



# CHURCH OF THE FUTURE AND THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

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## **Church Of The Future And The Future Of The Church**

Let me begin by thanking members of this society for inviting me to share a few thoughts at this conference. This lecture is a continuation of my long conversation with the ecclesiastical class. I am a stakeholder in the Christian faith, and I am a consultant. In these capacities I have come to provoke discussion and to challenge convention.

The title of our lecture – the very theme of this conference, is, Church of the future and the future of the church. There are three possible approaches to the topic.

Approach One is to take extant facts and project the coefficients into the future. Whatever we arrive at is the vision of the future of the church.

Approach Two is to imagine what civilisation will be like, say thirty, forty, fifty years from now, and imagine what church will be like based on futurism.

Approach Three is to imagine a best case scenario - imagine the ideal church. That becomes our vision. We can then do comparative analysis with the present to spot dissonance gap. This will give us an idea of the amount of work we need to do to bridge the gap.

I want to quickly explore each of these approaches in this lecture, weigh the pros and cons.

Let's start with the first. Let's project from our present state into the future.

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The African church has major challenges. That much is clear. Our theology can't travel. It is steeped in African cosmography – the constitution of the order of nature. The Nigerian church in particular has stratospheric issues. The church is not well.

There are structural alignment problems with God's policy document on ministry. Nothing demonstrates the un-wellness of the church more than the emergence of commission agent pastors. These are pastors who claim to have special anointing for fund raising. It's a new genre of ministry. When a church is desirous of raising a special offering for a building project for example, these special purpose entities are called in to ginger the people to give. In exchange for their service they receive a percentage of money raised. This "anointing" is of course alien to scriptures and is a distortion of the definition of anointing in the Bible. By the very essence of their calling commission agent pastors have to be aggressive when it comes to offering. The more money they raise the more commission they collect. How did we get here? What would Paul say? What would Apostle James say?

There are other problems. Commission agent pastors are just symptomatic. There's lack of theological depth. Evangelists are pastoring churches for economic security. There is a love of titles and eminence in the church. The concept of the African big man has crept into the church. There's syncretism of African traditional beliefs with Christianity. There's an aberrant metric system of successful ministry. There are issues with accountability – ethical, financial, spiritual. There are accusations of sexual predation.

If we project from these facts it is obvious the future will not be pretty. The second law of thermodynamics will kick in. That law states that the total entropy of an isolated system can never decrease over time. Entropy is degradation and disorder.

The sad thing about these issues is that the pastors responsible for the bad image of the church are actually a miniscule but they colorate the wonderful work of so many good ministries. When an aberration reaches a critical mass it becomes the definition of a subset and can even create a culture. Our refusal to speak against these aberrant ministries

has made questionable practices normative. The downside of the federated architecture of the church is the absence of a central regulatory commission. The enterprise system of the church assumes self-regulation.

There are of course churches doing wonderful things. I have never supported the idea of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I am aware of the critical role the church plays in an underdeveloped economy. There are many pastors labouring in obscurity, doing good. When I served in the youth corp scheme in 1986 I met pastors in laborious ministry in remote parts of Bauchi and Gombe states. Some places are not on Google map. These pastors ran churches without microphones or musical instruments. These are frontier pastors.

The largest scholarship scheme in Nigeria is by Bethesda Schools, an NGO of This Present House, a church based in Lagos. Thousands of students attend those schools absolutely free. They're fed daily, don't pay for school uniform. The most successful rehabilitation scheme in Nigeria is also by the same church. It actually set up a specialised church called God Bless Nigeria Church. It's for "area boys" and drug addicts. It's the only church where church attendance is preceded by a haircut, a bath and a change of clothes. It's not uncommon for the barber's clippers to encounter worms and maggots. Church service is accompanied with breakfast and lunch. That church sends out buses every Sunday to convey drug addicts and area boys to church. The ministry specialises in turning drug addicts into responsible citizens. Many are now pastors. Should we condemn the efforts of such ministries on account of a few rotten apples?

Our consolation is the fact that God does course correction for his church. The history of the church is that of an institution regularly nudged back into righteous trajectory through mini and major corrections. When a mini correction is self compelled we call it revival. When a revolutionary correction is compelled

we call it reformation. When the state exerts negative political reformation on the church it is called persecution.

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The second approach is futurism. Because of time constraint I will skip some things but it is a vision of omega churches that are chock-full of technology. In the church of the future people will get married in two different locations – the groom in one location, the bride in another. This will be enabled by technology. Churches will offer an options menu: If you want deliverance, press 1. If you want healing, press 2. If you want to talk to a counsellor, press 3. If your problem is ancestral spirits go to the church next door. There's going to be convergence of platforms; big data will drive the concept of church.

But as beautiful as all this sounds, technology is not the definition of the church. Technology is not intrinsic to the definition of church. We thank God for multimedia screens but the early church had no multimedia screens. Yet they turned the world upside down. This second approach will not take us to the future we desire. It is superficial.

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The third approach, which is my recommended approach is to dimension the essential qualities of the church and walk back from there. There are four critical dimensions to the church of the future:

1. Model
2. Relevance
3. Theology
4. Intersectionality

As per model, the model adopted by many churches is a wrong model. It's a sole proprietorship model and it's one of the factors generating anomalies. The pastor is alpha and omega. There's no institutional vision. The entire system is built around

the pastor. There's an over-concentration of power in his office. Corporate governance therefore fails and this endangers the pastor. There are no safeguards. This makes the organisation structurally weak. There's key man risk. Besides it's an inefficient administrative system. The pastor becomes bottleneck.

In God's scheme the pastor is a talent development executive. If we follow the natural logic of God's model the structure of the church will radically change. The focus will be on individual ministries - the empowerment of individuals for purpose. It's a more efficient system.

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### Relevance

The second factor is relevance. The church of the future responds to local context. The church was designed by God to respond to context. Irrelevant churches lose their franchise. Often times they die. Without flavour the salt is good for nothing. If a church cannot solve the problems of society it is of no use to God, or society. It's just an arbiter of empty liturgy and human ceremonials.

Now, it's not as if the church has not been trying in this regard. There's an incredible tonnage of social responsibility initiatives undertaken by churches. But our solutions are not always intelligent. For example we try to solve the problem of mass poverty with teachings of the law of sowing and reaping. But that's a retail solution, not a mass market program. There are 90 million Nigerians living in poverty. If we want to solve the problem of multilateral poverty we must leverage the capacity of the state. The church must empower people to go into government.

There's no better illustration of the possibilities of lay ministry than the story of the Clapham Sect of the Holy Trinity Church

on Clapham Common, South West London. The group comprised politicians, a lawyer, a brewer, banker, businessmen, a literary celebrity, a philanthropist and several clergymen. William Wilberforce was a member of this group. That group was responsible for the abolition of slave trade. But to accomplish that objective they combined their effort to create public opinion and exert pressure on government.

They would end up founding the first major British colony in Africa. That was Freetown, Sierra Leone. The Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East, what we call CMS was one of their vehicles. They founded CMS Grammar School. Between 1780 and 1844 they founded at least 223 national religious, moral, educational and philanthropic institutions to alleviate poverty, combat child abuse, fight illiteracy, exploitation of women and other social ills. They formed “societies” to protect widows, refugee women and single women. They worked on prison reform, sports reform and several other reforms. This is lay ministry at its most effective. This is the church of the future. A network of purposed individuals is more powerful than the lone exertion of a pastor.

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## Theology

The third factor is theology. As per theology the issues are clear so I won't dwell on them. We however need to resolve our differences with science and intellect. You need an intelligent generation to answer challenging questions of the future – new sociology, emergent multiculturalism, expanded ambit of civil rights and the question of Ishmael. Paul countered Plato's thoughts. He was challenged by Epicureans in Athens. We must be able to answer questions about our faith in a logical manner, just as Peter recommended: Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you to account for the hope and

confident assurance that is within you, yet with gentleness and respect. 1 Peter 3:15 AMP. We can't do that if we're anti intellect.

We shouldn't be teaching the kids to obey the Ten Commandments. Jesus already reduced those commandments to two – love God, love your neighbour. The only reason to teach the kids Ten Commandments is to give them historical context of the progressive reduction of the 613 commandments to just two.

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### Intersectionality

The last dimension is intersectionality. The church of the future must operate at the intersection of the priesthood and the kingship. We hardly do. We operate in Old Testament priest mode. It's why pastors seek to anoint politicians for office. But you cannot anoint a president in a democracy. That convention belongs to either a theocracy or monarchy. But even barring theology the practice can't make sense. Bearing in mind the number of churches in Nigeria who is the anointing authority? What happens when there are multiple anointings? Who is the ultimate authority?

Christianity is at the intersection of the priesthood and the kingship. The spiritual order to which Jesus belonged was not the Levitical order. It was the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews 7:13-17. He's from the tribe of Judah, not the tribe of Levi.

The Levitical order was pure priesthood. The priests could not hold secular jobs. It's because we belong to the order of Melchizedek that we can be priests and hold secular jobs. Melchizedek was both a priest and a king. Jesus is a priest and a king. The anointing we have is a spirito-secular anointing. It's why Jesus chose non priests as apostles. Perhaps only Matthew Levi came from the tribe of Levi. Andrew was from

Reuben. Bartholomew was from Manasseh, James Zebedee was from Gad, James Alphaeus was from Issachar, John the Beloved was from Asher, Judas Iscariot was from Benjamin/Dan, Jude was from Zebulun, Thomas was from Simeon.

Jesus chose professionals for a reason. It was a revolutionary concept, a radical departure from the old system. It was a pointer to the church. Andrew, Peter, James and John were seafood entrepreneurs. They worked as fishermen. Mathew was a government revenue agent. He worked as tax collector. Simon was an anarchist and revolutionary. He belonged to the group that sought to overthrow the colonial authority of Rome. It is because we belong to the order of Melchizedek that we can work in secular capacities though priests unto God. And so we're priest-lawyers, priest-accountants, priest-doctors, priest-fashion designers, priest-photographers, etc.

The order of Melchizedek is why we can participate in politics. Melchizedek was a political office holder. Our priesthood does not contradict politics.

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What is the future of the Nigerian church? It depends. One thing we know is that our present practices and theology cannot deliver the future we need – not for us, not for our youths, not for the nation, not for the world. We need a new orientation. We need pastors who are bold and confident, ministers who can think outside the box, challenge assumptions. That's what Jesus would do.

God uses ministers. But sometimes ministers stand in the way of God. When this happens God simply takes a detour, and sometimes it's a generational detour. The ministry of the future will be one that can align itself to critical elements of God's blueprint. It's always been about God, we're no more than incidentals.

Will this generation of ministers realign the church? That is the big question. If we won't, we stand in danger of being mere occupiers of space and time, mere genealogical staple pins connecting the old and new generation of ministers.

We need to do things differently. And we need to do things different. Fast.

I want to thank you for listening. God bless your ministries.

You can download the lecture at [www.lekealder.com/lectures](http://www.lekealder.com/lectures).