

Will the Christians Balance; Exploring the Socio-Economic Collaboration within the House of Faith

Rev. Dr. Manya Wandefu Stephen

Alupe University College, Kenya

Abstract:- Collaboration of Churches among themselves is an expression of adherence and response to the truths shared in the Bible. This paper aims to encourage all the parties living and working particularly in the urban Church to consider the outcome of their ministry in an economically divided society. The disparity between the urban rich Church and the poor Church is a representative of the actual life in the Christendom. It is important to have an urban Church that is conscious of the gap between the rich and the poor and the subsequent action influenced by the realization that the gap is a denial of the Theology of the Kingdom of God. The writing of this paper was informed by the widening gap between the rich and the poor Churches within the house hold of faith. convinced that out there, there is less interaction between the rich and the poor churches. The poor church had limited access to resources for economic development. I would therefore suggest that; rich churches need to strategically engage the poor churches to prompt collaborative measures. Poor churches on the other hand, must seek ways in which to work with their rich counterparts for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concern for social -economic collaboration between churches is not a new phenomenon. It is a discourse that is emphasized Biblically and historically. It evolves when the tenets inscribed both in the history of the Church and the Bible are allowed to flourish. The realization of the same in Christian kingdom is attained when better economic and social improvements are laid down. Robert Clouse quoting Griffiths says of Christianity as that which starts with faith in Christ and it finishes with service in the world.¹ He notes that, although service is not its object, it is nevertheless, its inevitable consequences. He adds that obedience to Christ demands change, the world becomes his world, the poor, the weak and the sufferings are men, women and children created in His image; injustice is an affront to his creation.²

I therefore observe that the mandate of the church as the body of Christ is to promote a Kingdom that displays unity that goes beyond social-economic bridges that exist in the world. Asante Quotes Conner saying that; “The church consists of those who have obeyed the call of God through Christ and have convoked around Christ as believers, regardless of race nationality or culture. It consists of those who have been

called out of the world, the flesh and the devil. The church therefore is not institutional, racial, national, international, denominational, undenominational, sectarian or non-sectarian. It is the body of Christ.”³

This means, the promotion of a gospel that is exclusively about preaching and teaching the Word of God is misplaced. Some critic of the social -economic collaboration between Christians, advocate a church that should not be in the business of social-economic welfare at all but should leave this to the state. They see anything apart from spreading the gospel of salvation as a distorted gospel. Arguing for the church’s involvement in social-economic collaboration, Muehlenberg states that; “The good news is not just about getting disembodied individuals into a cloudy heaven. God created us as whole persons, bodies included. Every aspect of us is the subject of redemption. And the cultural mandate of Genesis 1 is still in effect. The fall was an interruption to God’s intended program on planet earth. Establishing the reign and rule of Christ in all areas of life is part and parcel of the biblical Gospel. The Lordship of Christ demands that we seek to reclaim and redeem every aspect of life, all of which were created by God and declared to be good. Sure, sin has affected every area, be it the cultural, social, political or spiritual, but the saving work of God is to reclaim all things in Christ.”⁴ (Col. 1:20)

The Early Church immediately after Christ’s ascension, demonstrated amply the social dimension of the existence of the Church of Christ, by meeting the needs of the brethren irrespective of class or status. As seen in Acts of Apostles 4:32-37, all the believers were of one heart and one soul. This signified the bond of love and care that existed amongst them which in my view is a great model of social-economic collaboration. That is seeing your neighbor’s problem as yours and going the extra step of doing something about it. Paul’s counsel to the church to care for the widows in their midst is another example of the early church’s, concern for the social-economic needs of its members.⁵ Paul used his ministry career raising money for the perennially poor churches of Jerusalem and held his congregations accountable for the treatment of the poor among them. Acts of Apostles, the Epistle of James,

¹ Robert Clouse, *Wealth and Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1984), 20.

² Ibid.

³ Asante E, *Gems from the Preacher’s Pedestal* (Accra: Son fire Books, 2006), 95.

⁴ www.billmuehlenberg.com. Accessed on 28th March 2014.

⁵ Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. 1 Timothy 5:3

the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Apocalypse to John, and other New Testament writings stress the community's obligations to the poor. The sharing of resources was vital to the realization of the kingdom that Paul preached.

The New Testament Church was an urban church and sought to fight poverty amongst them as a sign of living the down on earth kingdom values. Later on the early church history, most of the Church Fathers that Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants, and Orthodox venerate, all recognized a link between the spiritual well-being of believers and their generosity toward those in need. "Athanasius ranked care for the poor as a spiritual discipline on the same level with watchfulness in prayer, purity of the fast, and study of the Scriptures, while John Chrysostom considered almsgiving an act of worship. Francis of Assisi and his early followers were motivated to serve and enter into solidarity with the poor.⁶The history of the church shows considerable effort in enhancing a just society.

To this dimension, Thomas Schirmmacher⁷ observes that "the provision for the socially weak was also considered a matter of course, in the Early Church which universally reserved special funds for social purposes. Its provision for widows was exemplary." He adds that, as a matter of fact, more money was spent on social concerns than on the salaries of elders and pastors. He quotes Eusebius, one of the foremost historians of the Church, - the Church of Rome in the year 250 A.D., for example, supported 100 clergymen and 1500 poor people, particularly widows and orphans.⁸

II. THE NEED FOR SOCIAL-ECONOMIC COLLABORATION AMONG CHURCHES IN URBAN CENTERS

In Africa, as in Asia and the Americas, the rich and the powerful are at one pole, and the poor at the other. For example, Nairobi, being one of the very dynamic cities in Africa, also displays the same notion where the rich live side by side with the poor. Nairobi city, which is the capital city of Kenya, is one of the African cities that experience the high urban growth contributed by the rapid migration of rural to urban areas. This means that the poverty levels of the urban population rises and thus a high concentration of poor people in towns. Moreover, the population of the city, both poor and the rich produces in effect, the presence of the rich and the poor churches. Most of the population in Nairobi city is concentrated in the informal settlement and thus majority of the poor churches are found here.

The current situation Church finds herself in, is not self-made but has been influenced greatly by the history of

how the city came into being. The birth and growth of the city of Nairobi meant a stratification of space. The different economic and social class displayed in the city was influenced by certain factors. These factors even though they do not concern this paper are also seen as contributory to the current situation that the Church in Nairobi finds herself.

The social-economic factors that control the urban society, is by and large the same that controls the Church and her operations. This should not be the case! Through the study of various scholars and research, it is clear that there are factors that control the social economic gap that is found between the churches and thus affects their mandate to be a Kingdom governed by God. While the political state can try to enhance sharing and collaborative measures, yet the Church being the conscience of the people has the mandate to solve the challenge of division in the urban area. For this to happen, the church herself must first cure her problem since she has also been influenced by the same forces.

The gap between the rich and the poor Churches in Nairobi is not a permanent situation and can be corrected. Shorter and Onyancha notes that "there is in fact a big gap between the urban residents enjoying high incomes and low income people struggling to survive or make ends meet."⁹

The reality of the relations shared seems to engage harder in the informal settlements as those who reside there continue to do so under very difficult conditions that are inhuman in consideration. The churches in the same position are by far replicas of the relations shared by rich and the poor of the divided city. As the cities grow day by day, the Church must seek ways to help her members to collaborate between the rich and the poor churches by answering the questions of relationship that both groups share, in order to make a true existence of God's kingdom.

The oppression tendency within the population of the city is as a result of socialization process that produces oppressive tendencies among its populace. Generally history of African cities saw the colonizers leave at the end of colonization in the mid-19th C and the immediate takeover of natives who later turned to be colonizers of their fellow Africans. Paulo Freire says that once one poor man/woman is delivered, he/she instead turns and copies the same life lived by the oppressor (rich). The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or "sub-oppressors".¹⁰ For the oppressed, at a certain point in their existential experience, to be is not to resemble the oppressor, but to be under him, to depend on him.¹¹ This therefore shows the importance of social processes in the perpetuation and or

⁶www.nccusa.org/pdfs/LFP-final.pdf, accessed on 27th July 2012

⁷ Thomas Schirmmacher (born June 25, 1960) holds a chair in theology (ethics, missions, world religions), is a Christian moral philosopher and a specialist in the sociology of religion.

⁸www.contra-mundum.or/schirmmacher/social_acts, Accessed on 28th March 2014

⁹Shorter Alyward and Edwin Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa: A case study* (Nairobi: Pauline's Publishers, 1997), 9.

¹⁰Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47

eradication of oppression,¹² which in turn affects the collaborative aspect between the rich and the poor churches.

For the urban rich church to respond to the needs of the city and especially to the poor churches around them a conscience of the past has to be revisited for borrowing the words of Myers Bryant, “helping people recover their true identity and vocation also requires that they learn to reread their history. ---for the community to move into a new future, it must rediscover and recover its past, albeit understanding it in a different way”.¹³ The urban congregations cannot wait for the same government that failed to plan enough for the current influx; neither can it remain silent for it will cease to make sense of its existence. The exercise to move forward from orthodoxy to orthopraxis finds its ground in the famous quote by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Junior (1929-1968) “our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

The Church and especially the rich churches deserves the heart-rending question posed by Evangelist Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in 1930s,

“Are we still of any use?” Maybe the church and especially the rich church need to listen, and confess as Bonhoeffer “We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the art of equivocation and pretence; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still in use?”¹⁴

Maybe the words by Bonhoeffer are far too harsh on a Church that seeks understanding, however if the words can pierce the church’s conscience to respond to her obligation, then the comparison to Nazi Germany during Hitler’s time should be welcomed.

III. RICH AND POOR CHURCHES AS DEFINED BY THE POPULATION WITHIN THE SPACES

It is apparent that in every high rise estate in the city such as Nairobi, there is a slum next to it. Kibera slums,¹⁵ the second largest slum in Africa is next to *High rise* estate which is a community of the rich in the city. Another example is the Mukuru slum which is next to Nairobi South B estate, a

middleclass estate situated in the west of Nairobi city. The geographical neighborliness of both the rich and the poor areas of the city portray a condition, which must be appreciated. It is without mention that the rich and the poor residents of the city though sharing the same city space, yet they are different in all ways especially their economic, political and social lives. This is because while the rich population owns a large portion of the city wealth and the people therein, many of the poor serve the rich who are the minority. Aylward and Onyancha¹⁶ observe that the urban poor are extremely vulnerable to every form of exploitation and abuse.

They also note that “there is in fact a big gap between the urban residents enjoying high incomes and low income people struggling to survive or make their ends meet.”¹⁷ The rich may say that they help their poor in the city through charity but charity is relatively easy for wealthy people and may even become a form of ‘conscience money’ for maintaining a rich lifestyle amidst the poverty of others. But above all, such giving must not be allowed to dehumanize the ‘have-nots’ and increase their state of dependency on the ‘haves’. The response of the rich to the poor must be that of compassion and not of sympathy.

There is a difference between how the rich think about the poor within them that gives way to the outcome of the treatment of the poor by the rich. Bosch sees modern capitalism as a philosophy that has created a world totally different from anything known before.¹⁸ That as the wealth of the rich Christians increase, they increasingly tend to interpret the biblical saying on poverty metaphorically. The poor were the “poor in Spirit”, the ones who recognized their utter dependence upon God.

The discovery of the relationship between the two groups demands a solution. Mathew Theuri observes that “as the poverty continues to spread and the gap between the rich and the poor widens, the church has to proclaim the need for conversion of attitude- a change of mind and heart, among the rich and the powerful.”¹⁹ In the new Kingdom that demands a new social order, the poor must also see themselves as God created them, in their true dignity and worth. The need for collaboration cannot be wished away for the Church to grow; both from the poor and the rich. They must view themselves as persons with something to contribute, and to share. The rich on the other side are summoned to discover themselves in God’s sight and to recognize that they, too, are sinners in need of grace. For them it is much harder. They have so much they must lose as depicted in Jesus’ teaching to the rich man who wanted to know how he could attain eternal life “If you want

¹²Readings on inequality in Kenya-Sectoral Dynamics and perspectives Vol I, (published by society for International Development, 2006), 221.

¹³ Bryant, Myers, *Walking with the poor: Principles and practices of Transformational Development*, (Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 117.

¹⁴Bonhoeffer, D. *Letters and Papers From Prison*. (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 16-17.

¹⁵<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kibera>, accessed on 23rd Oct 2015.

¹⁶Shorter and Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa*, 59.

¹⁷ Ibid., 9

¹⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 435.

¹⁹Getui Mary and Obeng Emmanuel, *Theology of reconstruction, exploratory essays* (Nairobi Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2003), 236.

to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”²⁰ It is hard for them to receive and respond to this invitation to live by grace, when security lies in wealth, power, and status. It is even harder to repent and, like Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8, to acknowledge that their wealth comes from a defrauding of the poor. Yet the same movement of grace can release the rich from their isolation and estrangement.”²¹

In the above recognition about the plight of the poor, in the early stages of the 1960s, salvation was translated as liberation, fellowship and as solidarity. The meeting of Roman Catholic Bishops in Melbourne 1980, resolved that the affirmation of the poor was the Missiological principle per excellence and the Catholic church relation to the poor, “the missionary yardstick” Pope John Paul II encyclical on social justice, *sollicitudine sociali*, states that solidarity with the poor must be emphasized as it “enables us to see other people, not just as instruments with a work capacity, or a physical strength that exploited at low cost and then discarded,--but as neighbors, invited equally by God to the banquet of life.”²²

The poor through the likes of Gustavo Gutierrez fought and has been fighting for their voices to be listened to if not to be acted upon. Paulo Freire also one of the fathers of liberation theology has it that, “the poor must be conscientized about their plight so as to be able to win back their share.”²³ Their being made aware is the start of a transformation that would cause both the poor and the rich to be of help to each other and thus narrow the social-economic gap that exists even to date. The efforts of the rich in bridging the gap are much easier since they hold a better position than their counterparts, the poor.

The rich Christians unlike those that are not bound by Christian values are at an advantaged position and need to realize that their true spirituality is determined by their response to the needs of those in their neighborhoods. The book of James 1:27, alludes to this fact, “Religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this ‘to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world’”. Churches alike can and must innovate ways of lessening the poverty among its congregation. They must develop strategies and ways that will bridge the widening gap. However churches must be aware of ways that have been formulated by other organizations and have not produced viable solutions.

To add on the above, Harper Nile²⁴ argues that the understanding of God’s law in serving others can and have produced works of charity on a small scale in church sponsored social service agencies and at macro scale, charitable organizations that sometimes operate under the government bureaucracies. He adds that “there are significant limits to what charity can do”. This reason is so because ordinarily, charity deals with personal needs of an immediate nature, and does not deal with the root causes of injustice and human suffering. Sometimes charity can become a barrier to doing the more difficult work of justice.”²⁵

In some churches, there is pride in giving financial support to charitable organizations that serve poor people. Many of the organizations working in Nairobi city are present more in the informal areas which have become the “locus of operation of a network of humanitarian, development and advocacy institutions in the form of non-governmental organizations (NGOS), community-based organizations (CBOS) and faith-based organizations (churches and religious communities).”²⁶ This is done without any intention of becoming involved with the people for whom the aid is intended. Sometimes charity is given as a means of intentionally avoiding involvement with people who are different from one’s own group or class.²⁷ His suggestion towards having a vital Christian witness is to engage the urban congregations to go beyond acts of charity. Urban churches must go beyond the need to feel good about giving and develop the most valuable strategy which would include an active partnership between oppressed people seeking to change the conditions of injustice, and rich who are willing to join in a common effort so that equity can be established and thus correct the relationship shared.

IV. TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RESPONSE TO THE SOCIAL- ECONOMIC IMBALANCE

Both the African society and the church which comprises mostly of the poor understand the social- economic imbalance as that which has been caused by the rich through their own selfish living. Some factors that cause this difference are as a result of actions either by the rich or the poor themselves. Julius Nyerere, the former president of Tanzania adds that

“...the significant thing about the division between rich and poor nations is not simply that one has the resources

²⁰ Mathew 19:16-21

²¹ http://www.pen.org.za/pics/Christian_Witness_UrbanPoor.htm accessed on 16th July 2009

²² Shorter and Onyancha, *Secularism in Africa*, 51.

²³ Freire, Paulo, *pedagogy of the oppressed*. (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 27

²⁴ Harper Nile is director of Urban Church Research in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and an adjunct faculty member at Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit. Among his previous books is *Will the church lose the city?*

²⁵ Harper Nile, *Urban churches-vital signs, Beyond charity toward justice* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing Co, 1999), 298.

²⁶ Chinwe M. Nwoye, *Urban Ministry in Africa: Theological Reflections for the 21st Century* (Nairobi: Pauline’s Publications, 2010), 63.

²⁷ Nile, *Urban churches-vital signs*, 298.

to provide comfort for all its citizens, and the other cannot provide basic services. The reality and depth of the problem arises because the man who is rich has power over the lives of those who are poor, and the rich Nation has power over the policies of those which are not rich. And even more important, is that our social and economic system, nationally and internationally, supports these divisions and constantly increases them, so that the rich get even richer and more powerful, while the poor get relatively poorer and less able to control their own future.²⁸

Most traditional African societies understood the fact that the society cannot be at the same level socially and economically but sought to diffuse the gap by creating mechanism whereby those who harvested would pass by a common granary and deposit some of his/her harvest. As an example, *Luhya* tribe and one of the dominant tribes of Kenya had in its traditional practice put definite structures that cared for all the classes in the society. There was personal and collective ownership. The *Muluhya*, with scarce means would provide household requisites, because he was well aware that in case of need he would easily be able to borrow a pestle, a hoe, a knife or any other necessary tool from his neighbor, who would never refuse it. FrCagnolo²⁹ adds that “even long after civilization had spread to quite remarkable degree, it was not strange to find a person wearing the trousers, shirt, or hat belonging to different people, borrowed for a particular occasion.” On the land issue which supported most of their economy, “the absolute ownership of land, resided exclusively in the clan as a joint body, the individuals who exploited it being simply custodians by communal consent.”³⁰ Grazing was a common right and nobody prevented others from grazing in their land, provided the land was not cultivated. Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya equally observes that, the squatters would be allowed to cultivate the lands of those who owned land. Until the day they would have their own land

V. CONCLUSION

Collaboration of Churches among themselves is an expression of adherence and response to the truths shared in the Bible. It is of great importance that Christians living and working in the cities be encouraged to consider the outcome of their ministry in an economically divided society. The disparity between the urban rich Church and the urban poor Church is a

representative of the actual life in the city. It is important to have an urban Church that is conscious of the gap between the rich and the poor and the subsequent action influenced by the realization that the gap is a denial of the Theology of the Kingdom of God.

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AUTHOR

Rev. Dr. Manya Stephen is an experienced lecturer of religion. He has lectured in a number of universities and colleges including; Alupe University college (Where he is currently based), Kenyatta University, Daystar University, Scott Christian University, Mt. Kenya University, Africa International University and Riara University. In this paper Dr. Manya Stephen's examines the Christians' response to the acquisition and dispensing of Church resources within the house of faith.

²⁸ John Parrat, *A reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1991), 109.

²⁹ FrCagnolo, *The Agikuyu, their traditions and folklore* (Nairobi: Wisdom graphics publishers, Kenya 2006), 29.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.