
Re-reading Acts 2:44-45 and the extent of communal living in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri during COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on communities around the world, and the Anglican Diocese of Owerri in Nigeria is no exception. The main thrust of this paper is to investigate the effects of the pandemic on communal living in the Diocese within the context of Acts 2:44-45, which describes the communal living practices of the early Christian church. The study found that the pandemic had negative consequences for the poor, who are often more vulnerable to the effects of economic instability. Despite the efforts of the church and other charitable organizations to provide aid to those in need, the study found that these efforts were inadequate. The study suggests that churches and Christians in the Diocese should be proactive in addressing spiritual, social, and economic emergencies through communal living, as was done by the early church. This could involve sharing resources, providing mutual support, and working together to meet the needs of those in the community who are struggling.

Introduction

The main thrust of this paper is to investigate communal living in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri, Nigeria during COVID-19 pandemic within the context of Acts 2:44-45.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on individuals and communities around the world. One significant impact has been the widespread implementation of lockdown measures and movement restrictions, which disrupted daily routines and led to widespread economic disruption. This had particularly negative consequences for the poor, who are often more vulnerable to the effects of economic instability.

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The lockdown measures put in place to slow the spread of the virus led to widespread job loss and economic insecurity. Many individuals, particularly petty traders and those in low-wage employment, lost their sources of livelihoods, leading to financial strain and uncertainty. The economic downturn caused by the pandemic disproportionately affected the poor, who often have fewer resources to fall back on in times of crisis.

In the Anglican Diocese of Owerri, many less privileged members suffered from economic challenges during the lockdown because they depended solely on daily income for survival.

(Anyanwu 2020).

The main focus of this research as stated earlier is to examine the efforts made by the Anglican Diocese of Owerri to alleviate the sufferings of their members during the COVID-19 pandemic at the same time comparing the situation in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri with that of the early church in Jerusalem described in Acts 2:44-45.

Brief history of Anglican Diocese of Owerri

The Anglican Diocese of Owerri is one of the groups of churches that share common communion with the Anglicans worldwide Okorocho (2011) defines the Anglican Church as that aspect of Christendom that is episcopally led and synodically governed. The word Anglican is used to describe the churches that are derived from the Church of England and shares common tradition of faith, church order and worship (Obilo 2007). The Anglican Diocese of Owerri is part of the Anglican Communion situated in the Owerri capital city of Imo State Nigeria. The Diocese has the jurisdiction in four local government areas of Imo State thus: Owerri Municipal, Mbaitoli, part of Owerri West and Owerri North. The headquarters of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri is the Cathedral Church of Transfiguration of Our Lord (CATOL) Owerri and the motto of the Diocese is *Ex Tenebris Ad lucem* meaning out of darkness into His marvelous light, derived from I Pet 2:9b. Currently, His Lordship Right Reverend Chukwuma Chinekezi Oparah, is the Bishop of the Diocese.

Conceptualization of the Term

I. COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a viral disease with symptoms such as dry cough, fever, sore throat, dyspnea, body pain and diarrhea. The disease started around December 2019 in

Wuhan, in Hubei province of China. It spread globally and ravaged the world in the year, 2020. This made World Health Organization (WHO) to declare COVID-19 a pandemic. As part of effort to control the spread, public places were shut down, people were forced to stay at home and also work from home with exception of medical personnel and security agencies.

II. Communal Living

Communal living is as old as the society. The concept of communal living is so wide and encompassing, that it touches every aspect of human life. This cuts across both situations of joy and sorrow. Communal living is concerned with the ways people interrelate with other people in their life situations. This is entrenched to help in proper ordering of the society. This develops from the fact that man is a social being and cannot live a meaningful life without interacting with his fellow beings. Madukwe and Madukwe (2010) contend that communal life implies concern for people and their welfare. It can be compared to an extended family structure where everyone in the community is connected to one another and looks out for one another. Everyone is responsible for looking out for one another and enduring each other's burdens. Additionally, there is a sense of care and support for one another. The rich assist the poor so that nobody dies from want while their next-door neighbor lives in opulence..

Communal living therefore is mutual assistance for one another in all situations for peaceful harmonious living. It bridges the gap between the rich and the poor in any given society. It makes the community to be a life giving or living principles that promotes and nurtures the spirit of togetherness, solidarity and community consciousness. This is important because life is meaningful when there is interaction with his fellow beings, hence an Igbo proverb *otu osisi anaghi eme ohia* which means that a tree cannot make a forest. In view of the fact that a tree cannot make a forest in in any society, communal living is fosters togetherness, interdependence and mutual support.

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Any institution becomes a community by virtue of its communal lifestyle and shared interests.

According to Egwutuora (2013), there are a variety of ties and binds that affect the members of any given community, such as blood ties. In fact, this dominates most cultures, leading to the idea that individuals are considered "people of one blood"—kinsmen or brethren.

Aside from geographical location, which brings community members into direct contact with one another, other elements that encourage synergies include physical proximity of members. These factors bring about complementarity which agrees vividly with the Igbo saying *-Agbata-obi onye bu nwanne ya* meaning one's neighbor is his relation.

Iroegbu (2000) buttressing this fact said: "The community is structured to the point that people of the same affinity interact no matter where they live. Those living in urban or rural areas, people working or doing business in the same environment or the same business share in constant common life and activities, most time, they organize themselves into associations that share affinity and solidarity. This makes them to remain as a people belonging to the same affiliation though their hometowns may be different. The unique sense of communal living is not only embedded in blood bond, Erumevba (1985), noted that brotherhood inspired communal living. He asserted that "the feeling of fraternity is manifested in the readiness to enter into the feelings of other persons to help them, if need be, without condescension". He argued that communalism does not necessarily exist because those concerned are blood relations. It exists because group of people share interests and beliefs in common. It is important to note that communal living is an essential aspect of Christian life. It promotes unity and oneness among the members of the society. It helps to identify members who have needs also proffer solutions to the needs. This manifested in the communal life of the members of early church in Acts 2:44-45.

The Exegesis of Acts 2:44-45

The Periscope

⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. (NIV)

The context of Acts of Apostles 2:44-45 is the socio-economic and religious situations of the early Church in Jerusalem. Adelakum (2010) identifies the passage as the first précis of the event in the community of believers; the second summary is recorded in Acts 4:32-35. Adeyemo (2006)

treats Acts 4:32-35 as simply a duplication of what was said in Acts 2:44. However, a close observation reveals a clear indication that there are changes in the procedures of the two passages.

Before the ascension of Jesus, the apostles were commanded by Jesus to stay in Jerusalem for 'the promise of the Father' (Acts 1:4). The promise manifested on the Pentecost day when the apostles experienced baptism by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) After the experience of the infilling of the Holy Spirit by the Apostles (Acts 2:1-11) Peter addressed the crowd who suspected the Apostles were drunk, he denied that the believers were drunk with wine. Peter lined this event with the prophecy of Joel 2:17 – 21, which he interpreted as a prediction of the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2: 14 – 41). He proclaimed that all flesh shall prophesy. He emphasized on the Resurrection of Christ and about the exalted Jesus whom God has made both Lord and Christ. Peter enjoined them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. On that fateful day three thousand three thousand men joined the church hence they become the community of believers. The text (Acts 2:44-45) presents the history of communal living of the church at its infancy. The members had communion with God and with other believers. They listened to the apostles' teaching, partook in the breaking of bread and devoted themselves to prayers and fellowship. According to New Geneva Bible (1997), the early church preserved their new converts by making sure they were baptized immediately (Acts 2:41). The multitude ton pisteusanton (of believers, that is, Christians) shared a common faith that bound together and they also shared everything in fellowship hapanta koina. Adeyemo (2006) notes that the believers were of one heart and mind καρδιά και ψυχή μία: it is difficult to distinguish precisely between the two words, but they undoubtedly imply entire harmony in affection and thought according to a common Hebrew mode of expression. Both ψυχή and καρδιά occur as here with μία, 1 Chronicles 12:38, 2 Chronicles 30:12. This shows the kind of unity that was in the church at that time, nobody claimed ownership of any possession rather they had everything in common. The unity also enabled extraordinary sharing of all they had. Members of the early church were perfectly knitted as one

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body and with one life, hence they experienced a common bond of fellowship which made every problem to be addressed such that there was no needy person in their midst.

The members of the early church were ready to assist one another especially the needy in their midst. According to Adeyemo (2010) the use of the needy instead of poor is interesting and appropriate because some of these believers may have been rich in their home town they were because they separated from their property. They had no access to their wealth, hence they were in need. Thus they ate together with glad and sincere hearts. They sold their possessions and goods voluntarily and gave the money to the brethren according to the need of a person *καθότι ἄν τις χρείαν εἶχεν* (v 45). The word sold *ἐπίπρασκον* and distributed *διεμέριζον* all two verbs are in the imperfect, this tense may denote an action which is done often and continuously (cf. Acts 4:34, Acts 18:8, Mark 12:41). This implies that the early church was made up of altruistic members, who were in the custom providing for the less privileged in their midst to the point there was no needy person among them. Hence, they demonstrated love and care to their vulnerable members as communal living.

Social Status of Early Church Members

The situation of Acts 2:44-45, has raised some issues of concern about the social status of the early believers. Some issues are the economical state of the members of the early and their motivation to sell their property to cater for the needy in their midst. Adelakun (2010) notes that most of the members of the early church lived in Jerusalem after the ascension of Jesus. However, Adeyemo (2006) pointed out that none of the apostles were native or residents of Jerusalem, and that they were separated from their relatives and places of commerce (Mark 10: 28). Jerusalem's economy at the time was struggling since it was mostly reliant on enterprises related to Temple-related religious activities. Adelakun (2010) describes the situation, thus:

At the time of Jesus, Palestine was undergoing a period of rapid social transition. A number of natural phenomena, e.g. the famine of 25 AD when even Herod was moved to melt the palace plate for the poor and the epidemic of 29 AD combined with the probable over population of Palestine and problems in the distribution of goods to produce social upheaval....

Jerusalem was in this situation when Jesus told the apostles to stay there until they receive the Holy Spirit. Some church members were probably in need due to their extended absence from

doing business and earning a living. Although Paul's claim in Acts 24:17 also suggests that some early Christians—particularly the earliest converts in Jerusalem—were destitute. Some middle class individuals were drawn to the church as a result of the spread of the Gospel to the Gentile world so that they might periodically send gifts to the believers in Jerusalem.

These claims appear to show that some of the early believers were not just low-status individuals but also poor. The term "not all of you" does not, however, refer to every believer; rather, it just suggests that there were a mix of rich and poor men present, including slaves, common people, and poor men like the apostles and Ananias and Saphira who owned land plots in Judea or abroad. The former were many while the latter were few. Dickson (2011) affirms this position, thus:

Even before the ministry of Paul, there were indications of wealthy and middle class people in the church. For example Barnabas clearly had some wealth (Acts 4:37) and Cornelius was a member of the proletariat (Acts 10:1). Cornelius must have been a member of the middle class. With Paul's conversion and ministry, the class basis of the Early Church became even wider.

One of the important lessons from the experience of the early church is that the believers were willing to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich in the congregation. Poverty was not encouraged neither was affluence discouraged. Poverty was not pleasant to the early church, hence, the apostles sought for help from brethren (Gal. 2:10).

The Situation of Owerri during Covid-19 Lockdown

The lockdown COVID-19 only increased the poverty rate. According to the World Bank, the attributes of poverty include poor access to credit, poor healthcare and education facilities, poor access to information, high rates of unemployment and over-dependent on informal and low productive sectors. This situation is not only peculiar to Imo State but other 35 states in Nigeria including Abuja. (WEF, 2019).

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During the peak of the pandemic, the Governor of Imo State, His excellency Senator Hope Uzodinma issued the order of total lockdown of the state except people on essential duties like medical personnel and security officers consequently enforced the social-distancing, stay at home and work from home orders. However, lockdown in developing countries represents a trade-off not between saving lives and saving the economy, but between saving some lives from COVID-19 and potentially condemning far more people to hardship or death by other means (World Bank, 2020). In Imo State, there were little or no income supports, social benefit and business support packages from the government. During the lockdown, most of the citizens were subjected to the hardship associated with food insecurity, joblessness and poverty (Vincent, 2020).

It is also noted that during the lockdown, the travel bans and lockdown were not only limited to the movement of people across borders but also affected food supply chain, informal jobs, manufacturing company, trade, school system, social and religious activities. According to World Bank (2020), this situation was particularly acute in developing nations where the majority of the population are low-income earners with extremely low savings and especially affected by economic lockdown of any duration. Thus, the lockdown of the economy affected households negatively. It devastated the income of the people and many found it difficult to take care of their families. Hence, there was high rate of poverty and unemployment in the country because majority of the population depended on the business like street trading, daily paid jobs and private businesses. The pandemic and the lockdown jeopardized the health, livelihood, educational sector, social and economic development.

Moreover, the people lost confidence in the government, because politicians have repeatedly lied to the people and make empty promises they never kept. During the lockdown, the government failed the people, they could not provide adequate care for the masses, they only provided one bag of rice 25 kg, few packets of noodles, and few tins of tomatoes for a community of over 200 citizens for the whole of the lockdown that lasted for almost one year. Oparah (2020) reported that Palliatives from the Imo State government to Owerri Province include 1998 bag of rice (10kg), 994 tubers of yam, 120 cans of 1 litre groundnut oil, 63 sachets of tomatoes paste, however the Diocese received 259 bags of rice (10kg) 129 tubers of yam, 15 can of groundnut oil (1 litre) 63 sachets of tomato paste. In the second phase, the Government

provided the following as Palliative to Owerri province, 300 bags of rice (50kg), 102 bags of beans (100kg), 100 bags of garri, 31, 20 litres of palm oil, 600 cartons of indomie noodles. Oparah (2020) observed that Anglican Diocese of Owerri received the following 49 bags of rice (50kg), 13 bags of beans, 12 bags of garri, 5, 20 litres of palm oil, 78 cartons of indomie

Response of Anglican Diocese of Owerri to her Members during COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

Communal living is an element of human association that emphasizes the cohesive social bond that holds individuals or a group together. These were evident during the COVID-19 lockdown in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri. With the outbreak of COVID-19, churches, communities and informal groups and individuals have sprung into actions; people connected and sought each other more than usual. Communal living was felt in cities, urban and local communities across the world as people came together to help each other. The Anglican Diocese of Owerri was involved in the provision of palliative to the members and non-members during the lockdown. The Diocese through the Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development, different churches within the Diocese, individuals and groups were involved in the provision of palliatives to indigent people within the church and beyond.

Echendu (2020) reported that the Bishop's Office, Men's ministries, Knight of Saint Christopher and the Women's Ministries of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri made available large consignments of food and other materials as palliatives to churches and indigent persons in the Diocese during the lockdown to cushion the effect of the lockdown occasioned by the COVID-19. Nwebo (2020) also reported that the Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development made disbursed about 300 bags of rice (25kg), 129 tubers of yam, 15 bottles of vegetable oil and 33 cartons of tomatoes to members of different church stations in the Diocese. The Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development also disbursed 49 bags of 50 kg rice, 13 bags of beans, 12 bags of garri, 5 gallons of palm oil and 78 cartoons of noodles to different Archdeaconries in the second phase of the intervention. Mbagwu (2020) reported that the Women's Ministries of

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the Diocese contributed five hundred thousand naira, while the Men's Ministries contributed two million naira and the Knights of Saint Christopher contributed five hundred thousand naira to support the palliatives distributed by the Diocese.

Oke (2020) also reported that Churches in the Diocese showed evidences of demonstration of charity to their members and the local churches during the lockdown caused by COVID-19 pandemic. The churches augmented the palliatives from the Diocese. Some churches distributed food items like rice, beans, noodles, food items like bags of rice, beans, garri tubers of yam, gallons of vegetable oil and cartons of noodles, cartons of tomatoes. Oparah (2020) noted that some individuals made donations to alleviate the suffering of the people during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the analyzing the data collected, about 14 Archdeaconries selected at random including the contribution made by the Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development. The research shows that The Anglican Diocese of Owerri through the Bishop's foundation for Mission and Development catered for the members while the all the Archdeaconries provided palliatives to augment what was provided by the Diocese. Some well-to-do members of congregation like Barnabas of Acts of Apostles (4:36) pull their resource together to support their different churches in assisting the indigent members of the congregation.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated Acts 2:44-45 in the context of communal living in of the Anglican Diocese of Owerri, Imo state during the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown. It is the submission of this paper that there is communal living in the Anglican Diocese of Owerri among members. Hence, the church took care of the needy members and non-members living within the locality of the churches in the Diocese. Within the diocese, palliatives were distributed in three phases, from the Diocese through the Bishop's Foundation for Mission and Development, the churches and well-to-do members of the congregations. Palliatives were provided in terms of cash and food items. Whereas the Anglican Diocese of Owerri demonstrated commendable step to cushion the effect of the lockdown, the church and the well to do should take a radical step to be consistent in helping the indigent among them. The government should help the citizens with the regular payment of salaries and initiate a workable plan of helping the indigent citizens. Other churches, non-governmental organization and individuals who are yet to start a plan to

help their members and the members of the public should borrow a leaf from the early church.

Recommendations

- Christians should recognize that they are one body in Christ, and prioritize the needs of others
- There should be a concerted effort against individualism, and all Christians should work together to help those in need, regardless of denomination
- The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) can set up programs to identify and help needy believers
- Communal living, as practiced by the early church, can be an effective way to combat suffering and poverty
- Local churches can organize seminars on economic empowerment and poverty eradication to help members change their attitudes towards work
- Church leaders should be interested in both the spiritual and social care of their members

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