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The Impact of Ecotheological Training of Faith Leaders in Mitigating Ecological Degradation in the Global South: A Nigerian Perspective

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Abstract

Faith leaders, as trusted opinion leaders, can play a strategic role in influencing community members towards mitigating ecological degradation. Prior debates on the religious contribution to the ecological crisis have not adequately explored the effects of intentional training of faith-leaders for combating developmental and ecological challenges. The varying degrees of commitment to creation care observable among the faith leaders underline the need for, and impact of, the intentional training of faith leaders. This paper seeks to address this need. We argue that intentional *ecotheological* training of faith leaders will enable them to be more effective influencers on ecological and sustainability issues. This will equip them to appropriately engage in creating ecological awareness within the community, thereby translating to mitigation of environmental degradation.

1. Introduction

Ecological degradation is one of the six categories of global challenges that the sustainable development goals seek to address and reduce to the minimal level possible by year 2030. This enormous task of preserving the planet earth from degradation includes "sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations" (United

Nations 2016). Previous studies have significantly approached the global environmental crisis in response to the degradation in the environment and climate change as well as approaches for mitigating the ecological hazards in the context of ecotheology, a discipline that began in the mid-twentieth century (Mante 2004, Nihinlola 2013, Faniran 2014, Asiedu-Amoako 2014). These majorly African voices were in addition to the numerous explorations of the subject from scientific and anthropocentric perspectives that have dominated the discourse (Anselm 2006, Kortetmaki 2013, Samuelsson 2013).

While the relationship between religion and global challenges or faith and development has been established (Shehu and Molyneux-Hodgson 2014; Abu-Sayem 2019), prior debates on the religious contribution to the ecological crisis have not adequately explored the effect of intentional training of faith-leaders for combating development and ecological challenges. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge. We argue that faith-leaders, as trusted opinion leaders, can play a strategic role in influencing community members towards mitigating ecological degradation. Hence, this research is entrenched in theories of faith leadership and ecotheology. *Ecotheology*, a term coined from ecology and theology, is “a reflection on different facets of theology in as much as they take their bearings from cultural concerns about the environment and humanity’s relationship with the natural world” (Deane-Drummond 2008:x). It aims at equipping Christian groups (and by inference faith leaders) by enabling them to link environmental issues with theology towards engaging them in practical environmental projects (Deane-Drummond 2008). The study thus discusses the concept of ecological degradation in the Global South; it explores the role and significance of faith leaders as trusted opinion leaders; it presents their current awareness and efforts in mitigating ecological degradation in the community, nation and the world at large; and it highlights how their intentional training would foster their accomplishment.

2. Ecological degradation in the Global South

This section focuses on the concept of ecology and ecological degradation, which poses sustainability challenges to the Global South with emphasis on Africa. The concept of ecology has been generally known as the inter-relationship of human beings with other living species in the environment as well as the interaction of living things with one another and other elements in

their immediate environment. The term was reportedly coined in 1873, but largely employed by Lynn White (Yamauchi 1980:193-202). According to Gnanakan, “ecology is the scientific study of the interactions between biotic and abiotic organisms and their environment. Biotic refers to the living and abiotic to the non-living components of an ecosystem” (2004:17). Ecology is often used synonymously with ecosystem, a self-sustaining system formed by the interaction of individual organisms with each other and with other components of the environment. It could be a living environment, a tropical forest, a lake, a field or a whole range of physical and biological conditions that surround human beings (Gnanakan 2004:16-17, Faniran 2013:119).

The earth environment embodies the interaction of four major components, namely lithosphere – the solid, rocky crust covering the entire globe; and atmosphere – the body of air which surrounds the planet and unseen gases or objects; it also includes the hydrosphere – a body of water masses such as the oceans (representing about 97 percent of it) as well as rivers, lakes and moisture in the air; the fourth component is known as biosphere – referring to all living organisms and embodies a network of plants, non-human animals and human beings (Faniran 2013:119). A theology of interdependence among these four components of the ecological sphere has also been explored (Oloyede 2018:111-114).

The rigorous engagement of ecological study can be traced to Lynn White, whose address in 1966 (published in 1967) recognized the arrogant attitude of Christians to their environment. This arrogant attitude is due to the wrong interpretation of the biblical dominion mandate which has been identified as the historical roots of the ecological crisis (White Jr 1967, Santmire 2014). White’s identification of science and technology in the nineteenth century as a source of ecological crisis, which was not as sophisticated as this twenty-first century scenario, was quite apt, but the largely religious nature is really contentious. While the dominion misinterpretation is a feasible cause of global degradation, White did not directly associate the arrogance with the Fall of Humankind, which resulted in depravity of the human mind and disharmony with nature among other consequences. Contemporary realities and empirical investigation have however indicated that unwholesome human dispositions are fundamental factors responsible for issues of ecological degradation in the African context. These unwholesome human dispositions include self-

centeredness, greed and power hunger, ecological ignorance and illiteracy, and lackadaisical attitude among others (Oloyede 2020:248).

The African environment is apparently blessed with resources in the hydrosphere and biosphere components, which potentially provide a better chance of sustainability among other countries in the Global South. It is however pathetic to note that the continent is largely rated poor, underdeveloped, less developed or developing. A large percentage was regarded as third world countries (fourth or fifth world countries in some reclassifications) which refer to economical and ecologically bankruptcy (Eriksen 2015:3). These are few of the descriptions of the Global South which consist of non-western or developing countries that are faced with social, political and economic challenges such as poverty, environmental degradation, human and civil rights abuses, displacement of refugees, hunger and disease. The Global South thus consists of nations of Africa, central and Latin America and most Asia (Mingate 2015:8).

Ecological degradation in the world has been classified into seven categories due to the complexity of the phenomenon. The first category is the alteration of the earth's energy exchange occasioned by human and industrial activities, as well as soil and land degradation, which is the focus of Bahnsen and Wirzba (2012). The second category is the approach to and extent of consumption. Waste and ecosystem dysfunction forms the third. Land conversion and habitat destruction, species extinction, global toxification and human and cultural abuse are the other four categories identified by DeWitt (2011:41-54).

There are three major sources of environmental degradation, which are categorised as human activities, industrialisation and globalisation that is influenced by man, science and technology. The different forms of pollution arising from the sources have also contributed to global climate change, also known as global warming (Carter 2016:1-3, Moo and White 2014:54-79). There are also waste problems and exploitation of natural resources leading to land degradation and extinction of species. The wideness and spread of these groupings of ecological degradation are apparent in the African daily newspapers and on the internet.

There is an interconnection among the sources of degradation. For instance, refuse accumulation and household wastes contribute to land pollution and air

pollution especially through burning. Common examples of air pollution in some parts of Africa include excessive emission of carbon monoxide from generating plants or automobiles and locating poultry or piggery farming in residential area. These are somewhat informed or influenced by poor maintenance culture and the poverty of resources or ideas to site the business in secluded or reserved farming areas. Loss of forests, overuse of land, water pollution leading to death of aquatic species and loss of species are other environmental problems leading to or aggravating poverty of Africans and their resources. The use of chemicals in pesticides such as DDT for securing plant crops from destruction is also causing cancers, birth defects and infertility (Kinoti, 2006:616).

Improper waste disposal in drainages is largely responsible for flooding and erosion in many cases on the African soil. This is in tandem with the recent alarm of impending flood disaster in Lagos, Ogun and other neighbouring states in Nigeria by the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). The agency predicted a high volume of rainfall in September 2019 and inevitable flood with the failure of the state governments to expand the drainage both in urban and rural areas since “the drainage has been filled up with refuse and other waste” (Bosun, 2019:1).

The different categories of pollutions in the African society are indications of the mismanagement of the environment. This is in consonance with Ogedegbe who identified and discussed indiscriminate burning and release of toxic substances, poor disposal of refuse, poor sewage disposal, poor defecation habits, improper disposal of animal, chemical and industrial wastes, dumping of refuse in drainages, streams and rivers, bush burning and poor personal hygiene as ways of environmental pollutions (2010:287-301). Ban (2019) also observed that the heaps of thrash, polythene products and uncollected garbage in some parts of Ghana necessitated the government spending huge sum of money on waste management (309-325).

In 2019, a survey on the awareness of ecological challenges in Africa among 32 faith leaders in training found that they consider refuse/waste accumulation, as well as forms of land pollution arising from oil spillage and other pollutants as the two prevalent causes and examples of ecological degradation in the Global South. The respondents, drawn from four theological institutions and eight churches spread across four states of Oyo, Ogun, Lagos and Kwara in

Nigeria,¹ indicate high level of awareness (approximately 72 percent) of these ecological concerns in their neighbourhood. Air and noise pollution from generators in religious centres and industries with flooding, erosion and overpopulation were also identified as significant ecological problems ranging from 15.63 to 37.5 percent awareness. All the respondents in the survey were variously concerned about the ecological challenges, probably due to their exposure to the theology of creation and environment (Oloyede 2020:228).

An aggregate of 75 percent of the respondents affirms that the Church as an institution, which consist of individual Christians in the body of Christ, contribute largely to many of the ecological problems in the contemporary environment. These include, but is not limited to, noise pollution from church auditoriums, air and land pollution as a result of indiscriminate dumping of refuse and waste accumulation within and around the church locality. While these opinions seem to concur partly with White's speculation about religious arrogance cum misconception of dominion as a cause of ecological crisis, which has now become global and more sophisticated, there can be no significant and long-lasting impact without the role of faith leaders.

3. Faith Leaders as trusted opinion leaders

It has been established that 84% of the world's population identifies with one religious group or the other (The Guardian 27 Aug 2018). Global development challenges, such as ecological degradation, bother on the values of people and values are usually rooted in faith (Seiple 2016). Considering the rootedness of values in faith, the role of faith (in that of faith leaders, by extension) in tackling global challenges is becoming more and more prominent. The World Economic Forum affirms that "faith plays a dynamic and evolving role in society" and that people of faith ... have profound impacts on community mobilizing for both productive and damaging purposes" (www.weforum.org). Some have even identified faith communities as the third partner (on par with government and business organizations) in tackling global crises (Warren, Stuff and Odendaal

¹ These are the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso, Baptist College of Theology Oyo, Baptist College of Theology Lagos, LIFE Theological Seminary Abeokuta Ogun State. The eight churches are basically from Ibadan, Oyo, Ogbomoso and Ilorin situated in Oyo and Kwara States of Nigeria.

2012). Faith communities take this prominent place because they have a strong network at the grass-root, national and international levels; they have a large volunteer labour force to tackle the development challenge on the globe; they have an enduring history of tried and tested cultural integrity; and they have the capacity of inspiring and motivating the populace for a change of lifestyle (Woodhead and Jackelen 2016; Warren, Stuff and Odendaal 2012).

Consequent upon the role of faith in development as discussed above, faith leaders have a significant role to play in generating awareness and shaping the attitude of community members on environmental sustainability. According to Humaid (2020), “faith leaders are in a uniquely positive position to bring about behavioural change through their teachings and actions” (www.weforum.org). This assertion reiterates the significant role of faith leaders in community education. Seen as opinion leaders with influential roles within, and sometimes beyond, their faith communities, faith leaders enjoy the trust of their followers and “exercise moral authority over members of their local faith community, and shape public opinion in the broader community and even at the national or international level” (UNHCR 2014:2). It is therefore imperative to pay close attention to the training of the faith leaders towards effective utilization of the potentials of the faith community towards driving and supporting development agenda.

4. Assessing the training of faith leaders for ecological issues

The foregoing role of faith leaders in the community affirms their indispensable role as a significant other for influencing their religious followers while tackling and alleviating ecological problems. Based on this background, a group of 20 faith leaders, consisting of 5 theological educators and 15 field ministers, 5 female and 15 male, from the southern and northern parts of Nigeria and Ivory Coast were selected for a survey. A structured interview guide, meant to find out their awareness of, training for and efforts on alleviating ecological degradation was administered to the faith leaders whose previous training span across ten theological institutions and 8 denominational backgrounds. These were intentionally chosen because if they are adequately exposed to ecotheology and equipped to link faith and development, they will embark on environmental projects and influence their community to do so.

4.1 Awareness of ecological crisis

The faith leaders are relatively familiar with prevalent ecological hazards in their neighbourhood which largely reflect the nature of degradation in the African context. However, their awareness of indiscriminate dumping of refuse and household wastes, flooding and erosion, overgrazing, air pollution from bush burning, generators and vehicles as well as land pollution could be regarded as average. The extent of awareness and understanding of ecological problems fundamentally lacks the integrated dimension of these human activities leading to global warming and climate change – being one of the 17 SDGs in the ecological degradation classification. This implies that inadequate equipping of faith leaders will limit their effectiveness in imparting the community for alleviation of environmental degradation to a large extent.

Five factors were identified as prominent causes of ecological degradation by these African faith leaders who are recognized as church, community and opinion leaders in their spheres of influence. While human attitude rated first among the causes identified, ecological illiteracy incidentally comes fifth in the ranking of their responses to the causes of ecological degradation. Poor town planning and management, noise pollution (from religious and economic centres) and overpopulation rank second, third and fourth among the causes of degradation. The five identified causes which can be appropriately subsumed in poverty understood from a holistic perspective (Osawe 2012) also resonate with previous studies on the resultant effect of poverty on ecological degradation, which religion and religious leaders have not given adequate attention to (Murekezi, 2004; Nwagbara et al 2010, Milek and Nel 2010). Faith leaders, therefore, need not only tackle material poverty but also spiritual, aspiration, identity and civic poverty in order to effectively help their followers from their spiritual capital deficiency, ecological illiteracy, identity crisis and ignorance of fundamental rights to life and good environment.

4.2 Training for ecological sustainability

The training and literacy of faith leaders on the need for ecological conservation and sustainability with the basic knowledge of ecological crisis were also investigated in this study. The survey found out that only 55 percent of the faith leaders have been exposed to ecological issues in their previous theological education. Their equipping for environmental awareness and revitalization was also limited to only portions of certain courses namely

Systematic Theology, Christian Worship, Bible Geography, Christian Ethics, Church and society and Theology of Providence. This ecological content reflects intentional training on the part of the course facilitators who understand the critical importance of the subject in ministerial training. This must have been informed by the exposure of the theological educators who had participated in conferences and workshops organized by institutions, Non-Governmental Organisations and other relevant bodies.

The contribution of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS), Ogbomoso, Nigeria to environmental awareness and community development since 2000 is quite significant and worthy of mention. This has been enhanced by their collaboration with the Sacred Earth Ministry (SEM) and International Council for Higher Education (ICHE) for two decades, the two religious bodies were founded and coordinated by professionals from various disciplines like Geography, Urban and Regional Planning, Environmental Studies, and Theological Education within and outside the African continent.

Further investigation into the preparation of the selected faith leaders for sustainable development indicates that 65 percent have attended at least one or more academic or security conferences, workshops, practicum, community development programmes or local government orientation aimed at addressing ecological degradation, earth conservation or restoration of the ecosystem. NBTS presents a *minimester* course titled Theology of Creation and Environment annually to equip church leaders and students who are future leaders. SEM organises biennial conferences while ICHE coordinates also textbook writing project and workshops on ecological stewardship among other related topics. Friends of the Earth was another organization that provided environmental literacy for these trusted opinion leaders who have little or no access to government campaigns or support on the alleviation of environmental hazards.

4.3 Efforts in alleviating ecological degradation

The need for more intentional training of current and future faith leaders through formal and informal contexts cannot be overemphasized in order to make remarkable progress towards the achievement of the SDGs related to ecological sustainability by year 2030. All the respondents affirmed that faith leaders can influence their community members and shape their attitude towards creation care. This affirmation, however, did not translate to

commensurate action among the field ministers as only 20% of them engaged in ecological awareness at least once in a year; 53.3%, once in 2 years; and 26.7% never did. Meanwhile, the theological educators, who have received explicit training on environmental issues, are more committed with 80% of them engaging in ecological awareness at least once in a year and the remaining 20%, at least once in 2 years.

5. Highlighting the impact of trained faith leaders on ecological degradation

Perceived as the most trusted members of their communities, faith leaders occupy a strategic position to more effectively influence their community members toward mitigating ecological degradation. Prior debates on religious contribution to the ecological crisis have not adequately explored the effect of intentional training of faith-leaders for combating development challenges. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge.

Though the cumulative level of ecological awareness of faith leaders and their attendance of relevant workshops and conferences is rather below average, their exposure and training at the NBTS and other platforms provided basic impetus to actively engage in the mitigation of ecological degradation in their environment. Their teaching and preaching efforts entail creating awareness of the hazards of ecological creation, enlightening church members on ecology as part of God's gifts that require stewardship responsibility and leading them to engage in environmental care.

While these actions are not regular and intensive enough, the faith leaders have also advocated for inclusion of relevant course in the curriculum of the seminary to abate their ecological ignorance. They also suggested the translation of ecological theory in classroom environment to *practicals* whereby future leaders in training are asked to lead and report ecological campaigns for healthy environment. They also requested for greater promotion of environmental care through workshops and seminars, and intentional training of faith leaders to be involved in creation care both of which will ultimately foster their concerted efforts. Since their good perception of ecological issue have not translated remarkably to expected actions by faith leaders, it is evident that intentional training will equip them to take concerted

efforts towards mitigating the challenges of ecological degradation first with their exemplary leadership as opinion leaders, followed by motivation and encouragement of followers to detest activities that contribute to degradation while consciously and conscientiously pursuing environmental sustainability. These will gradually and ultimately reduce the ecological hazards in the immediate environment, the nation at large and the Global South.

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

This study has shown that faith leaders have a significant role to play in generating awareness and shaping the attitude of community members on environmental sustainability. The strategic position of faith leaders as the most trusted members of their communities can effectively influence their community members toward mitigating ecological degradation. Establishing the relationship between faith and development, and the role of faith leadership in combating development challenges, we assert that intentional training of faith leaders will enable them to be more effective influencers on ecological and sustainability issues. The findings underline the need for, and impact of, intentional training of faith leaders. This will equip them to appropriately engage in creating ecological awareness within the community thereby translating to mitigation of environmental degradation.

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