

Contextualized Theological Education for Transformative Church Planting in Africa

Ilami Ozegbe

Abstract

This paper examines contextualized theological education for a transformative church planting. Many of the third world countries inherited theological education from the west and have continued to depend on the west for curriculum patterns regardless of the context. The paper argues that if the Great Commission is to be fulfilled, the world evangelized, the gospel understood and churches planted, then theological institutions are to design appropriate curriculum which equips the students for the task of contextualization. An early attempt by the AICs to contextualize the gospel in the nineteenth century gained acceptance and resulted in the planting of churches. But, that brand of Christianity was faced with some religious extreme of adding extra-biblical modes to their worship. Through qualitative analytical methods, the study clarifies the concepts of church planting from the Biblical perspective, its relevance and the necessity to the task of contextualization. The paper concludes that contextualized theological education will provide available human resources and academic facilities for training people who have a sense of call to proclaim the truth concerning God's word, plant churches and lead people step by step to Christian maturity in their own cultural setting.

Introduction

The twentieth-century missionary enterprise that took Christianity out of Europe to Africa was a resounding success. The missionary mandate was to go and "make disciples", gather these disciples into

local indigenous churches and teach them Christian living and service as recorded in Matthew 28:19-21. This exercise has been very much rewarding as many churches have been planted with different church denominations. In line with the continuation of the great commission, theological institutions have also been established in different countries in Africa with the sole aim of training indigenous leaders to plant churches for kingdom expansion.

However, over the years, African scholars have questioned the relevance and the effectiveness of Christian mission and church planting inclusive (Adelani, 2012, pp. 151-152). Such question is expressed on the background that the Euro-American Christianity to Africa was characterized by cultural imperialism. The gospel the Euro-America missionaries brought to Africa was not contextualized. Western culture was superimposed on the African converts as Christian's culture (Chipenda, 1990, pp. 15-16), the Western own mode of belief and life was passed to the African converts, believing this to be worthy of emulation. This concern has been expressed in various debates, conferences, and seminars under the theme: "indigenization" "inculturation" and "contextualization" and the focus has been on how to rectify this defect in missionary activity, including theological education in Africa.

In another dimension, Christians and non-Christians often ask, "Why do we need to plant new churches"? They sometimes base this question on their feelings that there are enough churches. Others question the need for new churches, contending that church planting has become a business, and that some new churches are not viable and transformative in nature. In the light of this, this paper examines theological education in relation to contextualization and the role contextualized theological education will play for the transformation of church planting in Africa.

Contextualized Theological Education

Contextualization is a widely used and hotly debated concept in missiological circles. However, one of the most important works that clearly delineate and clarify the most used, and most debated concept of contextualization is David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen's, book on "*Contextualization...*" They stated that contextualization is

the “communication of the Christian message in such a way that is faithful to Gods revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teaching of the Holy Scripture, which is meaningful to the respondents in their respective cultural settings (Hesselgrave, 1978, p. 143). In other words, it is the process of interpreting Christian truth in terms of applying it to real life issues arising from the socio-cultural context within which the interpreters live (Kraft, 1996:133). This entire task of mission has to be contextualized whether, in theological training, in evangelizing and in the planting of new churches.

In the area of theological training, John Chukwuneme Nnoje, wrote that theological education emerged in Africa due to the need for providing competent leadership for the church in Africa that is fast growing in the continent (Nnoje, 2012, pp. 84-94). Furthermore, McClung stated that Africa has very large Christian majorities ranging from 69% to 92% of their countries populations and is experiencing one of the fastest church growth in the world (McClung, 2006, p. 245). However, this growth is faced with challenges for the Africa Christianity and her theological education. He further indicated that the curriculum of theological education in Africa has a strong European DNA structure within its bones and fibre. The Western theological world is where Africa inherited most of its theology (McClung) and continues to depend on the west for their curriculum pattern in order to maintain its theological training.

John Mbiti discussed this crisis of dependency and stated that the contemporary religious, socio-cultural, political and economic situation in Africa requires a contextualized model of theological education (Hesselgrave, 1978, p. 43). In same view, Andrew Walls, the global icon in Church History had noted that the African church, including theological education have abundant experiences of crises and are routinely faced with social-political, economic, oppression, and a new awareness of accountability among laity” (Wall, 2007, pp. 40-44). Consequently, these issues are a challenge to theological educators and some Africa scholars have proposed a reevaluation (Kwesi, 1984, p. 106), and a change in ministerial training.

Focusing on the same dimension, E. Robert Thomson’s *Studies on theological education* indicates two dilemmas: first, what to include in the curriculum as new disciplines and issues emerging from a rapidly

changing society. Second, how to integrate academic, practical, spiritual and contextualized theological training (Thomson, 2023). Apart from these studies, several conferences have been held and recommendations made on how to promote excellence in theological education.

In the area of Christian theology, Osadolor Imasogie suggested three points that are pertinent to contextualization in Africa and this include: a new appreciation of the efficiency of Christ power over evil forces, a new emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit and a new emphasis on the omnipresence of God (Imasogie, 1986, pp. 79-85). In addition, a new way of guiding individuals toward personal change from the religion of darkness to the light of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, the work of Melchizedek M. Ponniah is a representative of individual efforts at examining contextualization of theological education. He outlines four levels of contextualized theological education as:

- Missiological Contextualization: theological education should aim at renewal and reform of churches and the development of human potential and realization of justice.
- Structural Contextualization: the structures of theological education should correspond to the social and economic condition of a given situation.
- Theological contextualization: theological in any situation that is done is authentic as it must relate to the proclamation of the gospel to the urgent task of the church in the world.
- Pedagogical contextualization: theological educational is a liberating, creative, and transformational force, academic study and practice merged into one approach (Ponnaih, 2003).

From the above suggested outline, one cannot but commend the work of Ponniah and his effort toward the contextualization of theological education in Africa. Furthermore, it is significant to note that regardless of the perspective, the concern for the contextualization of theological education in Africa is basically the same. Theological educators in Africa are to stir up concern and follow in the part of those who have moved from the stage of offering

suggestions into the stage of actual doing (Ponniah, 2003). For, the theological education to be relevant and contextual, its aim, goal, personnel, material resources, appropriate attitudes, and behaviour are to be considered. In other words, theological educators are to rise to the needs that exist within the society and culture.

Attempt at Contextualizing Church Planting in Africa

In the 19th century, within the Sub-Saharan Africa, there had been an early attempt to contextualize the gospel making it acceptable to the Africans. Smart observed that Africa Indigenous Churches (AICs) made concerted efforts to contextualize Christianity in Africa rather than accept the foreign structure of Western Christianity (Ayegboyin & Ukah, 2008, pp. 7-8). The AICs did not only take root but, proliferated and showed phenomenal growth through the planting of churches. These churches, produced desirable results with the fact that indigenization and Africanization were not only desirable but necessary efforts toward achieving the dream of the three self-formula known as “self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating,” (Ayegboyin & Ukah) as espoused by Rufus Anderson, Henry Venn and Roland Allen.

In spite of the different varieties of the AICs, there was a common identity that justifies their being distinguished from each other. Among the Yoruba they were referred to as Aladura because of their intense fervour for “energetic” prayer. Their interests in faith healing and exorcism earned them the name: Prophetic and healing ministries (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 1997, pp. 18-19). However, the leaders of the AICs did not endorse theological training during this early period and were syncretic in their worship and planting of churches as observed.

J. M. Fernandex, commented that in an attempt to contextualize the gospel, the African Indigenous Churches practice some religious extreme of adding extra-biblical modes to their worship and ministry. According to Fernandex, the syncretism was more obvious in some of the churches that were offshoots of the mission churches, some of the AICs, engaged in spiritism, cultism, and further have alliances with witches and wizards. Schreiter calls this, the second type of Christianity, where Christianity is blended with non-Christian

elements (Schreiter, 1985, pp. 144) and this brand of Christianity loses its basic structure and identity. However, the fear that contextualization of the gospel may be syncretic, should not deter the church from making attempts to contextualize the gospel and in the planting of churches. The gospel and culture are to mutually engage in a dialogue where the purpose is to plant new churches under the lordship of Jesus in its historical situation. The contextualization of church planting allows each local church to worship Jesus in their cultural context in agreement with the Biblical injunction.

Church Planting in Africa

Church planting is the ministry that seeks to establish new churches through evangelism, discipleship and gathering of persons into functioning congregation. Church planting is simply starting new churches in obedience to the Great Commission and gathering the new believers for worship. According to Stetzer, the church in Africa have made remarkable impacts and multiplied more than five-fold during the first half of the twentieth century (Stetzer, 2003, p. 95). There is a renewed interest in church planting in some parts of Africa. The church is reaching different classes of people in the cities through the planting of new churches, reaching the new generation, and new residential areas where people are.

The existing churches are vigorously planting new churches, renewing the existing churches, as well as growing the body of Christ in the cities. Conferences, Seminars, even on global stage are still being organized to teach the art of church planting. Theological education is providing new creative Christian leaders for the cities. The church in Nigeria is not standing aloof amidst the evolving trends in church planting in Africa. However, in Nigeria, Wilfred Jibril contended that planting of churches has been grossly abused with every Tom, Dick and Harry setting up a church after graduating from the Seminary or Bible School (Jubril, 2018). Planting of churches has been an issue of debate in recent times.

According to Anthony Okonkwo Gbuji, a survey was carried out in 1994 to examine the challenge of how the churches in Nigeria can launch into the new era of evangelization and in the planting of churches. The report shows that some church members are “very

religious but at the depth of this religiosity, there is a shallowness; a lack of deep faith which is a lack of faith commitment to the person of Jesus Christ.” There is a make-money-quick syndrome in the church resulting to loss of values and transformation of lives. Gbuji further stated that some persons in Nigeria (including church members) are not really what they seem to be; rather, they pay double allegiance to God and money, the world and the spirits” (Gbuji). Some churches have become business ventures and industries in order to make money.

In addition, Ada Moses observed that a great deal of heresy takes place in some churches under the guise of power-encounter. Those who disobey sound teachings are caught by the devil; false prophecies and deceptions loom large in some churches, and the use of delusive prophecies and heresies to catch victims for exploitation is the order of the day (Moses, 2019). The above observations is the reason why Andrew Walls, have earlier noted that the African church have abundant experiences of crises and therefore, a theological response on the socio-economic development is needed to work out some sort of Christian response (Wall, 2007, pp. 40-44). Similarly, a contextualized theological training is needed in situations where western theology has no answers because it has no questions or any relevant experience.

Nihinlola shared the same concern that a theological study of the problem of human development in Africa is very necessary and appropriate at such a time as this. A contextualized theological study of human being and human existence that can help individuals, families and communities obtain appropriate tools, skills, training, education, and knowledge to free them from both physical and spiritual poverty (Nihinlola, 2010, pp. 99-110). Similarly, John Parratt stated that a contextualized theological education asks the question, “how do we interpret what was given to a culture 2000 years ago in different cultures today”? (Parratt, 1987). African theologians agree that in order to contextualize theological education in the African continent, new methods of approach are needed. Western theology is inadequate for the task of planting new churches that are transformative to the lives of people in the different Africa context.

Contextualized Transformative Church Planting

Transformation is a viable tool in church planting. Transformative church planting does not imply the restructuring of the church, doctrine in the likeness of Western society. Rather, it is the transforming of unbiblical and non-Christian ways into the ways appropriate within Biblical Christianity. Guiding individuals toward personal change from the religion of darkness to the light of Jesus Christ. The church is to proclaim the message of release to the captives and recovery of sight to those who are lost. In Matthew 9, 36, the Scripture reveals the mind of God toward those who are lost. *“When Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”*

For instance, there are many lost and unreached peoples group in Nigeria; the Joshua Project currently lists 523 people groups in Nigeria and out of this number, 79 are considered unreached, with a total population of 53 million. The largest of these groups are the Hausa and the Fulani’s with a combined population of 40 million (Joshua, 2014). The church as the body of Christ on earth is the channel to reach the unreached people with the planting of churches. Odesola stated that a proper approach to planting a new church is a call for expressing Christianity in local terms with open-mindedness of Scripture (Odesola). The gospel and culture are to mutually engage in a dialogue where the purpose is to plant churches under the lordship of Jesus in its historical situation.

Furthermore, the open mindedness of Scripture, the respondents’ situation and the spiritual needs of the people should be of paramount concern for the effectiveness of the gospel and the transformation of individual lives. Shaw share same view when he asserted that “in order to respond to the gospel message, people must perceive it as an answer to their needs” (Shaw, 1988, p. 188). In the same way, Richardson observed that the gospel message is a “prepared message for a prepared people” and that God has already prepared his people for the message by placing within each culture symbols and forms to aid in the understanding of the gospel and in the transformation of individual lives and society (Don, 1995, p. 55). Ministers of the gospel are to identify such elements of the culture that will make it easier for the recipient to understand.

God has already prepared all people on earth to hear the gospel. The preparation has been done through the general revelation and the special revelation. That is, “the basic ideas a child gets from general revelation and continues to receive all the way through his education—even in graduate school, are foundational to that individual’s hope and to later response to the special revelation.” The presentation of the gospel and planting of new churches becomes easier when it is contextualized and presented in the understanding that God has already prepared the people. Church planters are to avoid both the enforcement of the western missionary’s own cultural heritage and the syncretistic inclusion of the elements from the receptor culture which would alter or eliminate aspects of the message upon which the integrity of the church depends.

The gospel is to be proclaimed from a deeply involved incarnational presence, plant churches and with a deeply caring social consciousness. Furthermore, the church itself: the fellowship of the body, and the liturgical life of the people of God should be the deepest driving force in responding to both spiritual and physical needs of people. The power of the word of God studied, proclaimed, shared and lived will be the transforming power that will make a difference in people’s lives. The vital presence of leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit will give power and purpose in the midst of the life challenges, whether it be the socio-economic or the morally corrupting pressures in society.

Planting of new churches should gear toward propagating righteousness, hard work and trust in God. Church members must be taught to put their trust more in God to make new converts, plant churches and be transforming agents in the society, for no human power can save lives and restore the wounded humanity in the city.

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