

## **Being the prophetic church in a world of hurts and hope**

By

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*“...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8*

### **Introduction**

I am particularly inspired and energized always by the counsel of my aged father that, “truth is a spring of water that never dries and saves life”. These words about truth-telling characterize a prophetic church and have in many ways kept focus in all my engagements. An award winning novelist and poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, William Faulkner said that, “Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world would do this, it would change the earth.” The use of “never” by William and indeed many other advocates for justice stresses the profound necessity of remaining true to the ideals that make for a just world. The choice of the topic of this article is premised on the idea that the “church” whether at local or global level must be seen as one that sets standards on matters of justice, honesty and compassion. The church must seek to discern what are just and distinguish itself from unjust ideas, logic and systems. The need for the church to be a voice of reason and a living conscience of the world as both light and salt of the earth cannot be overemphasized. The church must treat socio-political issues that impact on human dignity and that of creation as matters of religious confession of faith. In doing so the church should intentionally engage the process of reasonably thinking out on Christian political ethics. Such ethics will to a great extent enhance good governance and mitigate on the politicisation of religion as argued by José Míguez Bonino, a well acclaimed liberation theologian. Bonino argues that, “we urgently need a Christian ethics of politics precisely in order that we may avoid a wrong politicisation of Christianity” (1983:17). Similarly, developing Christian political ethics is core in all the discourse on Church and State engagement. It is, therefore, essential for the church today to understand the political dynamics of state political players in order to engage in a constructive manner with systems and structures put in place by governmental institutions at all levels. Understanding the dynamics will help the church to be in critical solidarity with the government and also take uncompromising stance with the oppressed and marginalised majority. This article will therefore attempt to re-echo the church’s roles as a non-partisan political movement that should offer alternatives to oppressive systems and structures, while remaining faithful to the liberating word of God.

### **Being a religious leader in Nigeria**

It was not long when I was called through election by the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN), Mayo Belwa Diocese to serve in the ecclesiastical office of a diocesan Bishop, later as Archbishop of the church. When I was called, it never came with ease I was confronted by very high expectations of the people, knowing again that the diocese was created newly. That means starting from the scratch, but optimistic that the human resources available within the diocese will offer the necessary support for the take off. With such understanding, I accepted the call with heartfelt gratitude to God and the people.

The journey in this ecclesiastical role began when I took off as the pioneer Bishop of the diocese. Leadership, whether, religious or political in a complex country as Nigeria is quite a task. . The complexity is characterized by charged political atmosphere, multiple

cultural and political belongings, strong traditional institutions, religious fundamentalism and violent extremism, religious polarization of societies, young population growth, mis-governance, denominationalism and frail ecumenical relations, sectionalism, unnecessary media hype, and crisis among people who hitherto were peacefully co-existing.

As leader, I was expected to contribute in clear ways to responding to these glaring challenges. These complexities and realities are not only peculiar to Nigeria alone, but many countries are faced with such situation, where as leader, one is seen as “miracle worker”. This perception has led many religious leaders in temptation, thereby missing the very essence of their call as “servants in God’s vineyard.” While the challenges continue, I have been constantly challenged to speak out on issues that negatively impact on the generality of the populace. I together with the governing council of the church have written press statements and articles, and also convened press conferences on the violent attacks on innocent people in some part of north-eastern region of Nigeria. It is the zone that happens to be where the bulk of the LCCN members reside. We condemned the violence in the strongest terms possible and spoken with political leaders directly on the need to assume more responsibility in ensuring security of life and property as enshrined in the constitution.

### **The LWF as a global player**

The global place and role of the LWF is not in question at all. But some of the questions that may be asked include, how has the LWF sustained its effect on global socio-political and economic matters? The LWF by its very nature and existence right from inception has responded to human challenges and needs informed by its biblical and doctrinal ethos. The LWF study document on “Churches in the public spaces” states that, “As churches and Christians we are shaped by the gospel message, the liberating power that transforms us to live a life that reflects the gospel. The rediscovery of justification by grace through faith during the Reformation entailed a renewed vision of justice in society and transformed individuals, the church and other institutions” (LWF 2016:9).

The LWF is and will remain a non-partisan political entity that unequivocally challenges global systems, structures, frameworks and instruments that dehumanizes and endanger the earth. The LWF under my humble leadership will continue to remain forthright in its gospel mandate of “doing likewise” as Christ has instructed. As a global player our diaconal ministry and humanitarian interventions at international levels through the World Service and locally by member churches will continue to be our frameworks making our global presence prominent, notwithstanding, our advocacy engagements on justice agendas.

The LWF will continue in its efforts of accompanying, mobilizing and empowering churches in their global and local responsibilities. The study document eloquently captured this role, thus, “Churches and congregations are called to move beyond their institutional comfort zone and prophetically to dwell amidst the cries and hopes that fill their local and global contexts” (LWF 2016:35). The churches and congregations are the strength and pride of the LWF communion of churches. Their involvement and empowerment are critical to the ministry and witness of the LWF. They are the LWF communion presence in each specific context and LWF is their presence at international levels.

The global role of the LWF is further enhanced by its ecumenical, interreligious and bilateral engagements with organisations that are committed to similar objectives, either in part or whole. These engagements are critically necessary because the LWF does not and will not exist in isolation of other organizations and institutions. LWF will continue to enter mutually enriching relationships and cooperation knowing that the end results will be life-giving. The study document brought the aspect of interreligious interaction so succinctly, which states, “The LWF is committed to promoting interreligious dialogue and cooperation. One of the hallmarks of LWF’s approach to interreligious relations is to collaborate with

interreligious partners in humanitarian work while engaging in theological dialogue...” (LWF 2016:29). The Memorandum of Understanding between the LWF and Islamic Relief Worldwide first signed in August 2014 and renewed in November 2017 is a clear demonstration of LWF’s commitment to engage in diapraxis as a robust approach on humanitarian causes with focus on joint humanitarian programmes, policy, research and advocacy, specifically on faith and protection issues. It is a common saying among Lutheran Ecumenists that “to be Lutheran is to be Ecumenical”. This notion I will say is anchored on the statement adopted by LWF programme unit on Ecumenical relations that states, “For us, Christian ecumenism is not a choice: it is our mission to witness together with and in Christ, and it is a gift we receive from God through the Holy Spirit” (LWF website). This undoubtedly unveils the unswerving commitment of the LWF to ecumenism and ecumenical involvements at all levels of human existence. To further express LWF’s determination towards responding to human needs in crises situations, Agreement was signed with Catholic World Relief, active membership and participation in the ACT Alliance and timely collaboration with relevant United Nations systems.

The 2017 Twelfth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Windhoek, Namibia has passed twenty four (24) resolutions that offer direction and expressed the unflinching commitment of the communion to contextual existential issues that impact on global affairs. The resolutions touched on issues of diakonia, humanitarian response, social protection, climate change, gender-justice, (UN) sustainable development goals, inequalities, among other issues. These resolutions no doubt amplify the global approach and role that the communion is poised to continue to play. I have mentioned in clear terms in my acceptance speech that LWF will not renege in its roles of deepening diaconal and humanitarian work, advocating through member churches and relevant institutions on issues of justice and peace among other priorities of the communion.

### **Re-imagining the ethico-relationship between Church and Politics**

The debate on the kind of relationship expected to exist between Church and State is unstoppable because of the divergent views held unto by different Christian schools of thoughts. These views are expressed in multiple dimensions of societal interaction. Some held to the view that the church is heavenly minded and should have nothing to do with the state, which is seen as mundane, while others hold strongly to the view that the church should play an active role in the governance of the state (McLellan 1997; Nolan 2009; Raiser 2013). Many reasons have been offered to justify the two dominant views. As Lutherans, we are grounded in the theological views of the two realms on the spiritual and temporal dimensions of human relational existence with untainted knowledge of the three estates. Our discussion on church and politics are informed by foregoing theological resource as debated clearly by Martin Luther in a number of discourses and writings. Meanwhile, Weber in McLellan arguing on the fact that politics being the defining fulcrum of the state is designed by God and should be revered for the common good of humanity. He goes on to assert that, “the authority of the state, even when exercised by unbelievers, might be evaluated positively, due to our condition of sin, as an indispensable instrument, based upon the divinely implanted natural knowledge of religiously un-illuminated heathen, for the social control of reprehensible sins to pleasing of God” (1997:220).

Furthermore, recognising the fact that the church does not exist in isolation of the wider society, many Christian scholars have alluded that the church has profound roles to play in shaping the polity of a state. A Kenyan document affirms that, “the participation of the Church in the political, social and economic life of the people is a social and divine responsibility she cannot run away from” (n.d:10). Reinforcing the above allusion, Ntamburi (1999:141) argues that, “both Church and State are bound together, as they both owe their

existence to God. The Church should be autonomous from the State. The two, however, are bound together in a deeper and mystical level. Church cannot exist in a social vacuum without the State, and since it must be relevant to the people's needs... Church and State co-exist for the common good of all". Ntamburi's assertion seemingly expresses the crux of the interrelatedness of the Church and State in public affairs. Ntamburi further gave impetus to his assertion by arguing thus, "the Church must inevitably be involved in every human activity, including politics" (1999:141).

Furthermore, Musa (2009:136-144) outlines eight areas that the Church can function in the political life of the society, namely; encouraging participation in politics, praying and fasting, promoting values transformation, organising training, conducting advocacy, providing forum for dialogue and networking, providing advise/counselling, and facilitate setting up of accountability groups. Musa's suggestions are seemingly community based approach motivated by fundamental Christian principles. Some of the thematic areas he outlined are most needed in regions like Nigeria where the Church until most recently, had remained passive regarding its role in the public affairs of the country. For most time, the Church had only been active, in fact, reactive when national issues are suspected to have religious undertone. Therefore, much is expected of the Church in Nigeria and other countries of Africa, to be more proactive in discerning their local contexts, identifying medium and long term approaches to their engagements

The church has a pastoral responsibility to be the voice of the voiceless and helpless. The pastoral responsibility of the church places the church as an institution on alert, thereby confronting government actions that negate the welfare of the generality of its citizens. However, this concern is necessary so that the church will take a stand to support and amplify the challenges faced by the poor majority.

### **Reconceptualising models of church and state engagement**

Many scholars sought to define the kind of relationships existing between the church and state. Some discussed such relationships as models, while others take them as typologies. Haynes (1996:87) quoting Weber identified three types of relationship between the church and state thus; "*hierocratic*, where secular power is dominant but cloaked in a religious legitimacy; *theocratic*, where ecclesiastical authority is pre-eminent over secular power; and *caesaro-papist*, where secular power holds sway over religion". Again, Haynes utilising what has been offered by Mazrui argues that, "a common middle position on such a scale – what he called the 'ecumenical state' – is where a government is not religiously monopolistic but is, intent, rather, on upholding religious pluralism. The ecumenical state is obviously different from one with established church, although it may of course have either a pro-Christian or pro-Islam bias" (1996:87). These bring into perspective the multiplicity and complexity associated with church-state relationship, particularly where religious intolerance and tensions already exist.

Apparently, Nthamburi in Magesa & Nthamburi (1999:142) affirms that, "Theologically, the Word of God establishes and preserves the 'secular' power. The Gospel should therefore, instruct, judge and guide the State in all its activities. If the State abuses the authority entrusted to it, the same Gospel should rebuke it. The Church should exercise its prophetic role by calling upon the State to seek the will of God by promoting justice and care for all citizens". Similarly, in an attempt to clarify on the interaction that should exist between the church and state, Hansen (2007:181) quoting Hiemstra upholds that "the task of the church as an institution but also through its individual members, whom it has to equip for this task, to witness to the Kingdom of God and the sovereign rule of Jesus Christ before the political powers of the day". This can be done through prayer, dialogue or prophetic witness of the church, as well as through the examples of righteous living by the members of the

church”. Arguing further on the kinds of state-church relationship that existed in the historical era, Hansen identified five models of relationship, namely; *Constantinian, Theocratic, Christian Separationist, Secular Separationist* and *Abolition of Religion* (2007:185-188). These models were in one way or the other imbibed in the early and medieval era of the church. The models had their myriad of challenges. However, to the proponents of the models, they were essential and beneficial.

Furthermore, Kumalo (2009:171-2) describes church-state relationship in the context of South Africa in five stages and patterns, namely; Uncritical Acceptance, Critical Acceptance, Critical Opposition, Resistance, and Critical Solidarity. Each of these stages describes the various eras that South Africa went through to democratic election in 1994. Kumalo describes further these patterns, thus; *Uncritical Acceptance* mean the church and state were one and the same thing; *Critical Acceptance* describes a period when some missionaries were critical of both the colonial administration and the church; *Critical Opposition* describes a time when some sections of white churches and the majority of the black churches began to resist government policies that excludes the blacks from the decision making structures; *Resistance* stages illustrates how certain initiatives were set up to resist in constructive terms government systems and policies that disregards certain racial group; and *Critical Solidarity* means the church supports those government initiatives that promotes justice, peace and democracy, whilst continue its protest against unjust policies (De Gruchy 2008:171-2).

De Gruchy (1995:222) elaborates further that, “Critical Solidarity means that the church remains prophetic in its stance for truth... continued resistance to what is unjust and false... taking sides with all who remain oppressed in one form or another in a new democratic society, participating with them in their never-ending struggle for justice, human dignity, and liberation”. It is therefore, imperative that the church not only in South Africa to examine its relationship with the state in the light of critical solidarity. Doing so will enhance its impact as a church that places top priority on the concerns of the marginalised.

### **Prophetic function of the LCCN and other religious groups in addressing societal issues**

The evils that cause suffering are deeply rooted in immoral and unjust structures resulting in underdevelopment, oppression, poverty, illiteracy, disease and massive unemployment, especially among youth and marginalized groups. These existing systems and structures must be challenged on the grounds of the “common good” of humanity embedded in biblical and theological injunctions. Nthamburi in Magesa asserts that, “if we recognise that God is found at the margin of our society, particularly where people are hurting and struggling for freedom and socio-economic and political transformation, then our faith must undergo a drastic metamorphosis... we must be seen to be on God’s side which mean siding with the oppressed” (1999:158). Similarly, Kunhiyop strongly argues that, “the church will be accused of interfering when it makes accusations against the economic and social order, but to fail to do so is to betray the trust committed to it; for the commission given to the church is that it carries out the purpose of God” (2008:99). It may be asked, what is the purpose of God? Nolan in his effort to summarily present the purpose of God for humanity asserts that, “God is just not only because God is fair and honest in all God’s dealing with human beings but also because all God’s activity is a matter of putting right what is wrong in the world, and all God’s laws and commandments are simply demanding that justice be done” (2009:131-132). Ultimately, justice is central in the mission and purpose of God for humanity. It is on this premise that the church must strive to advocate for justice uncompromisingly. Therefore, the church in Nigeria must constitute itself into a strong advocacy institution to challenge injustices perpetrated at different levels of governance.

The church must deliberately convene on regular basis dialogue sessions for Christian political leaders and parliamentarians to discuss issues of national importance in non-partisan and transparent approach. The above idea is supported by Musa where he argues that, “the Church is better placed to create a forum for interaction with Christian politicians from different political parties because it is a non-political body. In this regard, the church should act as the parent of all, and not take sides with any political party” (2009:142-143).

### **Confronting economic injustice as divine mandate**

The prophetic understanding of justice is not the impartial administration of law, but the overcoming of the gap between the rich and poor. De Gruchy argues that, “from the perspective of the gospel, the care for, and the empowerment, of the poor and social victims is the chief criterion by which to evaluate social structures... this is the permanent test of the authenticity Christian witness, and the basis upon which critical theology must evaluate all social and political structures” (1995:269-9). The issues of economics should not be left only for scientific discourse which often time is devoid of good conscience and moral. De Gruchy asserts that, “it seems to be of paramount importance to ensure that the right decisions are made both on the basis of good economic sense and in the light of ethical and theological critique. If we decide to let the market sort things out, it is likely that the end-product will be neither justice nor efficiency” (1995:272-3).

Unfortunately, churches have also been complicit in this system, relying on popular models of finance and economics that prioritize generating money over the growth and well-being of humanity. These models are largely oblivious to the social costs of financial and economic decisions, and often lack moral direction. The challenge for churches today is to not retreat from their prophetic role. They are also challenged by their complicity with this speculative financial system and its embedded greed. At the centre of a confessing church is humility and steadfastness of the Christians to follow a path of commitment that leads to divorcing from the dominant order that has tolerance to corruption, unrighteousness, injustice and idolatry in order to build an alternative vision of community of hope. Mugambi vehemently argues that, “Churches lead the way for the secular social structures, churches ought to become torch-bearers into the future, rather than follow models designed by secular leaders that keep people in abject poverty” (2003:199). The church must draw its inspiration from biblical injunctions where it is called upon to take a stand against all forms of oppression and marginalisation. Isaiah 58: 6 reads, “...break the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free”.

Similarly, the church must be seen living out its vision and mission instituted and inaugurated by Christ, where he says, “the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19). These scriptural verses should keep the church on its feet to remain a voice against unjust economic systems that enslaves and impoverishes the masses. The church should not be complacent and avoiding engaging constructively with proponents of the unjust structures that favours few wealthy people in the society at the disadvantage of the larger population that are languishing in poverty, hunger and diseases.

Furthermore, Jones (2008:359) argues strongly that, “our faith traditions and our values call us to be outraged at the ongoing tragedy of poverty at a time when we can do so much more. The time has come for religious communities worldwide to bring the full weight of their moral authority to bear on behalf of the poor and excluded”. This assertion re-echoes the fact that economic issues and/or agenda should become central part of church’s mission and ministry for it to accomplish God’s mission of bringing good news to the poor. The

church must be uncomfortable with the current economic order, thereby compelled to take proactive steps towards advocating for alternatives that are pro-poor.

Supporting Jones argument on the church serving as the conveyor of good news of freedom from all manner of oppression, Mugambi (2003:199) affirms that, “Churches could lead the way for the secular social structures. Churches ought to become torch-bearers into the future, rather than follow the models designed by secular leadership”. Mugambi’s point tends to suggest strongly that wisdom to lead nations into prosperity and well being rest heavily on the church. This is a wakeup call on the church to rise above board in the mission of transforming the oikoumene for all humanity. This agenda of transformation is not possible with secular self centred greedy leaders but the transformed church.

Therefore, the church must deliberately work for the eradication of poverty and inequality through developing economies of solidarity and sustainable communities. Wherein hold the various governments and the international institutions accountable to implement their commitments on poverty eradication and sustainable (infrastructural) development; thereby rejecting the current economic system that is at variance with God’s purpose for humanity. The system is oppressive and excludes the poor, vulnerable and militates against fullness of life.

Therefore, the church must be united in order to achieve its shared goals. Van Elderen et al asserts that, “Unity will come about as churches stand together publicly in solidarity with the marginalised and in common witness and action against oppression”. This suggest that one strategic way for the church to demonstrate its visible unity is by standing in unison against oppressive economic policies and systems. Yoder (1987:37) recognising the urgency for the church to focus on justice that is life enhancing argues that, “only a justice which is based on need will really serve the interest of the underclass and transform their situation from that one of need and oppression to one of sufficiency and freedom”. It is imperative, therefore, that the church is to be actively involved in life-giving justice advocacy for all humankind regardless of religious affiliation or racial appearance.

### **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, many churches in Nigeria and in some countries seem to be complacent or deliberately chosen to remain silent, despite the obvious evidences that the economic policies don’t favour the impoverished majority of the citizens. Not to talk of outlining political ethics that will help Christians to politically function well for the common good of all humanity. While attempting to speak on corrupt practices perpetrated within government quarters, churches must take a stand challenging the governmental institutions on unjust policies and frameworks instituted to the advantage of a few wealthy people at the detriment of the majority. . Much is expected of the church in Nigeria and LWF to rise to its God given responsibility in challenging unjust and oppressive systems and structures globally and locally, but remaining critically prophetic. In an interesting manner José Míguez Bonino says, “it is the duty of the church to interfere in public conditions where it finds that serious moral evils are being tolerated...duelling...where weak are trodden underfoot...language that, in the name of Christianity, destroys the peace of the land and sows scorn and hatred broadcast...to draw together the rich and the poor...to help break down mischievous class prejudices” (1983:27). Bonino, even though writing in 1980s and many others call for radical transformation in the ways that the church engages with political structures. The radical transformation should lead to concrete transformation of human beings and the environment.

The LWF will remain faithful to its vision and mission as reflected in its strategy document. The strategy guides the institution in all its programme interventions in line with biblical obligations and developmental and humanitarian concerns.

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