This paper focuses on the role of

Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere; founder and leader of Omega Power Ministry (OPM) in disaster management in Rivers State as a pattern of Pentecostalism in social gospel in Nigeria.

What is disaster?

Disaster is an event, natural or man-made, sudden or progressive, which impacts with such severity that the affected community or individual has to respond by taking exceptional measures. This phenomenon has become an issue of growing concern throughout the world. There has been a dramatic rise in the frequency and magnitude of disasters, threatening large populations living in diverse environments in recent years**.** Natural disasters had tripled since the 1960s killing hundreds of people and destroying millions of dollars of property each year (Sutton, 2013). Disasters in this study usually mean natural hazards, which sometimes include manmade emergencies. When reflecting that natural hazards have always been interrelated with individuals' social activities. In other words, there would be no natural disasters, if they were not to influence individuals. Without influencing humans, such natural occurrences would be called natural events

Religious organizations and disaster management

According to Webster's Dictionary of 2015 religion is defined to be the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a God or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service, and honor are due. Different religions have been introduced in the world throughout history. There are two kinds of roles religion is considered to play in this context; *i.e*., positive roles and negative roles. Religion is said to play a positive role when it encourages individuals or organizations to behave morally, whereas it has a negative influence when it is seen to be the main factor encouraging individuals to behave immorally. Our concern here in this work is to consider the positive role of Christianity using the activities of Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere. In having a positive role, Christianity encourages its believers to donate more than atheists. Although Christians like other religious people continue to donate, regardless of any change in their income. Hence, religious people's social health, mental health, or mental rehabilitation is improved by their religious beliefs even during a disaster. Religious beliefs almost function like disaster counseling during the

various phases of disaster response. Otherwise, religious people's beliefs may influence their understanding or response to series of disasters. Furthermore, many religious institutions have substantially supported disaster relief and recovery activities in communities (Batniji etl.2006). On the other hand, it is right to mention here that faith-based organizations also play a negative role in the field of disaster management. Some believers are willing to negatively interpret scriptural phrases and, thus, commit to destroying religious artifacts. With particular reference to Northern Nigeria where we see cases of some misguided religious fanatics such as *Boko Haram,* kidnapping social relief workers at disaster management centers housing internally displaced persons (IDPs). These in any way do not erase the fact that some religious groups like the Seventh Day Adventist Church and other Christian groups are continually involved in helping in recovery and rehabilitation of disaster victims (God knows, 2019). Let us at this point come to the world and works of Omega Power Ministries (OPM) where Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere their leader to explore their involvement in disaster management.

Apostle Chibuzor's and disaster management

According to data collected from one of his associates, Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere hails from the eastern part of Nigeria, at a very young age he left home from where he ran away to Lagos. Without parents and uncles, he spent years without comfort of home, good housing, feeding and other necessary goodies of life. This tough experience even from young age exposed him to witnessing and sharing from the pains of vulnerable living. The sources further confirmed that in this young painful life experiences, he grew with passion to reduce suffering. This he started while still living under the Lagos bridge among area boys. At one instance it was recorded from his personal testimony to even have stayed for three whole days without food resulting from starvation. This rough background did not turn him into a monster instead he choose to grow with the challenge of fighting every form of suffering and oppression from the face of humanity (oral Source 2019). This amplifies the traditional belief that life is a choice. It is not what we go through in life that defines us but what we allow to go through our minds especially during our various life experiences. Another source confession reveals that Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere began his quest to fight against suffering one the faces of the oppressed as an area boy who did not get involved in the negative lifestyle of the

areas as we come to know them today but was committed to buy over fight from the oppressed around him. Without fear of those area boys since he is used to their ways, he will always rise to free any vulnerable one helplessly caged by those area boys. This action made him appear to be seen as a rough area boy from youth (Ebenezer Oral source 2019). This aligns with the assumption that what we go through in life serves as preparation for what purpose we can serve in near future (Sutton 2003). Having established the very fact that the passionate move of Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere towards disaster victims is not just sudden but an age long imbedded sense of calling which he was naturally prepared for through his own personal experiences let us advance to show how this passion was expressed.

His strategies

One thing is having the hunger for a thing and another is how you go about it. In this case Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere came into the ministry of the Church with deep seated burden which had lived with him from small, when he founded Omega Power Ministry (OPM) he quickly sort for vehicle through which some affected individuals in the society could be reached with the helping hand of suffering alleviation. This led to creation of OPM foundation which is the body saddled with the responsibility of helping the poor, vulnerable and indigent members of the society. Among the duties of this foundation is the responsibility of raising funds from within the members of OPM as offerings and tithes and the judicious use of the supposed fund to care for the wounded and vulnerable members of the society. This the foundation is committed to doing through selected programs which includes but not limited to the free education facility, free hospital disaster victims care and rehabilitation (OPM Chief of Staff 2019). The simple system here is giving back to the society what is gotten from her. This is the face of social gospel. This glaring evidence before us here counters the assumption of many denigrators of religion and church who claim that church is now in the business of taking from the poor masses to enrich the pastors. Here is a living testimony that things are not always as it seems. This is the beauty of the academic research culture of phenomenological approach. Where the researcher takes and tells the story from the insider's position instead of passing unmerited assertions from a narrow singular point of observation.

The Apostle does not sit back in his office and send forth the staff of the rescue team in cases of disaster victim but he goes into the scene to feel what the people are going through. Just like Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry did not always wait for the needy to come to him but at some points in time went out of his way by meeting the sick and needy at their very point of need. Biblical example of such cases is; the man with thirty-eight years of affliction at the pool of Bethesda, Lazarus of Bathany etc. (John 5, & 11). Apostle Chibuzor has also joined other kind hearted ministers of God in this contemporary time to advance the course of the church through the vehicle of social gospel especially in the area of disaster management and rehabilitation.

What Has Been Done

In this situation when it is glaring and boldly written on the face of the Nigerian society that poverty is a major challenge, disaster now assumes a hydra headed format if not amoeboid. This unpredictability and complicated nature of disaster experiences in Nigeria is also a function of the multi-complex causal factors. This explains why the fight against disaster may not be won from one singular perspective. Even when the Government of the day is trying through her agencies, Apostle Chibuzor and OPM joined other faith-Based organization to help disaster victims in Nigeria in the following ways: Rehabilitation of Flood Victims, Rehabilitation of homeless and street gangsters and other efforts to alleviate Sufferings.

Rehabilitation of Flood Victims

As a way to explicate what is being said let us pick out the 2012 flood incidence which affected most states in Nigeria especially those close to the coast of the Niger river as portrayed in Fig 1.1. During this time, some parts of Rivers and Bayelsa states were adversely affected.





Fig 1.1a Fig 1.1b

Flooded Communities in Rivers and Bayelsa State (***Sources: OPM Media Dept).***





Fig 1.1c Fig 1.1d

Flooded Communities in Rivers and Bayelsa State (***Sources: OPM Media Dept).***

The Plaques in Figs 1,1 show the pictures of some affected Areas scene. Food and other relief materials were donated to victims, and they all relocated to the church premises as shown in Fig. 1.6. When the crowd became overwhelming, the Apostle and the OPM quickly built a camp for the rehabilitation of the flood victims.



Fig.1.6a



Fig.1.6b



Fig.1.6c



Fig.1.6d

Food, Clothing and other relief materials provided to disaster victim by OPM foundation

Sources: OPM media Dept.

This is one of the disaster rehabilitation centers built by non-governmental organization within Southern Nigeria. There in the camp disaster, victims were not provided with food but the help was extended to the provision of cloths,

accommodation with modern toilet and sanitary facilities (Grace 2019 Oral Source).



Fig 1.4a



Fig.1.4b

OPM Disaster Victims Rehabilitation Center ***Sources: OPM media Dept.***

We can see that the present day Nigerian churches have not all deviated from the original culture of Christ in helping the wounded vulnerable members of the society.

Rehabilitation of homeless and street gangsters

Since the 2012 flood incidence, the disaster rehabilitation center has been used as a place for the homeless and dejected members of the society (Felicia 2019). According the Felicia a beneficiary from this gesture, the centre was being used to house many jobless and homeless individuals in the society.



Fig. 1.2a



Fig. 1.2b

Victims of flood swimming their way to safety (***Sources: OPM media Dept).***

Most of these persons who benefited from the services of OPM foundation were not allowed to leave the camp until they have acquired skills which serves as a means for meaningful source of livelihood (Felicia 2019). The beneficiaries were also empowered with financial stipends from the OPM foundation before leaving the camp. Just like the ancient teaching of Apostle Paul in his letter to James that faith without works is dead. James reminds the church that caring must not be limited to word but in practical terms of meeting the present need of the hour.

> If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:15-17)

This gesture demonstrates the fact that the gospel of Christ as presented by the present day Christianity is not just of words but in manifestation of the true goodness of God to all.



Fig 1.5a



Fig 1.5b

Team of Doctors Staffs of OPM Foundation with Disaster Victims ***Sources: OPM media Dept.***



Fig 1.5c



Fig 1.5

Fig 1.5cNEMA personnel On Inspection at OPM Disaster Rehabilitation Site
Fig. 1.5d Medical Doctor working with OPM Foundation on the Flood Disaster Rehabilitation

Mr Ugwu Udi, A staff of NEMA spoke well on the passionate moves made by the Apostle and the OPM foundation to help in caring for the 2012 flood disaster victims. After inspection of the disaster rehabilitation camp built by OPM foundation, the NEMA personnel certified the camp not just as place of refuge but as a standard and classical place for managing the trauma arising from disaster challenge. "Considering the quality of food, toilet and Medical facilities available this center would be of global standard when completed (Ugwu 2012).

Recommendation

After due considerations of the primary and secondary data the following is therefore presented as recommendations:

(1) The creating of the OPM Foundation as an umbrella body to man the relief and intervention programmes by the Apostle is a good move in the right direction but more efforts should be made to employ the services of Professional social religious caregivers as Professional Chaplains who would

dispense these services beyond the walls of the immediate religious faith domain.

(2) More Religious leaders within the Pentecostal circles and other Faith Based organizations should intensify efforts towards having a more organized action plan in preparation for the event of disaster.

(3) More study needs to be done in this area to enable the government to open window of recognition and collective participation with Religious Bodies and Faith based organizations to inspire many others to see the need to prepare to intervene in the fight to save disaster victims.

(4) The Government through adequate legislation should come up with a more enabling environment for well-coordinated disaster intervention programme which would allow religious bodies and Faith based organization through their professional caregivers (Professional Chaplains) effectively be part of alleviating sufferings from the faces of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) within our society.

Conclusion

The analysis of Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere's activities in disaster management in Rivers State presented above leads to comments directed at the methods used for this study as well as the assessed outcomes of the activities of other specified organizations. For instance, past studies of activities of other local Christian Pentecostal congregations have provided analyses that identify congregations as extending organizations in times of need rather than existing as mere close minded religious organizations, where they have opened their doors to flood victims and served as shelters, or as expanding organizations where new and additional volunteers and relief infrastructures were provided. This paper offers only a snapshot of relief efforts provided by Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere and the congregation; Omega Power Ministry (OPM) in the few accounts of disaster which struck Rivers State and its environs. This work therefore concludes as follows; that the sample of representatives interviewed was without bias towards their congregation as very prominent number of our respondents were members of OPM. This was because as at the time of the study, the only available persons to be reached were those who had benefited from this gesture and those residing within the rehabilitation camp. Secondly, that almost all those beneficiaries of these gestures were members of Omega power ministry. At the visit to the disaster

rehabilitation center all those found currently at the site enjoying the facilities are members of Omega Power Ministry (OPM). This does not in totality erase the fact that the passion for Apostle Chibuzor in his disaster intervention programme is meant for the society even if it has to begin from the church. Thirdly, one could also establish the claims that the foundation of social gospel laid by Jesus Christ thousands of years ago is still held and valid among the Christians of today as demonstrated by the activities of Apostle Chibuzor Chinyere and OPM.

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