

## **Christian Association of Nigeria: An Indispensable Tool for National Unity**

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### **Abstract**

In Nigeria, there are three prominent religions; African religion, Islam and Christianity. The role of these religions cannot be divorced for the peace, unity and growth of the society. Christianity for example is the religion based on the ideas of Jesus Christ and has its followers as Christians. Meanwhile, part of the tenets of the religion is to preach love and peace for the unity of the nation which remains a sacrosanct element for nation building. But a look at Nigerian society revealed that despite the fact that many Nigerians are adherents of one faith or the other, there are still lack of unity among the populace, misunderstanding, intolerance, among others which to some extent negate the tenet of the religions prevail. It is on this premise this work examined the role of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), a body which comprises members who profess Christ as the Lord and Saviour, as a way of promoting the unity of the nation. The work adopted historical method, and the findings of the work revealed that, it is not only Christians that exist in the country, the body (CAN) has been searching for ways of uniting members, extending the hand of unity to people from others faith for the growth of the nation. The work recommended that Christians should lead by example worthy to be emulated by all; the leadership of the association should do away with act of sentiment either within or outside of the association. The work concludes with the view that harmonious living is one of the elements that can bring about national unity.

**Keywords:** Christian Association of Nigeria, National Unity, Religious Bodies, Society

### **Introduction**

Nigeria is a pluralistic religious state where different types of religions and ideas exist with the aim of using such for the unity and peace of the nation. The religions are African Religion, Islam and Christianity Adiele (193). In addition, the tenet of

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the religions revealed that unity is part of their doctrines which pave way for harmonious relationship. But in Nigerian society, it seems that the concept is not properly used among the adherents of faith-based religions.

Often time, a look at the relationship of adherents of religious faiths revealed that, there is no proper unity among the populace, there is mutual suspicions and acrimony, intolerance which to a certain extent may not allow for national unity. As observed by Ogwu (1) the expectation of religion and its adherents is to seek unity, reconciliation and integration of the society for a peaceful atmosphere. But the irony thing in Nigeria is that the society is filled with mutual suspicion between people of diverse ethnicity, nationality and religions. It is very disheartening that this can be found in the Church of God, a place that is regarded as the spiritual custodian of people and where unity should reign.

In addition, one of the concepts that is essential for the growth, development, progress and unity of a society is the responsibility of individuals, government, religious bodies among others. Dime (1) states that Africans attach great importance to the unity of a society. He is of the view that unity and peace are sum total of all that a man desires for a harmonious relationship. In the Bible, Paul explained to the Christians in the Church of Corinth in I Corinthian Chapter I and Acts of Apostle Chapter 15 the need and importance of unity in the family, church and the society as a whole. For a peaceful co-existence in the society there should be unity before harmonious living can take place, thus, making this work to examine the role of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as a way of promoting the unity of the nation. The work also explained its formation and objectives and its role in the society.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

**Unity:** This is a situation in which people, groups, or countries join together or agree about something. It is also a state, property, or product of being united, physically, socially, or morally. It is regarded as oneness which is opposed to division Allen (1373).

**National Unity:** This is the process of establishing a common identity and cohesion among a country's people and this could be achieved through language and cultural

constructs, living and working together, religious and ethnic tolerance, national symbol or ideology Wahab (292).

**Christian:** This concept relates to Christianity or someone whose religion is Christianity. The person holds the view and ideas of Christ as the Lord and Saviour Rudell (253).

**Christian Association of Nigeria:** This is a religious body/association that comprises all Christian churches in Nigeria. It could also be described as an umbrella body of Christian denominations in Nigeria. It is seen as a distinct identity, belief in the trinity and recognizable church structures Ayegboyin (20).

### **Formation of Christian Association of Nigeria**

Christianity emerged in Nigeria through the activities of various evangelical bodies from Europe in which their mission to spread the gospel came to reality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Christianity came to the country, various denominations brought the gospel with different doctrines but have Christ as the central and major theme of their teaching.

In Nigeria, there are not less than six main church traditions. The Roman Catholic, the mainline or protestant congregation, the Ethiopian or African church, the indigenous African Movement, the Pentecostal and the neo-pentecostal churches Ayegboyin (25). A look at this revealed that Christian Association of Nigeria is an Association of Christian Churches in Nigeria with distinct identities, belief in the Trinity and recognizable church structures. Though, with different denominations and doctrines but with the aim of fostering unity and Christ as the central core of teaching. When Christian Association of Nigeria was formed, it witnessed the time when churches were ready for ecumenism. Information had it that what is known as CAN today started in the North by Christians who saw the activities of Sardauna. As at that period, Sardauna of Sokoto wanted to Islamize the North and the entire country. This made Christians and some non-Christians in the North to come together as a group to resist his mission Dodo (51). At that period, the activities of Sardauna of Sokoto made him to be regarded as both political and religious leader, and a man to be reckoned with in the society. (Ikeanyi and Enwered, 12).

According to Wahab (12) after the death of Sardauna on 15th January, 1966, the country witnessed civil war in 1967 to 1970. However, before his dead, it seems that the government of the day was trying to take side in the area of religion with the aim of taking over the mission's schools, health facilities, imposition of heavy taxation on religious parcels imported into the country; this event continued until 1976 when General Muritala Mohammed was assassinated by Dimka.

Meanwhile, the above scenario brought about suspicion and engulfed the relationship between Christians and Muslims, and there was speculation of reprisal attack from the Muslims in the Northern area of the country. Ikeaniyi and Enwerem (45) posit that, around 1975-1976, during the Obasanjo regime, Christians in Nigeria thought that it would be a good thing if Christians could have an organisation that would bring them together to discuss issue of unity among them and the nation as a whole.

Shedding light to above discussion, Wahab (18) opines that on 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1976, the then Federal Military Government, under Gen. Obasanjo invited church leaders of diverse denominations to Dodan Barracks, Lagos. The aim of invitation was to discuss the singing and recitation of the National Anthem and National Pledge respectively, and the salutation to the national flag, which the government intended to introduce to the nation's primary and secondary schools. The church leaders attended the meeting with no objection to the government decision. However, the religious leaders pleaded to have morning devotions during which the staff and the students of each school worship their creator and offer praises and prayers to Him. After the meeting with the head of government, the church leaders assembled at the Catholic Secretariat, Lagos to review the discussion between them and government and their meeting later transpired to the formation of formidable association.

### **The Role of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Fostering Unity among Christians in Nigeria**

The most significant functions of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is to uphold social justice, equality and people's welfare, which can assist the country to achieve national unity. However, as an umbrella body of all Christians, it focused

on the unity and welfare of the Christian community in Nigeria. Thus, the objectives of the association are highlighted below:

1. To promote understanding, peace, and unity among the various people and strata of society in Nigeria, through the propagation of the gospel;
2. To act as a liaison committee, by means of which its members, churches can consult together and when necessary make common statement and take common actions;
3. To act as watch-man of the spiritual, moral welfare of the nation;
4. To be the unifying voice of all Christians in Nigeria, amplifying their views, interest and enhancing the spiritual development of all followers of Christ;
5. To connect people to Jesus and one another by helping them to grow their faith, finding the true essence of Christianity and building healthy Christian relationships;
6. To foster ecumenism by uniting all denominations in the body of Christ so as to promote understanding, peace, unity and mutual respect; and
7. To build a great nation for all people through gospel movement, community formation, social justice and cultural renewal Ojebode and Ajayi (11-12).

It could be inferred from the objectives that Christian Association of Nigeria had it in mind to search for unity and bring people together as a means of promoting understanding, progress and mutual respect among one another in the society. This could be seen in the area of interpersonal relationship, the need to have harmonious living among people of other faiths, the need to respect the constituted authorities among others.

Going further, a look at the society's activities vis-à-vis the association revealed that no development can take place in an area where there is chaos, disunity or misunderstanding. To promote peace and unity for the development of a society, it is the responsibility of individuals, associations, religious organisations and the government, an objective which Christian Association is searching for either within the umbrella of the association or outside for a harmonious relationship. To allow unity among Christians and believers of other faiths in the society, the leadership of the Christian Association of Nigeria should intensify efforts in fostering unity. The leadership of CAN should preach absolute loyalty

and obedience to the civil and political authority. The view is that if this is done, the society will be free from political victimization, instability and oppression. The leadership of CAN should preach the need for citizens to fulfill their obligations toward the unity of the nation.

One of the major functions of Christian Association of Nigeria is to promote the spiritual well-being of the people and in the process of foster unity; the association has made itself known to all as the only umbrella association that draws its membership from all blocks of Christian churches in Nigeria. Ayegboyin (20) posits that through the association, the Christians in Nigeria have got a voice in advocating for good governance and the protection of human rights in Nigeria. Wahab (23) adds that, it has spoken against corruption, human rights abuses and other forms of injustice, it has also pushed for accountability and transparency in government. CAN has also rendered advice and suggestions to government for a successful governance of the nation.

Before the formation of Christian Association of Nigeria, Ariyo (7) notes that there were lots of problems among the Christian bodies but these were pacified with the presence of Christian Association of Nigeria. Wahab (16) adds that the association also agitate for fair treatment of its members and the generality of the citizens, if it observes that there is an infringement on the rights of its members either by any external force or if any government policy is against its members. As a corollary, Christian Association of Nigeria demonstrated the act of unity in the wake of the school uniform crisis in some states like Kwara, Osun, Oyo among others.

When issue of *hijab* was introduced to the school system, the association acts as intermediary to the government at all levels, in order to make sure that Christians are not marginalized, as enshrined in its objectives, which states that Christian Association is to act as liaison committee by means of which its member churches can consult together when necessary, to make common statement and take common actions. However, as observed by Ayegboyin (20) Ojebode and Ajayi (24) and Ariyo (12) with the acceptance of the ecumenical body, churches to a large extent, began to understand that despite their theological differences they need to stand for one central core, instead of relating as enemies, rivals or engaging in

struggles against one another. At this period, the church started to see herself as a family which need to work for the unity of the nation.

Apart from this, Adesupo (55) is of the view that one important contribution Christians can make to the unity of the nation is by speaking against any act of terrorism, war, intolerance, corruption among others. This is important for the citizens in the nation to know the need to live in peace with other people in the society. Thus, to allow unity in the society, holy wars and belligerence should not be preached under the religious faith. Besides, Christians are expected to give voice to the truth and find its nourishment by trusting in God, which surpasses all understanding, this is what will promote national unity.

In the political realm, Christian Association of Nigeria remains a body to reckon with. To a certain extent, the body do advise government on any policy that may be a problem to the society or those that are seen as gross infringement to religious rights. For instance, Ayegboyin (30) noted that in a communiqué issued by the association at its second general assembly held at Kaduna in November 1988, the association had it in mind to continue defending the secularity of the Nigeria – state as it is written in the 1979 constitution; the view of this is to allow peace, unity, progress and proper integration of the nation. One of the things the society should note is that where the political environment is not favourable to the citizen there may not be development, progress and unity which is the responsibility of every individual to look at, a thing in which the association is struggling to achieve. Moreover, as a way to enshrine peace and unity, the association has engaged in lots of dialogue to see that there is good interaction between the government and other religious faiths for proper integration of the society.

Going further, to promote the national unity it is the duty of Christian Association of Nigeria to speak in the light of God's word. This will allow unity to be promoted among the populace and enhance sanity in the society. Dairo (47) corroborated this view when he said that the teaching of Church should be directed towards condemning the ills of the society, comfort and raise the hopelessness of people, advised the people at the helm of affair of their responsibility to do the needful. CAN should also encourage and insist that morality or ethical precepts must be reflected in the daily activity of Nigerian for a harmonious living.

Another aspect that is significant in the area of national unity which Christian Association should profess is the reconciliation of the various denominations. This will allow to overcome the historical divisions within Christianity. Besides, CAN should not limit her reconciliation within Christian fold, such should be extended to other people from another faith to allow genuine ecumenism among the people for proper integration of the society, thus, if this is done, the aspect of defending the secularity of the Nigeria states will be promoted.

As a way of bringing people together in the society, the association has succeeded in the organization of joint programmes in the name of the Christian Association of Nigeria. To integrate people, especially the Christians in many localities, the body in each locality is responsible for the organization of joint Easter programme, Palm Sunday procession, musical concert, revival programmes among others. These to a large extent, unite Christians in many localities.

### **Conclusion**

One of the concepts that cannot be divorced from human society is religion. It is seen as a cohesive factor and a necessity for humanity; this is because human-beings did not create the world neither did they create themselves. This makes man to relate with God and submit to him. As one of the religions in the society, Christianity came from the West with the aim of preaching peace, unity and truth among the populace, hence, it is seen as integral force that unites people.

Christian Association of Nigeria is a body that aims to bring people together from all sectors for proper integration of the society and, to a certain extent, contribute immensely to the unity of the nation. It also brings many people together for the promotion of social welfare of the society. In the area of politics, the body has contributed to the political development of the nation, spoken on behalf of people and offered useful advice to the government for harmonious relationships.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the submission of this work, the following suggestions are considered useful: Religion being an essential integrative force in the society, has brought many people together for mutual relations, it is, however, good if religion did not lose its focus so as to promote national unity.

One of the major functions of Christian Association of Nigeria is to involve itself in making dialogue for the peace of the society when the need arises, however, it is good if CAN can come up with proactive prospects which can assist the nation and not only confine itself to the resolution of disputes.

Among the body of Christ in Nigeria, there are lots of problems or grievances, thus, leaders of the association should look for means of resolving the problems, joint hands with those who are aggrieved to move the nation forward; it is only where peace reigns that development can take place.

The leaders of CAN who hold power should not see religious organisation as an end in itself, instead, the organisation should be seen as a means to an end. Thus, leaders should search for a means of bringing people together for the progress and unity of the society.

Some of those things that are absolute in religion are truth, justice, equity, among others. CAN and other religious leaders should look for a way to preach equity, justice and truth among its members, for this will enhance the national unity.

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