

STATE OF THE CHURCH

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The year 2018 was annus horribilis for the Pentecostal movement. It was the year the image of the Pentecostal pastor sank so low many pastors dropped the honorific from their social media handles. The word “pastor’ became synonymous with greed, avarice and exploitation. It was the year of the concerted crusade against the payment of tithe. The income of many ministries dropped.

To be fair much of the attack was unfair. A very, very large accusatory brush was used to tar a large swath of pastors. Pastors as a professional demographic were accused of going into ministry for money, but the facts cannot fully support that assertion. When many of these pastors were called into ministry, most at a young age, the uncalled upon graduation took on lucrative appointments in banks, oil companies and the manufacturing industry. There was no future for the pastor, especially in the 1980s. There was no income guarantee, no healthcare scheme, no possibility of pension, not even a car. Pastors were so poorly remunerated you had to love God to go into ministry. The missionaries fared worse. They lived hand to mouth depending on the grace of God for sustenance of their family. In other words those who went into ministry practically took an oath of poverty. The only upside was the productivity of their faith. Unlike what we have today the primary preaching circuit was student fellowships. That meant offerings came from student pocket monies. And yet these men and women laboured in the ministry, some in remote and economically unviable regions. It is therefore uncharitable to label these group of people economic gourmandisers. If ministry is a sure path to prosperity there’ll be no poor pastors.

But that said, there are indeed those who give ministry a bad name. They manipulate the word of God and manipulate congregants. They are in it for money. Their God is their belly. There will always be such people. Even in the days of the apostles there were. Paul spoke about hucksters who preached for profit. 2 Corinthians 2:17. But these bad eggs are statistically insignificant. Truth is, if they don't exist Satan will be professionally negligent. The existence of these pastors is a counterintelligence strategy.

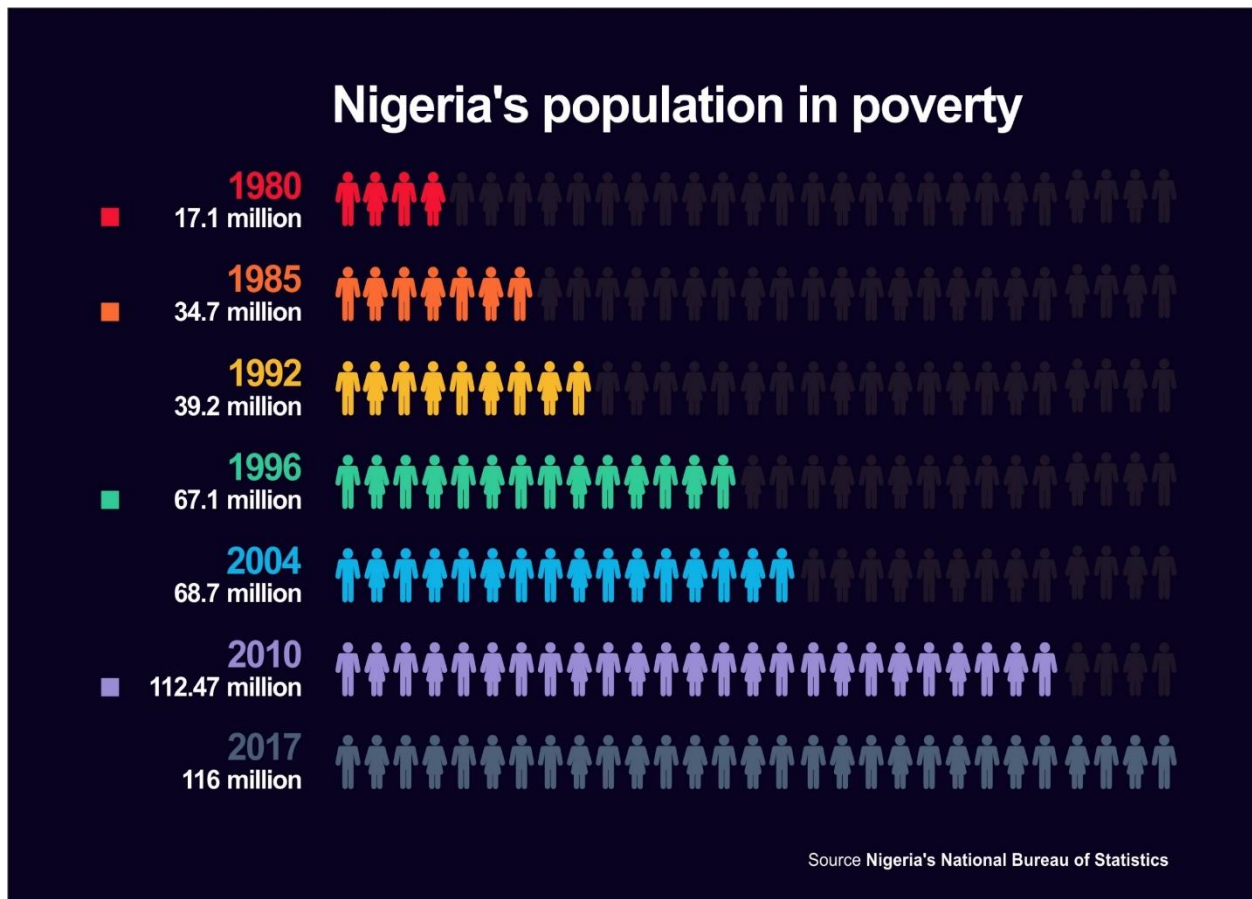
If the accusation was bad enough however, the way and manner some pastors responded to the crisis of confidence was even worse. Many could not articulate the position of scriptures on tithing and many went ad hominem. They attacked the person of the chief antagonist and not his arguments. It was a knee jerk response and it ignored the larger dimension.

What many didn't realise was what was powering the issue was not so much inside the church but outside it. Outside the church was grinding poverty, hopelessness and despair. There are few economic opportunities for youths. They feel buried alive in the concrete tombs of our national misfortune. Youths constitute more than half of the population. There are no jobs. The unemployment rate is high. Many of those who have jobs are underemployed. In this kind of situation any flagrant or boastful display of ostentatious wealth is bound to attract acrimony. Unfortunately Nigerian pastors tend to display prosperity as affirmation of technology of faith.

Let me show you the enormity of the problem.

Here are the poverty statistics: Zamfara 91.9%, Yobe 90.2%, Jigawa 88.4%, Bauchi 86.6%, Kebbi 86.0%, Sokoto 85.3%, Katsina 82.2%, Taraba 77.7%, Gombe, Kano 76.4%, Borno 70.1%, Kaduna 56.5%.

The average poverty rate for the North (minus the Middle Belt) is 79.3%. With the Middle Belt it's 72.6%. Little wonder we are regarded as the poverty capital of the world. This is the enormity of the problem we face. We have compound interest poverty.



But the crisis brought out the following facts:

1. Pastors are generally unaware of context. This is why we undertook the State of the Church research, to give pastors insight into society.
2. Many pastors are insensitive to the socio-economic context in which they operate even if they're aware.
3. The church is unaware of her political status, and this despite copious amounts of scripture. The church stubbornly sees herself as a social intervention organ, not a political entity.
4. The church is not strategic in approach to issues. It tends to be responsorial, acting only when only when things begin to boil over. And the responses are mainly prophetic proclamations and prayers. There's no pre-emptive strategy.
5. The fast food theology favoured by Pentecostals finally caught up with the church. It became evident there was no theological depth in the church. For instance many did not know the relationship between the old and new testaments during the tithe controversy.
6. The ministerial class does not have a strategic framework for political engagement outside the purview of political endorsement and request for personal favours from state actors.
7. The church despises her rational assets. She considers them unspiritual. This deprives the church of intelligent approach to national problems. Let me illustrate.

Without a doubt poverty is Nigeria's biggest challenge. It's what's fuelling crime, terrorism, militancy and insurgency. And the level of poverty is affecting our democratic choices. The poorer the people the poorer the choices made. It has

fostered on the nation a breed of rent seekers, economic saboteurs and political landlords.

What the church does to tackle poverty is social intervention – we feed the poor, take care of orphans and widows, get street urchins off the streets, repurpose “area boys”, build schools, offer scholarships, facilitate workshops for skill acquisition, etc. This is all well and good. Our faith demands we take care of the socially disadvantaged. But we are merely ameliorating human condition we are not solving the problem of poverty in our land. That can only be done at the policy level. Which means some Christians have to get into power and use the instrumentality of state policy to crack the poverty challenge. We need policy missionaries. That doesn’t mean the church should stop social intervention but national problems sometimes require national implements. If we don’t resolve our human development challenges as a nation, sort out our educational system as well as healthcare system, stimulate the economy and encourage enterprise development poverty will remain with us, even if we pray till kingdom come. There’s a reason God asks us to pray for those in government. It is to foster peace. A nation full of poverty cannot know peace. Without peace there can be no development.

Our second favourite solution to the problem of poverty fares no better. We imagine we can solve the problem of poverty by teaching individuals how to sow and reap. Again this is good, but it is a retail solution not a wholesale solution. It is wholly inefficient at the national scale. Let’s do some computations.

Only a negligible few relative to a local population come to church on Sunday. That already rules out a sizable number of people who can access the principle. Let's put the figure of the average church at say one thousand. Out of this may be 700 will believe the pastor outrightly, and even among these perhaps only 350 will have the means to respond to the teaching at a certain level.

The law of sowing and reaping has an incubatory period. Some will impatiently pluck out their seed during this period - may be 100 will, leaving 250 with the teaching. This mirrors the geographic efficiency ratio of the Parable of the Sower. It's 1:4. But more than the issue of geographic efficiency the critical take away is that the teaching of the law of sowing and reaping does not tackle the issue of national poverty it only tackles the issue of individual prosperity. Besides, the rate of conversion of individuals from poverty to prosperity by churches cannot match the national rate of production of poverty. The national average is overwhelming. Not to talk of the fact the principle has an optics challenge for non-Christians. You're taking money from the poor. We must also bear in mind our approach does not answer to the question of poverty among non-Christians. If we want to effectively tackle the issue of poverty in Nigeria we need to get into government.

Let us look at the relationship between the church and the state.

Perhaps the reason the youths in Nigeria blame the church for the failure of the state is because they transcendently know the

church is a political institution. Many of their complaints should ordinarily be directed at state actors, but the complaints are directed at the church, as if the church is responsible for formulating policy. But what if these kids aren't wrong? What if the church is indeed a political institution? The evidence from the Bible suggests they may be right.

Let's start with Jesus: all the titles of Jesus are political titles. "King of kings," "Lord of lords" are political titles. And he has ministerial portfolios – Jehovah Rapha (the Lord my healer) is his health portfolio, Jehovah El Roi (the Lord my righteousness) is his justice portfolio, Jehovah Nissi (the Lord my banner) is his defence portfolio. The list goes on.

Jesus is also the Messiah. To the Jew the Messiah is a military and political figure. It's why the disciples wondered if Jesus would restore the kingdom of Israel at that point in time. According to the prophets the Messiah has two programs – the spiritual and the political. Jesus has already fulfilled the spiritual. The outstanding is the political. Jesus is a political figure he's not a religious figure. Salvation is a citizenship program.

But if the church is in doubt of her political status the adversary is not. His response is political. Satan's organogram is wholly political. The job titles are blatantly political – Principalities, Powers, Rulers of Darkness... A principality is a prince. The Principalities are the political strategists, the Powers have executive power. They're in charge of governments and nations. They influence policy and coordinate national programs. We've been concentrating on non-political actors like witches and wizards when we should be concentrating on the Principalities and Powers. They're in charge of policy misdirections in Nigeria.

Wars, rumours of war, coups, anarchy, unrests, insurgencies, economic meltdowns and leadership ineptitude are coordinated by the Powers.

Even the titles we use in church are borrowings from the political sphere. Take the word Bishop. The Greek word is episkopos. It means “overseer.” In Ancient Greece it was used for government officials. These were Athenian officials sent into allied cities to set up democratic constitutions. The early church borrowed those terminologies for a reason.

Paul laid out a progressive vision of the church. He himself would not step into but it is a picture of political evolution. We find it in Ephesians 1:20-23 MSG:

“God raised him (Christ) from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the centre of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.”

In other words the church is a political nucleus.

There’s a dimension to the church we haven’t stepped into. The progression of the church is not a re-enactment of the past, it is an evolutionary movement into the future.

There are a number of steps the church needs to take in order to be politically strong (It is disgraceful that the church has the numbers, the finance and the brains, and yet the church is politically weak):

1. Have a long term political strategy. The church must plan at least twenty years into the future. We tend to wake up very close to elections or when there's crisis. By then the issues are already defined and we're voting on candidates chosen for us by a motley crew of interests that are not necessarily amenable to Christian ideology.
2. Christians must join political parties. In a democracy the platform for access to political power is the political party. Many Christians unfortunately see politics as abomination.
3. Churches should set up schools of government, like the Kennedy School of Government and not just schools of ministry. A school of ministry is nothing more than a personnel training institute for the church. The challenge of Nigeria is leadership. A relevant church responds to local challenges. Those schools of government must be open to non-Christians.
4. The church should set up secular media. A CNN is ultimately more powerful than a TBN (Trinity Broadcasting Network). A Christian TV station has limited reach whereas a secular TV station has unlimited reach. The church needs to learn to engage the polity. CNN speaks to the polity, TBN speaks to Christians, and in tongues.
5. The Church needs to make use of her secular assets. Christianity is a Melchizedek proposition. It has both priestly and kingly dimension. One of the reasons the church is weak is because it tends to rely solely on her priestly assets – the pastors essentially. It is an inversion of the principle laid

down in scriptures and it does not represent the diversity Jesus had in mind when he conceptualised the Church. Besides, pastors have their limitation. There's a reason Jesus chose tax agents, doctors, activists and entrepreneurs as disciples. It was a radical shift from Old Testament template. Unfortunately many pastors are operating in the Old Testament mold. It's why pastors imagine themselves Elijah. It's why pastors seek to anoint candidates in a democracy. It's a conceptual impossibility. Anointing goes with monarchy.

6. In line with modern imperatives church curriculum has to change. The issues of the future are not issues of the past. Children's church is a breeding ground for a new generation of Christians. This new generation must be a Daniel generation - able to function in secular society as well as in government. They must be able to answer to the issues of the day - the new sociology, the new anthropology, the new ideology, the new theology, the new science.
7. The church must connect with the next generation. That generation feels cut off from opportunities. The church must connect with youths, understand their issues, address their issues.
8. The church must encourage reasoning capacity development. The Holy Spirit is an intellectual. He inspired the writings of Paul. Paul was an intellectual. We must breed a thinking generation that is able to question issues. An unreasoning, unquestioning and un-examining generation of Christians is a danger to the faith and a danger to their nation.
9. Theology must be taught in church. Enough of our fast food diet – Seven Steps to Prosperity, Three Steps to Answered Prayer, How to Fast For A Husband... Our fast food diet has

created spiritually obese individuals who unfortunately imagine themselves a symbol of corporeal health. The history of the church must be taught as well.

10. The church must strategically interface with government. A platform of engagement must be created. This platform cannot be PFN (Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria) or CAN (Christian Association of Nigeria). They essentially function as trade unions now. They are not broad enough to accommodate the secular intellectual assets of the church.

If we must be relevant in the future we need new thinking, new approaches. The environment is changing around us. Nigeria is in transition.

I want to thank you for listening. May God bless his Body, and may he bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.