

Akper, Godwin I¹
National Open University of Nigeria

“PARTICIPATING IN GOD’S MISSION OF RECONCILIATION”

Nigerian churches’ response to ethnic conflicts²

ABSTRACT

The paper appeals to the Faith and Order paper on “Ethnicity, National Identity, and the Search for the Unity of the Church” (ETHNAT) to evaluate whether or not and in what way, Nigerian churches are responding to ethnic challenges. After a brief statement of the Faith and Order paper’s invitation to participate in the ministry of reconciliation (1), the paper describes categories of churches in the Nigerian context (2). The Nigerian churches’ responses to ethnic identities and their impact on the unity of the church is then evaluated (3). It is argued that not all Nigerian churches are responding to the call to reconcile societies divided along ethnic lines and, therefore, issues a call to participate in a ministry of reconciliation in their country (4).

THE INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

In 1997, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) initiated a study project entitled “Ethnicity, National Identity, and the Search for the Unity of the Church” (ETHNAT). According to Faith and Order Paper 201, entitled *Participating in God’s mission of reconciliation. A resource for churches in situations of conflict*, the express goals of the study were fourfold. First, to equip churches to understand and discern the role that ethnicity and national identity play in their (the churches’) own lives – both in their inter-church relationships and between the societies within which they propagate the gospel. Put in another way, the study was to help the churches to explore how and in what ways ethnic and national identities affect inter-church relationships and the relationships between churches and the societies in which they exist. Secondly, the study was to assist churches in challenging any loyalties toward ethnic and national identity that impede church unity and reconciliation

¹ Godwin Akper is Programme Leader II/Senior Lecturer at the National Open University of Nigeria in Lagos. He is also a Research Associate in the Department of Ecclesiology and Systematic Theology at the Stellenbosch University.

² Paper delivered at a conference that focused on ethnicity, hosted by the joint project on Religions and the Common Good in Pluralistic Societies, which was held on 23-25 February 2009, at the University of Mkar, Gboko, Benue State, Nigeria. This revised version was written in the period January to March 2010 during which the author was a visiting scholar at the VU University Amsterdam. The financial assistance from the latter institution is hereby acknowledged. The views expressed here are those of the author.

between communities or churches in conflicts – the ultimate objective being to “transcend” divisions within churches and communities. Thirdly, the study aimed at preparing churches for an “effective prophetic” ministry of unity and reconciliation capable of creating a renewed and healthy human community. Finally, the study hoped to guide churches toward hopefully becoming agents of reconciliation in their immediate (local) communities where tensions and conflicts exist (WCC 2006:Par. 4). On the whole, the study invited churches to “examine and explore” *together*, not individually, “the part they are playing in situations of tension or conflict in which ethnic and national identity is an important factor” (WCC 2006:Par. 4).

As will become clear in this paper, Nigeria is full of such situations of tension, so much so that, for us who live in this country, it is not a matter of either/or, but a situation of both tensions *and* conflicts, where ethnicity (not national identity) plays a leading role.³ Therefore, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN),⁴ the largest and highest ecumenical body in Nigeria, states as one of its objectives: “To promote understanding, peace and unity among the various peoples and strata of society in Nigeria, through propagation of the gospel”. In line with the goals of Faith and Order Paper 201, CAN member churches agreed to promote *understanding, peace and unity*, not only among member churches, but among all the *various* peoples and strata in Nigeria itself.

The churches are aware that Nigeria is a nation of many nationalities, a country with people of various ethnic backgrounds and origins; a country with over 500 languages; a country with numerous religious beliefs and cultures. The churches, therefore, do not seek to work among Nigerians as a homogenous group, but as a people with different ethnic backgrounds and affiliations. CAN is also aware of the existence of conflicts of interest among the socio-cultural, religious and ethnic groups that make up the entity we call “Nigeria”. Therefore, *understanding* among these groups is a key factor on the path toward *peace, unity* and *reconciliation*. CAN also acknowledges that the gospel of Christ is at stake in any situation where misunderstanding exists among the various people of Nigeria. Hence, it undertakes to use the gospel as a means of promoting understanding that may lead to peaceful coexistence and therefore unity among the ethnic nationalities in the country. The earlier stated objectives

³ The geographical entity called “Nigeria” cannot be described as a “nation” in the same way as, for example, Israel (where the nation is more or less formed by the Jews), or Holland or India (where the native Dutch or the Indians constitute the nation). We are indeed at best a “nation” of nationalities as Obafemi Awolowo, the pre-independence nationalist and First Republic (1960-1966) Premier of the Western Region, described it. Compare his description of Nigeria in Cletus T. Gotan (1995:1).

⁴ CAN was formed in 1976. The history behind the formation of CAN is quite revealing. It was General Olusegun Aremu Obasanjo, the then Head of State, that called a meeting of all church leaders in Nigeria to discuss his proposal of introducing in all schools the singing of the National Anthem and the recitation of the National Pledge every morning during school assemblies. Since this was to interfere with the daily morning devotion in Christian schools, the Head of State felt that the consent of the churches that own Christian schools was important before the implementation of the policy. Since no umbrella organisation existed that represented all churches, those with schools were invited to attend the meeting. During the meeting, Obasanjo’s second-in-command, the late General Musa Yar’Adua, a brother of the President [the author is referring here to the late President Umaru Yar’Adua who died on 5 May 2010 – eds], told the Christian group that he did not know from which denomination to choose a leader who would pray at the start of the meeting, since there were so many denominations present. Since church leaders attending the meeting were embarrassed by this comment from a Muslim, they immediately agreed to form CAN on that same day – a single ecumenical body similar to the WCC. For more detailed information on its formation, as well as an analysis of CAN, see Peter B. Tanko (1995).

of CAN expresses the conviction of member churches that the church of Jesus Christ in Nigeria exists among diverse ethnic groups with different interests, in such a way that whatever happens among the ethnic groups has consequences for the unity of its member churches. For this reason there was the desire of the churches “to promote understanding, peace and unity among the various peoples and strata of society in Nigeria ...”.

From both the above conviction of members of CAN and their desire to promote understanding and unity in Nigeria, it seems as if CAN is taking the invitation of Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to its members to “participate in God’s mission of reconciliation” seriously, as they should. But is this really the case? In order to establish whether or not and how churches in Nigeria are doing so, I find it helpful to draw on Faith and Order Paper 201, which was given to the churches as a guide for accessing, on ecumenical and local levels, their participation in the mission of reconciliation. Structurally, I shall present a sample description of churches in Nigeria. I shall then adapt some provisions in Faith and Order Paper 201 to assess Nigerian churches’ response to the call for reconciliation. In the concluding part of this paper I shall argue for an ecclesiology capable of addressing ethnic conflicts in the Nigerian context.

A SAMPLE DESCRIPTION OF CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

South African theologian, Dirkie Smit, describes the story of Reformed faith and tradition in South Africa as a “story of many stories” (2008a:263; see also Smit 2008b). I have a similar view of the context within which the Nigerian churches participate in the mission of reconciliation. The Nigerian churches’ experiences of ethnic tensions and conflicts varies from one church group to another. This is largely due to the history of the missionary activities in these churches. To appreciate the situation of the churches in Nigeria with regard to the issue of reconciliation, it will be best to afford the outsider the opportunity to gain some insights into the nature and formation of some of the major churches in Nigeria. In doing so, it is not helpful to apply to Nigeria the method used by the Cameroonian theologian Precille Djomhoue (2008:355) in her own context.⁵ Although her grouping of churches in Cameroon as “mainline and others” is legitimate within the context she did it, the context discussed in this essay is vastly different, and therefore a further grouping of churches will reflect the different experiences of the Nigerian churches with ethnic realities.

Therefore, I identify four church groups: The Roman Catholic and Anglican churches; the Evangelical churches; the Reformed churches; and the Pentecostal-like churches (Gifford

⁵ Djomhoue refers to “mainline churches” as those planted by missionaries but are now self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. By “other churches” she refers to all the Pentecostal churches that came into being on the initiative taken by the indigenous people. Djomhoue’s goal was to compare the “manifestations of ecumenism” between mainline and Pentecostal churches in Cameroon. However, the goal in this essay differs. I want to look at the churches’ engagement in ethnic tensions and conflicts in Nigeria, specifically looking at how and to what extent they are responding to WCC’s call to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation in their own context. As it will soon become clear, the churches in Nigeria have had different experiences with ethnic tensions and conflicts, demanding a kind of classification that best captures those different experiences. An attempt is made to do precisely this in the essay.

2008:280).⁶ The first group is self-explanatory. The second group (Evangelical churches) refers to a broad category of churches such as the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA), the Methodist Church, African Church, Apostolic Church, Church of Assumption, Jehovah's Witnesses, Deeper Life Bible Ministry, Reformed Evangelical Mission (REM), and numerous others. The Pentecostal-like churches include, but are not limited to, the Living Faith Worldwide (Winners' Chapel), the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church (MFMC), the Kings International Christian Centre, the Full Gospel Business Men Fellowship International Inc. and similar churches. The Reformed churches, as described by the Nigerian theologian Benebo Fubara-Manuel (2008:228-251), include the *Nongo U Kristu u ken Sudan hen Tiv* (NKST – formerly called Dutch Reformed Church Mission), the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (PCN), the Nigerian Reformed Church (NRC), the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRCN), the Reformed Church in Central Nigeria (RCCN), the Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ (ERCC), and the Qua Iboe Church. I admit, as Gifford (2008:276) does, that this does not cover all the churches. Certainly, this categorisation does not necessarily capture the diversity of church traditions present in Nigeria. However, it does serve the purpose of the discussion in this essay.

The Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches listed in the first category were the first to appear on the Nigerian scene. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, there were already Augustinian missionaries from Portugal, Italy and Spain, making converts around the south-western part of Nigeria. They moved further north at the beginning of the nineteenth century to cover the whole country by the twentieth century. The Roman Catholic missionary policy entailed first converting the kings, in order to have easy access to their subjects. This missionary policy enabled them to work across various kingdoms associated with various ethnic groups, even though they did not identify specific ethnic groups for missionary explorations. Therefore, wherever they went they preached the gospel and established Roman Catholic churches. Hence there are no Igbo, Yoruba, Tiv, Hausa, Idoma or any other tribal Roman Catholic churches in Nigeria (cf. Catholic Secretariat s.a.). The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) took a similar approach to evangelism as the Roman Catholic Church did. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was responsible for the establishment of the Anglican Church in Nigeria. They also worked in specific locations rather than among specific ethnic groups. Thus, this Church's membership cut across many ethnic groups. Perhaps, the cordial and bilateral relationship between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church contributed considerably to the duo's success in the country (cf. IARCCUM 2007). Catholic Augustinians and Our Lady of Apostles' missionaries used CMS buildings and facilities for worship in the formative years of Catholic missionary work in northern Nigeria.

It was indeed here, in northern Nigeria, that both Roman Catholic and CMS personnel encountered the forced exclusion of certain ethnic groups from being evangelised. This state

⁶ I use the category "Pentecostal-like" instead of Pentecostal for similar reasons that Gifford uses it in his work. It is somewhat difficult to place the numerous Pentecostal groups in Nigeria in similar categories as those that can be used to categorise Pentecostal churches in the USA. To use the designation "independent churches" will be misleading as well since there are independent churches in Nigeria, for example, Ekankar, but also many others that have no trace of Pentecostal elements in them.

of affairs was the result of an agreement between Lord Lugard, the then British Governor-General of Nigeria, and the Hausa/Fulani so-called “ruling class” in the north.⁷ The agreement was that CMS was allowed to carry out their evangelical activities only if they were willing to avoid reaching out to Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups. The reason for this was that Islam was used to sustain the political interests of Hausa/Fulani ruling class to dominate other tribes. In return for the numerous (more than 200) other ethnic groups in the area being allowed to convert to any alternative religion, the British Administration agreed not to interfere with the Hausa/Fulani political aspirations towards domination of minority groups. It will thus not be incorrect to argue that the political arrangement between the British colonial masters and the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group accounts for the beginnings of missionary work among particular ethnic groups, particularly in northern Nigeria. The policy of the non-Christianisation of the Muslim ethnic groups (i.e. the Hausa/Fulani group) was also strictly adhered to by missionary societies responsible for planting of churches in the third and fourth categories mentioned above. What this meant was that tribes/ethnic groups were divided among specific missionary groups, and that the churches planted by specific missionary groups among the specific tribes they evangelised ended up being the churches of those tribes – this will also become evident in the discussions in the following paragraphs.

The broad category of Evangelical churches had the goal of preaching to anyone they met in the southern part of Nigeria. However in the north, the policy of non-Christianisation of the Muslim groups was in place. Therefore, the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), the missionary group that planted ECWA, had to work among southern Kaduna ethnic groups (who are mostly Christians) and down to the Plateau tribes in the present Plateau State.

The migration of some Muslim groups to areas previously occupied by the non-Muslims in the second half of the twentieth century created tension between the two groups. The recent crisis in Jos, Plateau State, is one example of such tensions. The Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS) that started its missionary activities – as the Catholic and CMS missionaries did – among freed slaves in the coastal areas without much hindrance, also had to contend with the policy of non-Christianisation of the Muslim ethnic groups in the northern part of the country. Already in 1926, at a missionary conference in Lokoja, a decision was taken to divide the ethnic groups/tribes among the different missionary groups.⁸ Following the 1926 decision, ethnic groups/tribes began to lay claim to specific church groups planted by particular mission boards. The WMS, for example, worked among the Idomas in southern Benue. This explains why their first indigenous church leader, late Bishop Achigili, was an Idoma. Although they also made converts among other tribes in the Benue Valley, most of their members in that region are of Idoma origin.

⁷ Detailed documentation exists on this arrangement, its objectives, and how it was implemented. See especially the work of Catholic theologian and civil activist, Mathew Hassan Kukah (1993). Tanko (1995), a Catholic ecumenical theologian from Kaduna State in northern Nigeria, has also done a comprehensive analysis of how the Hausa/Fulani hegemony affected the ecumenical unity of the churches in that part of the country.

⁸ See Eugene Rubingh (1969) for an analysis of the circumstances that led to the call of the missionary conference in Lokoja, Nigeria.

Nigerian Pentecostal-like churches are mostly the inventions of the indigenous people. In fact, a number of them, such as the Winners' Chapel, RCCG and MFMC, among others, were Nigerian exports to other countries (Gifford 2008). All three of these major Pentecostal-like churches have their headquarters in the Lagos area. As Gifford rightly observes, they all emphasise prosperity (a true believer should be successful in all s/he does), as well as baptism by the Holy Spirit for the bestowal of spiritual gifts. However, the promise of (economic) prosperity is particularly attractive to their members. For this reason, no discussion on ethnic conflicts and other public issues occurs within these churches. In a word, the ministry of these churches is person-oriented and not group-oriented.

Among the four groups of churches described above, it is the fourth group that has to contend with ethnic divisions. The various Reformed churches are missionary churches. Therefore, the missionary policy of their founding fathers is largely responsible for the churches' subsequent experience with ethnicity. Of all the Reformed churches in Nigeria, PCN was the first to be established. By 1846, missionaries from the Church of Scotland had already commenced missionary work among the Ibos and Ibibios in the old Eastern Region (now South-East). Their work did not extend to other minority tribes but was restricted to the south-eastern zone. The other minority groups would later constitute the "other" (ethnic groups) within the PCN. Accusations are made of the marginalisation of the minority ethnic groups within the PNC and according to Uma Onwunta, a former Moderator of the PCN, this situation affects the "missional" activities of PCN (Onwunta 2006:4).

More prominent among the Nigerian Reformed churches that worked among specific ethnic groups are the churches planted through the missionary work of Sudan United Mission (SUM) founded by Karl Kunm in 1904 (Akper 2009:4-7). SUM had two branches: the South African branch comprising of Afrikaans- and English-speaking missionaries, and the Christian Reformed Church of North American branch. The missionaries from the South African branch split after a decision to separate the English-speaking group from the Afrikaans-speaking group in 1937 (Rubingh 1969:90). This in turn led to the establishment of two churches: ERCC (1957) among the Madas and the Alagos south of Jos by the English-speaking group, and NKST (1959) among the Tiv in the Benue Valley by the Afrikaans-speaking group (the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa). The North American branch had only an English-speaking group that worked among the Kutevs and Jukuns. Although they planted only one church, the *Eklesiyar Kristi A Sundan, Ladin Benue* (EKAS), this church later split due to tribal differences between the two ethnic groups within EKAS. For this reason CRCN now exists among the Jukuns, and RCCN among the Kutevs.

The other Reformed church of a specific tribe is NRC. Missionaries from Protestant churches in the Netherlands came to Nigeria in the second half of the twentieth century. They specifically worked among the Izi in south-eastern Nigeria.⁹ In 1974, the NRC was formed among the Izi. Despite this tradition of Reformed churches for specific tribes, the Qua Iboe Church was planted by Samuel Bill, who did not work among a particular ethnic group. Bill was, however, only able to cover a small geographic area where the impact of his work can be

⁹ Note that Izi were not converted by the Scottish missionaries that worked among the Ibos in the same region.

noticed. After his death, the gospel spread beyond the Ekwere in the Niger Delta area to other parts of the country. Today, there exist Qua Iboe churches in central Nigeria and beyond.

From the sketchy overview of the history of the formation of the given sample of Nigerian churches, two major realities become apparent: firstly, it shows that Nigerian churches did and do not have the same experience with regard to ethnic Christianity (ethnic churches). For this reason, one expects that the churches will also have different attitudes to ethnic tensions and within their ministry of reconciliation. Secondly, the overview indicates that the emergence of ethnic churches was the making of the missionaries that planted them.

Before moving on to a discussion of how the churches (in the four categories mentioned above) are currently responding to the call by the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission to “participate in God’s mission of reconciliation” in their respective communities, it will be helpful to first look at the relationship between the churches themselves and their relationship with the parties in conflict.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCHES AND CHURCHES AND CONFLICTING PARTIES

The two churches in the first category have strong ties with each other. They agree to collaborate in matters of church life and ministry. There is also a growing “consensus in faith” between them. This is clearly expressed in the statement on their “fresh commitment to share together in common life and witness”, as contained in the *International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission* statement of agreement.¹⁰ Based on this common goal of visible and living unity, the two communions, as they call themselves, appointed various commissions to address various societal issues such as ethnic tensions and conflicts (the Peace, Justice and Development Commission), health, ecumenism, etc. Nationally, the churches of the two communions are members of CAN and Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN).

Members of churches of the communions have been affected in various crises in Nigeria, such as the sectarian violence between Muslim groups and other minority ethnic groups¹¹ (the majority among these being Christian)¹² in Kaduna State in north-western Nigeria in 1991, 1992, 2000 and 2001, and the sectarian violence in Jos in north-central Nigeria in 2003, 2008, and 2010. Through CAN, these communions and the churches have reached out to various

¹⁰ IARCCUM (2007). Paragraph 6 of this statement reads as follows: “We believe that now is the appropriate time for the authorities of our two Communions to recognize and endorse this new stage through the signing of a Joint Declaration of Agreement. This Agreement would set: our shared goal of visible unity; an acknowledgement of the consensus in faith that we have reached, and a fresh commitment to share together in common life and witness.”

¹¹ I refer to these crises as sectarian and not religious because of the conviction of many, Christians and Muslims alike, that the violence was ethnic in nature and politically motivated. It was a power-play between the Fulani migrants in Jos, who happen to be mostly Muslim, and the indigenous Birom people, who happen to be mostly Christians. In the recent Jos crisis, the Sultan of Sokoto, the Chairman of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Nigeria, Alhaji Sa’ad Abubakar III, as well as the President of CAN, Archbishop John Onayikan, the Catholic bishop of Abuja, stated in the media (*ThisDay*, 7 February 2010) that the violence is ethnic in nature and politically motivated.

¹² Many of the victims of the numerous violent crises in Kaduna and Jos were not Christians. They were simply members of the contending ethnic groups.

conflicting groups at different times, calling for peaceful co-existence. The churches in the second category have a more complex relationship among themselves than churches in the third and fourth categories. Some among them like ECWA accept only adult baptism, but by immersion. Other churches in that category, such as the African Church, accept polygamy, while the others do not.

The Pentecostal-like churches, as Gifford (2008), Djomhoue (2008), and Ukwuegbu (2008) assert, emphasise the visible manifestation of spiritual gifts, which is measured in terms of the successes achieved by the believer. Therefore, most of them see traditional churches as spiritually dead, possessing no power to exorcise demons and bad luck. The churches in the first, second and fourth categories “condemn” Pentecostal-like churches for their lack of sound theological training and biblical exegesis. They argue that Pentecostal-like churches lay more emphasis on the spontaneous effects of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer and preacher. This, according to them, disregards the original meaning of the biblical texts Pentecostal-like preachers allude to in their healing ministries.

Pentecostal-like churches have their own fellowship. This is called Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). A good number of these churches are also members of CAN. However, their involvement in the ministry of reconciliation in the public domain is not easy to discern.

The Reformed churches in the fourth category, as was seen in the last section above, are most often implicated in ethnic tensions and conflicts since most of them function as ethnic churches. This, more often than not, translates into crises between their respective members that inevitably also involve conflict, not only between the Muslims groups and these churches, but also between the different Christian churches in this category themselves (Akper 2009:6-18). Notable examples are the conflicts between the Jukuns and the Tiv, the Jukuns and the Kutev, the Kutev and the Tiv, where CRCN, RCCN and NKST churches and properties are destroyed during ethnic conflicts (Akper 2009:16-17). The PCN, too, has to contend with internal ethnic tensions between the dominant Ibo group and other minority groups within the structures of the PCN (Onwunta 2007:4). In 2006, the ERCC was caught up in the political conflict between minority Muslim settler groups and the indigenous non-Muslim majorities in Nasarawa State.

All the Reformed churches are part of the Reformed Ecumenical Council of Nigeria (RECON), the national body organised under the auspices of the former Reformed Ecumenical Council. Apart from the PCN and the Qua Iboe Church, all the other members of RECON are also members of another evangelical ecumenical body of about 11 churches, *Tarayar Ekklesioyin Kristu a Nigeria* (TEKAN) (roughly translated as the “Fellowship of churches of Christ in Nigeria”). They relate to each other at this ecumenical level – and as members of CAN as well – but otherwise still function as churches in isolation from each other on an individual, ethnic level.

OVERVIEW OF CHURCHES’ RESPONSE TO ETHNIC AND SECTARIAN CONFLICTS

Paragraph 24 of Faith and Order Paper 201 reads in part:

The churches’ reconciliatory role can be seen in two interrelated contexts: first, the need to manifest unity within and between the churches themselves; and secondly, the churches’ wider role in working towards national reconciliation.

Regarding the first “context”, there is a lesson to be learnt from the South African experience. Smit (2002:128) argues that in apartheid (separate development) South Africa, South Africans “did not see in the same way”. For churches to undertake meaningful reconciliatory efforts in any context of crisis, but ethnic crisis specifically, they must “see in the same way”. Unfortunately, the Nigerian situation presents a contrary reality: the churches have different understandings of what constitutes church unity. Tanko (1995) devoted the second half of his book to arguing that the unity of believers that Christ prayed for in John 17:21 “that they may be one” goes beyond a mere fellowship of churches within an ecumenical body like CAN. According to Tanko, what is needed is a visible unity that could bring believers in “one” fellowship. His colleague from the same Nigerian Catholic tradition, Bernard Ukwuegbu (2008:309-316), argues for autonomy of the African church (i.e. churches in Africa, both mainline and indigenous). Stating his case for the urgent need for an ecclesiology for the churches in Africa, Ukwuegbu states, within the context of Pauline conviction, that there is “neither Jew nor Greek in Christ”,

[I]n the eyes of his opponents, what Paul proposes invariably jeopardizes the boundaries that maintained the ethnic integrity of the Jewish communities and protected them from foreign invasion (2008:215).

Applying the same to the African ecclesiological debate, Ukwuegbu contends that:

The same also goes today for attempts within the wider Church to view with suspicion any move by a group to find ecclesiological models and ecclesiastical structures that are attuned to their way of life (2008:315).

When reading Ukwuegbu’s proposal in the context of the discussion in this essay, it is possible to expect different faces of ecclesiology on the African continent in every country. Take Nigeria, for instance, with its more than 240 ethnic groups with different “ways of life”. How many ecclesiologies might be developed in Nigeria reflecting all those ways of life? It is also clear that Ukwuegbu and Tanko have different views on ecclesiology and concept of the unity of the church.

Despite the achievements recorded by the International Anglican-Catholic Commission for Mission and Unity, the two communions are not close to achieving the kind of unity hoped for by Tanko. Baptism has been suggested by many as the element that binds different believers together. However, it is also a point of divergence between many churches in Nigeria, as noted above. “Seeing” differently affects the churches’ ministries, and this includes their ministries of reconciliation as their divergent views of the nature, purpose, meaning of, and the reasons for reconciliation affect the efficacy of their involvement in

reconciliatory processes. If the churches themselves are not united, it is difficult to expect them to unite in their efforts to reconcile others.

Regarding the second “context” – the churches’ wider role in national reconciliation – it is important to establish whether Nigerian churches are in fact participating in national reconciliation, if such an ongoing national process indeed exists. If it does, what are the levels of involvement of the churches in Nigeria? In order to respond to these issues, one must first gain some insight into what constitutes the ongoing ethnic or sectional crises in Nigeria. It will then be easier to assess the level of involvement of the churches in any existing reconciliatory processes.

The most persistent conflicts in Nigeria are sectarian crises in the northern parts of the country between the so-called Hausa/Fulani Muslim ethnic groups and non-Muslim groups, designated “settlers”. The second most persistent conflict is the restiveness in the Niger Delta centred on resource control, environmental degradation, and poor infrastructure. The major ethnic groups in this area include the Ijaw, Ibibios, Itsikiri, and Orhubo, but many others as well. There are also frequent ethnic conflicts in other parts of the country, for example, the crisis that erupted between the so-called “Fulani settlers” and others who are not Muslims in Jos-Plateau State from 17-20 January 2010. There are also other recent crises that still necessitate reconciliation, such as that between the Tiv, Jukun and Kutev in north-central Nigeria, the *Boko Haram* (“school is forbidden”) sectarian crisis in many parts of the far north of the country, and the recent conflicts between rival tribes within the Yoruba ethnic group in Osun and Ogun States in south-western Nigeria.

Regarding the means and the extent of the level of involvement of the churches in Nigeria, the activities of the Catholic Bishops’ Conferences come to mind. From 7-12 September 2009, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) met at Kafanchan – an area notorious for ethno-religious conflicts in northern Nigeria. During their meeting, the bishops deliberated and issued statements on three of the crises mentioned above. Regarding the *Boko Haram* violence in some states in northern Nigeria, the CBCN declared:

[W]e deeply regret and strongly condemn the loss of life and property caused by the religious sect, *Boko Haram*. We offer our deepest condolences to all the bereaved, and our sympathy to all those who have suffered grave material losses, irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation. We pray for God’s mercy on all the dead (CBCN 2009:Par. 9).

Convinced that this crisis had nothing to do with religion per se, the bishops pronounced as blasphemous any religious justification for what had been rather ill-motivated violence inflicted on fellow human beings, since

God has not given anyone the right to kill in his name. Neither has he authorized anyone to violate the dignity of other human beings (CBCN 2009:Par. 10).

The bishops further expressed their sadness and their disappointment with government authorities for allowing this to happen, in spite of credible security warnings that this was impending (CBCN 2009:Par. 11). On the Niger Delta crisis, the CBCN applauded the government for granting amnesty to the militants and urged them to accept the amnesty.

However, they decried the injustice done to the people of the area by previous administrations in ignoring their area in their development agendas, and urged government to fulfill its promises to the people of the area (CBCN 2009:Par. 8). They made a passionate appeal for “Nigerians [to] be granted the grace to cooperate with God in solidarity with one another to transform our nation” (CBCN 2009:Par. 24). The CBCN, however, issued no statement on reconciling the parties in conflict so that lasting peace could be established between the groups. CAN leadership only issued statements in the media condemning the sectarian acts, without providing any plans of action to reconcile the factions involved in the conflicts.¹³ RECON, the Reformed body, issued no statement and did absolutely nothing to address the sectarian crises. If anything, they merely preached during Sunday services against violence in society – services that those directly involved were not in a position to attend. Almost all the mega Pentecostal-like churches in Nigeria held their annual meetings in the outskirts of Lagos between December 2009 and January 2010.¹⁴ However, none of the churches addressed the issue of sectarian violence in Nigeria.¹⁵ The CBCN Ibadan Ecclesiastical Province met when security forces were still battling to stop the ethnic violence in Jos, and in the aftermath of tribal violence over chieftaincy close to Ibadan, the venue of their meeting. The bishops condemned and issued a statement against the Jos violence (CBCN 2010:Par. 4). However, they were silent over the Yoruba tribal conflicts at their doorstep. No discussions were held on how to reconcile the parties in conflict. On the Kutev, Jukun, and Tiv ethnic crises, three Reformed churches, NKST, RCCN and CRCN, organised a peace walk in 2008, six years after the last major incidence of armed conflict that saw members of these same churches losing their lives and properties.¹⁶ No other reconciliatory efforts have been made to ensure that the parties agree to bury the hatchet in order to live in peace with one another. In fact, in all the crises mention in this essay, it is in the Jukun, Kutev, and the Tiv crises that churches were directly confronted with ethnic conflicts. One would expect that, since all the churches (NKST, RCCN, and CRCN) are members of RECON, a deliberate attempt would have been made by RECON to bring the parties in conflict together for dialogue. The fact that this never took place is a clear indication that the churches are indeed not interested in genuine reconciliation in the society.

13 The direct involvement of churches and church bodies in most of these crises usually begins and ends with handing out relief material to victims and condemning the actions of the perpetrators and the inaction of government agencies. They also stop at exposing the bias of security operatives during the crises. The Commission for Peace and Justice of the Anglican Communion did meet with various Judicial Commissions of enquiry constituted by various government bodies, but the commissions’ reports never saw the light of day anyway. The point is that there were and are no deliberate direct efforts to engage the perpetrators and victims of these crises in dialogue in order to reconcile them with each other and, therefore, with God.

14 In fact, the tribal violence in Osun and Ogun States delayed some members of these churches on their way to what Gifford (2008:283) refers to as a “pilgrimage” to their headquarters in the suburbs of Lagos.

15 Perhaps where they considered the spiritual growth of their followers to be more important, believing that once ‘born again’ the believer will shun violence and avoid conflict. Hence, RCCG’s theme for its meeting on 14-19 December was “Our God Reigns” over all things – perhaps over violence and ethnicity as well. It is believed that members of RCCG reign with God and have therefore surpassed all social ills, including ethnic identity loyalties that threaten peace in the country.

16 The complacency of members of the three ethnically-based Reformed churches associated with these tribes in the conflicts is documented elsewhere. See Akper (2009:4-21).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Nigerian churches are aware of the call by the WCC and other ecumenical bodies to participate in God's mission of reconciliation. However, the history of their formation – especially the missional strategy of founding fathers/mothers in the Nigerian mission field – has affected the way these different churches respond to and participate in God's mission of reconciliation today. The Roman Catholic and Anglican churches approach the issue of reconciliation on the basis of biblical and theological decisions taken at ecumenical levels. The same decisions are then faithfully implemented by their local communions. The Evangelical and the Reformed churches have had a less significant impact on the issue of reconciliation, perhaps due to the absence of a sound ecclesiology that prescribes how such a mission could be carried out. The Pentecostal-like churches do not consider reconciliation in the public sphere or outside church structures as a mission to which they are called. The churches in the latter category, apart from their complacency in ethnic conflicts, also lack a well-constructed and documented ecclesiology for public engagement. The churches in the first category thus have a more appreciable approach to ethnic conflicts. However, their approach to these conflicts appears to be reactionary. They respond with condemnations of the act only, and by offering relief packages weeks or months after the conflicts have already escalated into violence. For real reconciliation, perpetrators and the victims must meet, and the offender must be willing to confess the wrong that was committed and must ask for forgiveness with remorse and conversion of heart – i.e. with the desire never to “sin” again. Nigerian churches are as yet to jointly or individually facilitate such a process. The same is true for inter-church dialogue and reconciliation. The affiliation of Reformed and Evangelical churches with specific ethnic groups is a dangerous phenomenon. Their continued existence, separately and among specific ethnic groups when they subscribe to the same doctrinal standards (Three Forms of Unity), puts to the test their “gospel of reconciliation”. How could any invitation from them to people to reconcile with each other as a sign of their reconciliation with God have any credibility when they, as churches themselves, are not visibly worshipping together?

In light of the foregoing discussion, it would seem as if a biblically-based ecclesiology is needed to expose the nature and mission of the church in the Nigerian society. Such an ecclesiology will also show the danger of the continued divisions among churches and the fact that the current situation calls into question the churches' ministry of reconciliation. A common understanding of the nature and mission of the churches in the Nigerian context, by all the churches, is a good place to start. Inter-church dialogue is as important as dialogue between ethnic groups and between aggrieved parties. The churches must first reconcile their ecclesiologies in order to reconcile the Nigeria's population groups.¹⁷

¹⁷ The attitude of the Reformed churches that continue to operate on ethnic bases calls for urgent attention. Benebo Fubara-Manuel (2008:233), former General Secretary of RECON and Clerk of Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, reports that in 2004, during the 16th General Assembly of the PCN at Enugu-Nigeria, it was resolved that the continued existence of several Reformed churches in Nigeria is a poor witness to the gospel of Christ which they are called to preach. Therefore, the PCN called on RECON for the formation of one, united Reformed church in Nigeria. Today, several years on, the churches still have not seen the need to come together in one communion.

This does not mean that any ecclesiology acceptable to the churches will automatically translate into a successful ministry of reconciliation. The South African experience has given us reason to believe some ecclesiologies in fact promote and sustain ethnicity, race and oppression,¹⁸ thereby exacerbating conflicts. The South African theologian Clint Le Bruyns has suggested ways of evaluating theologies that are constructed for the churches as they deal with differences. First, he suggests we should ask to what extent such theological "resources assist us in recognizing and respecting differences, but especially facilitating a forum of cooperation and communication"? Secondly, we must seek to know if such "theological resources manifest cooperative tendencies on how we live with differences" (2006:129). I believe these criteria are capable of helping the churches in constructing an ecclesiology that could not only be effective, but may stand the test of time.

¹⁸ Allan Boesak, the South African black theologian who had been deeply involved in the struggles to dismantle apartheid structures in his own country, has documented some of the obvious ways in which theology sought to intensify segregation in the then South African context (1976, 1984). Renowned South African theologian John de Gruchy deliberately sought to "liberate" Reformed theology, seeing it as being trapped in the theological battle for supremacy among South African population groups during the apartheid era, especially the negative image it merited for itself in South Africa. For this reason, De Gruchy was convinced that the "liberating" nature of Reformed theology itself needed to be stressed (1991). Cf. also the comments of Smit (2008a:264) in this regard.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akper, G.I. 2009. Belhar Beyond Southern Africa: A Nigerian Reformed Perspective. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 135:4-21.
- Boesak, A.A. 1976. *Farewell to innocence*. Kampen: Kok.
- 1984. *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, liberation and the Calvinistic tradition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- CBCN. 2009. *Conversion for justice and reconciliation*. Communiqué at the end of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the Centre for Transfiguration, Kafanchan, Kaduna State, 7-12 September. [Retrieved 15 February 2010] <http://www.cbcn-ng.org/pdf/CBCN%20Communique%20Kafanchan%20September%202009.pdf>
- 2010. Communiqué issued at the end of a two day meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria: Ibadan Ecclesiastical Province, 18-19 January. [Retrieved 15 February 2010] <http://cbcng.org/pdf/2010/jan/CATHOLICBISHOPS.pdf>
- Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. s.a. Historical notes. Lagos: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria.
- De Gruchy, J.W. 1991. *Liberating Reformed theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Djomhoue, P. 2008. Manifestations of ecumenism in Africa today: A study of the mainline and Pentecostal churches in Cameroon. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8(4):355-368.
- Fubara-Manuel, B.F. 2008. Reformed Identity in Nigeria. *Reformed World* 58(4):189-206.
- Gifford, P. 2008. Trajectories in African Christianity. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8(4):275-289.
- Gotan, C.T. 1995. Gospel of Liberation in the Nigerian Context. Unpublished paper read during the July 1995 Nigerian Catholic Bishops Conference, Enugu. (Available from author.)
- IARCCUM (International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission). 2007. *Together in unity and mission. Building on 40 years of Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue*. London: SPCK. [Retrieved 12 February 2010] <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/ecumenical/dialogues/catholic/iarccum/docs/pdf/Growing%20Together%20in%20Unity%20and%20Mission%20definitive.pdf>
- Kukah, M.H. 1993. *Religion, politics and power in northern Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum.

- Le Bruyns, C.C. 2006. Living with differences from a theological perspective. In: E.A.J.G. van der Borgh (ed). *Affirming and living with differences*. Zoetermea: Meinema. 136-114.
- Onwunta, U.A. 2006. Ethnicity and Missional Strategies within the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria. Unpublished DTh dissertation. Stellenbosch University.
- Rubingh, E. 1969. *The Sons of Tiv: A study of the rise of the church among the Tiv of Central Nigeria*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Smit, D.J. 2002. "Seeing Differently" – On prayer and politics. In: L. Holness & R. Wüstenberg (eds). *Theology in dialogue: The impact of the arts, humanities, and science on contemporary religious thought*, Festschrift for John W. de Gruchy. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 271-284.
- 2008a. What does it mean to live in South Africa and be Reformed? *Reformed World* 58(4):263-283.
- 2008b. Challenges for Reformed churches in Africa: A contemporary narrative. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8(4):319-336.
- Tanko, P. 1995. *The Christian Association of Nigeria and the challenge of the ecumenical imperative*. Jos: Fab.
- Ukwuegbu, B. 2008. "Neither Jew nor Greek": The church in Africa and the quest for self-understanding in the light of the Pauline vision and today's context. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8(4):305-318.
- Van der Borgh, E.A.J.G. 2009. *Sunday Morning – The Most Segregated Hour: On racial reconciliation as unfinished business for theology in South Africa and beyond*. Amsterdam: VU University.
- WCC. 2006. *Participating in God's mission of reconciliation. A resource for churches in situations of conflict*. Faith and Order Paper 201. Geneva: World Council of Churches.

KEYWORDS / TREFWOORDE

Reconciliation / Versoening
 Ethnicity / Etnisiteit
 Nigerian churches / Nigeriese kerke
 Faith and Order Commission
 Identity / Identiteit

Dr Godwin I. Akper

School of Arts and Social Sciences
 National Open University of Nigeria
 14/16 Ahmadu Bello Way
 Victoria Island
 Lagos
 NIGERIA
 E-mail: igodwin@nou.edu.ng
