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Email: [getasie@yahoo.com](mailto:getasie@yahoo.com) or [george.tasie@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:george.tasie@uniport.edu.ng). Or Dr. A. E. Ahiamadu, Secretary Editorial Board, Journal of Religious and Cultural Studies, Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Telephone: 08063782201. Email: [amadi.ahiamadu@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:amadi.ahiamadu@uniport.edu.ng).

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## **List of Contributors**

1. Okunoye, Job Oluremi (PhD). Okunoye is of the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Mountain Top University, Prayer City, Ibafo, Ogun State, Nigeria.
2. Olumati, Rowland (Ph.D). Olumati is of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria
3. Edoghotu, Humphrey J. (Ph.D). Edoghotu is Conference Secretary, Baptist Convention, Bayelsa State.
4. Professor W. O. Wotogbe-Weneka. Wotogbe-Werieka is of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
5. Egbulefu, Enyinnaya Emmanuel is a Doctoral student in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
6. DthiruInuwa Ibrahim (Ph.D). Ibrahim is of the Department of Religious Studies, Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria.
7. Riblu, AliyuAlhajl, Rabiui ii of the Department of Religious Studies, Gombe State University.
8. Samson Elias Mijah (Ph.D). Milan is of Department of Arts and SOClftl Science Education. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria,
9. Chibuzo I. Nwinguma (PhD) Nwanguma is of Mountain Top ', feefe, Ogun State. Nigeria.

10. Elesin, Abdulwahab Muhammad Jamiu (Ph.D). Elesin is of the Department of Islamic Law, Faculty of Law, Nasarawa State University,.Keffi, Nigeria.
11. IlamiKrama Clive (Ph.D). Krama is of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
12. Rita Adaobi Sunday-Kama. Sunday-Kami is of the Department of Music, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
13. Ngozi Patricia Maduka (Ph.D). Maduka is of University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
14. Iniobong Dan Udoudoh is of Samuel Bill Theological College, IkotEkang/IkotAkpabio, Abak.
15. Dr. Amadi Enoch Ahiamadu is of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt.
16. Wotogbe, Igwechi Hope is of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education(I.A.U.O.E) Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State.
17. Dr. N. N Iheanacho is of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Rivers State
18. Ben O. Onu (Ph.D). Onu is of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Role of Church Leaders in Building Sustainable Nigerian Future <b>Okunoye, Job Oluremi.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Global Warming and Environmental Degradation: A Christian Perspective <b>Olumati, Rowland and Humphrey J. Edoghotu.....</b>	<b>15</b>
The Role of Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion (EFAC) in the Development of the Anglican Diocese of Aba (1972-2014) <b>Egbulefu, Enyinnaya Emmanuel; W.O. Wotogbe-Weneka.....</b>	<b>40</b>
Procreation and Contraception (Family Planning) an Islamic Perspective <b>DahiruInuwa Ibrahim.....</b>	<b>51</b>
Effects of Electronic Media on the Muslim Youth of Gombe Metropolis <b>RABIU, Aliyu Alhaji.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Christian Missions and Marriage Values: African Christian Responsein the Face of Current Marriage Problems. <b>Samson Elias Mijah.....</b>	<b>76</b>
Interplay Between Corruption And Poverty In Africa: A Recurring Decimal in Nigeria <b>Chibuzo I. Nwanguma.....</b>	<b>92</b>
Consideration of Al-Maslahah: A Compliant Methodology for Re-Reading and Re-Interpreting the Islamic Texts <b>ELESIN, Abdulwahab Muhammad Jamiu.....</b>	<b>117</b>

Social Dance Trends in Nigerian Music Videos <b>IiamiKrama Clive.....</b>	<b>136</b>
<i>EgwuAkuoyiboNwa: A Celebration of Womanhood and Birth among the Neni of Igbo Ethnic Nationality.</i> <b>Rita Adaobi Sunday- Kanu&amp;Ngozi Patricia Maduka.....</b>	<b>148</b>
Re-Reading Numbers 27:1-11 in the Context of Inheritance among the Annang: A Feminist Critique <b>Iniobong Dan Udoudoh&amp; Dr. Amadi Enoch Ahiamadu.....</b>	<b>166</b>
Family Structure and the Role of Women in Sustainable Development in Annang: A Socio-Feminist Approach <b>Iniobong Dan Udoudoh&amp; Dr. Amadi Enoch Ahiamadu.....</b>	<b>195</b>
How United Nations Organisations Conventions (UNO) on Women Enhanced Family Life in Ikwerre Traditional Society of Rivers State. <b>Wotogbe, Igwechi Hope &amp; Dr. N. N. Iheanacho.....</b>	<b>212</b>
Henry Venn - Missionary Statesman <b>Wilbert R. Shenk</b> <b>Review by: Ben O. Onu.....</b>	<b>233</b>

# THE ROLE OF CHURCH LEADERS IN BUILDING SUSTAINABLE NIGERIAN FUTURE

Okunoye, Job Oluremi

## ***Abstract***

*Recent happenings in the political arena in Nigeria have shown that church leaders have a great role to play in the governance of their nations as it was in ancient Israelite society. In fact, church leaders have taken a step higher above their traditional roles in the issues of governance and politics in Nigeria by actually getting involved in active party 'politics. They frequently express their views on governance publicly and radically in their churches on Sundays, on the pages of newspapers, on television and radio. Likewise, many political leaders and political offices aspirants (Christians and non-Christians) that are seeking the votes of the electorates run to the church leaders to seek for prayers, guidance and votes of the church members during the elections. However, many church leaders have disappointed the body of Christ, that is, the church through various negative roles they have played in the issues of politics and governance of this nation, Nigeria. Hence, this study, using socio-historical and theological approach assesses the roles the church leaders can play in building sustainable Nigerian future, ensuring transparent and credible leadership, and accountability. Biblical examples of men of God that played their roles according to the will of God to influence the politics and governance of their society positively are also examined to serve as a model for contemporary Nigerian church leaders. It was discovered that many church leaders have left undone what they ought to do and have done what they ought not to do. Materialism has replaced the message of true repentance, righteous living and so on. The contemporary Nigerian church leaders are hereby called upon to set themselves apart as holy and acceptable God's mouthpieces that truly serve as guides and consciences of the nation.*

**Keywords:** Good Governance, Roles of the Church, Church leaders, Credible leadership, Sustainable development in Nigeria

## **INTRODUCTION**

Religion according to Mala and Akanbi (2012) is increasingly becoming a mean of political mobilization and platform to decry bad governance and clamour for good, transparent and accountable form of governance in a bid to build a sustainable development in Nigeria. Religious leaders, political leaders and would be political leaders are , the key actors in this political drama. The roles that these key groups have been playing in the last few years as far as politics and governance are concerned in Nigeria cannot be swept under the carpet. But worthy of note are the roles of religious leaders and in this case, the church leaders, in politics and governance in Nigeria.

It is noticeable that contemporary Nigerian church leaders are now deeply involved in the issues of politics and governance even to the extent of holding political offices either through election or by appointment. A typical example is the incumbent Vice President, Prof. Yemi Oshinbajo who is a pastor in Redeemed Christian Church of God, a foremost new generation church in Nigeria. Similarly, church leaders freely and publicly express their views on politics and governance in their churches on Sundays, on the pages of newspapers, on television and radio programmes. Today in Nigeria, church leaders are seen taking to the streets, leading protests and demanding for their rights from the government. 'The Save Nigeria Group' being led by Pastor Tunde Bakare is a typical example of this. In Nigeria today, the fascinating thing is that the church leaders are not only expressing their views publicly and radically, but the political leaders and numerous would- be political leaders are likewise running to church leaders (not minding their religion affiliation) for counsels, prayers and to seek political mandates of their church members during the elections.

Thus, religion as Mala and Akanbi (2012) posit is still a potent force in the matter of governance and politics in Nigeria. Although many church leaders in Nigeria today have become politicians' praise singers and the messages on pulpit according to Tanu (2012) are that of accumulated blessings from God and not instructions of turning the wicked away from sin and of judgment where necessary. Thus, this paper assesses the roles the church leaders can play in building Sustainable Nigerian future by ensuring transparent and credible leadership and accountability. The paper also examines biblical examples of true men of God in ancient Israel that influenced their society positively in order to serve as models for the contemporary Nigerian church leaders.

### **DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS**

**Church:** The church according to Dickson (2007) is basically the body of believers, that is, those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. It is the people of Jesus Christ who have been called 'out of the world through the gospel. The church has been called out of the world of disobedient subjects to be a 'holy nation' and a 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Universally, the church refers to a body of believers in Christ irrespective of the denominations in whom the spirit of God dwells as the source of their excellence (Igbari, 2004).

**Church Leaders:** These refer to the set of people who are in-charge of churches as pastors and Administrators. They are known and addressed by various names such as Pastors, Reverends, Prophets, Bishops, Archbishops, Primates, Prelates, Apostles, and so on. These people are specially called by God as His mouthpiece to help instruct and coordinate both society and the rulers. They are called to govern the church as well as the society. This act, according to Tanu (2012) is to perpetuate godliness in the nation and among the leaders as it was in the Old Testament. According to Jewett (1980), one is called to the office of a pastor; one does not simply choose to be a minister as one would choose to enter a profession. The pastor or prophet by calling is

the one that delivers God's intention and motive to God's lost world. His craft exhibits God's nature to a world that does not truly know him.

**Sustainable Nigerian Future:** This simply refers to a new Nigeria that is desired by all. Where justice and equity reign. It involves the psychological reconstruction of individuals. Likewise, it is a process of infusing into the people of new independent territories who differ widely in language, religions and values with a new sense of common belonging and'-shared identity (Odudele, 2012). It involves the building of the individual and the structuring of his environment, the creation or recreation of a political community with a relevant economic system and the search for a cohesive and enduring ethos capable of making individuals identify with the political community. Sustainable Nigerian future implies the building of the spirit of patriotism, oneness, solidarity and understanding among the large ethnic groups that make up a country. That is, where everyone become? Loyal to -the country and stop subordination of national interest to regional interest.

### **BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF MEN OF GOD THAT INFLUENCED THE GOVERNANCE AND POLITICS OF THEIR NATION POSITIVELY**

The Bible is filled with incredible men of God/leaders who gave all they had to see that there was actualization of good governance during their era. These men of God according to Mala and Akanbi (2012) became the enemies; of their societies because of their penchant for justice, equity and development in their society or community. Thus, this section would examine the lives of three prophets of God from the Bible to show how important men of God had contributed positively to the growth of the society in biblical times and the valuable lessons our present church leaders in Nigeria can learn from them in a bid to build sustainable Nigerian future. The prophets in the Old Testament featured in various events and reigns of kings. They serve as divine

oracles in guiding the leaders, people and the entire nations in the ways of God.

They also acted as checks and balances to many kings at different dispensations in ancient Israel. The first to be considered among these men of God is Prophet Nathan. Prophet Nathan (c. 1000BC) was a court prophet who lived in the time of King David and Queen Bathsheba. He was a prominent member of David's cabinet and a faithful friend and confidant. He was well known for his famous soft rebuke of King David when he committed adultery. (2Sam 11: 1-26; 12:1- Nathan the prophet played a positive role in the administration of King David in ancient Israel society. He was a good counselor/adviser to the king. In fact his candid advice to King David on the building of a temple and dynasty of David became the bedrock of David's dynasty, the personality that should build the house of God and the Crown Prince that should reign at the demise of King David. Indeed Nathan's intimate relationship with the King and his household brought blessings to the King and Israel (2Sam 7:1-17; 1Chr. 17:1-15). Moreover, Prophet Nathan out-rightly condemned King David who was one of the greatest Kings of his time for murder. The Prophet was blunt in the circumstance in which he found him, although the King was his intimate friend, that notwithstanding, the prophet delivered the oracle without fear of the highly placed King. This bold feat of the prophet, according to Tanu (2012) revived and reshaped the backsliding King in leading God's people as reflected in Psalm 51 where the King pleaded for forgiveness and cried for a new heart and right spirit to serve the Lord.

Nathan the prophet played his role well as a religious guide and conscience of the nation at the time of Israel's apostasy. His well-timed rebuke and advice to the erring King saved the Nation from an untimely doom. Nathan's ministry, character and life should be emulated as a worthy example and inspiration to the contemporary

church leaders in Nigeria. Another man of God whose life and ministry positively influenced his society in ancient Israel was Jeremiah, the prophet. Prophet Jeremiah began his ministry during the reign of King Josiah and his prophesy spanned through the reign of King Josiah to Gedaliah until the carrying away of Jerusalem to captivity in Babylon.

Basically, the political, religious, social and economic lives in Judah as that time of Jeremiah's ministry were messed up by both great and small. Prophet Jeremiah according to Okunoye (2014) ministered amidst many political leaders whose aim was not to serve but to be served. Nevertheless, he declared the will of God to people who had made up their minds to follow deception and was willing to hear what suited their hearings. His words were stinging, probing the very root of what was wrong with Judah without minding stepping on the toes of the Kings and the entire populace (Jer. 22:1-18; 14:13-16; 23:1-21; 26;27). In spite of the various oppositions he met, he was not discouraged in preaching the words of the Lord. He was faithful, loyal and committed to his commission. He will not glibly speak the words of God's will without going through the arduous discipline of discovering what it really was (Jer.23:18-28; cf 28:1ff; 42:7). Prophet Jeremiah would never speak what the people wanted to hear but what God wanted him to say. As a result, he did not command the respect of many people of his generation, but his faithfulness and courage is entirely breakable.

The above experiences and circumstances that surrounded Jeremiah's prophecy are still prevailing in Nigeria today. Thus, contemporary church leaders in Nigeria should learn from prophet Jeremiah by preaching and teaching the undiluted word of God irrespective of the circumstances facing them. Just like Jeremiah, the preachers are to pronounce the judgment of the Lord upon the unrepentant sinners and His mercy to those who repent. It is however sad that most church leaders today only preach what the people wants to hear even when it

goes against the will of God. They are doing this in order to get the people's acceptance, to avoid persecution and for other selfish interest. There is need for Jeremiah-like preachers in Nigeria who will declare the whole counsel of God without minding stepping on toes.

Another man of God who played a very prominent role in the formation of the nation of Israel was Prophet Samuel. His (Samuel) model of leadership is worthy of note and emulation by the contemporary church leaders. Prophet Samuel according to Mala and Akanbi (2012) was outspoken on matters of his day. He rebuked King Saul when he was wrong and served as a guide to him. His rebuke to the misguided King Saul (1 Sam. 13:1-11) was a lesson worth learning by contemporary church leaders. In the same vein, his latter appointment of David as the successor of the throne of Israel was a typical character of any visionary leader who has the well-being of the nation in mind. The above examined men of God, Nathan, Samuel and Jeremiah have undoubtedly shown by their lives that religion can positively influence the society, and that church leaders are indispensable to the building of sustainable Nigerian future.

## **THE ROLES OF CHURCH LEADERS IN BUILDING SUSTAINABLE NIGERIAN FUTURE**

The church is called to build a just and equitable society, a society that cares for all its citizens, especially for those that are weak and marginalized; a democratic society that respect our constitution, the rule of law that guides against the misuse of power, that fosters our diversity and plurality, and that fosters the role of civil society. Such a society can only be built on a moral and ethical values founded in the Bible, values such as the respect for life, human dignity, transparency, accountability, honesty, faithfulness and to serve one another. Hence, what can the church leaders do to build sustainable Nigerian future?

- 1. Sensitizing and encouraging participation in politics:** The church leaders owe it as a duty to sensitize and encourage his church members to participate in politics. Those that have the gifts and

potential for leadership should be encouraged to go into politics to enable them use their gifts to serve people especially those that are marginalized and oppressed. The aim is not just for Christians to be represented in government, but more importantly to address the issue of corruption and injustice within the country. Similarly, the church leaders can sensitize their followers on the need to contribute their own quota to governance by obeying the law set by the government and exhibiting loyalty and a true sense of patriotism to the nation. Church leaders should mobilize their followers to register during the election registration process and the need to vote for credible candidates of their choice. They are to warn their numerous church members not to be involved in electoral malpractices and acts of violence that can hamper the peace of the nation.

**2. Prayer and Fasting:** One of the most important things the church leaders can do in building sustainable Nigerian future is to fervently pray for- those involved in governance and the politicians. This is because of the fact that prayers cannot be underestimated as guidance comes from God. In fact, the bible enjoins all Christians to pray for all the King's and those that are in authority (1Tim.2:1-2). There are times the church leaders need to fast for those in government, most especially when critical decisions are to be taken or when facing serious persecution. The prayers and fasting should be focused on the need for courage, fearlessness, faithfulness, transparency, openness to corrections, honesty, and to overcome all temptations (Danladi, 2009). It should be noted that church leaders do not necessarily pray for the government so that they may be recognized and be compensated, but they see it as part of their spiritual responsibility to the nation. The effort of the group called 'Nigeria Prays' with Rev. Dr. Moses Akinsola as the national coordinator is commended in this direction. This prayer movement is highly dedicated to praying for Nigeria irrespective of whether the President is a Muslim or Christian; the Judiciaries, Legislators, and all the citizens. They believe that without

prayers, Nigeria cannot achieve their dream of greatness not to talk of building sustainable future.

**3. Providing Advice/Counsel:** The church leaders should indeed serve as true advisers/counselor to the political leaders. Just as Nathan and<sup>1</sup> Samuel, the prophets rightly advised the Kings of their time, the church leaders should play similar role in Nigeria by giving candid and right advice to those in government without expecting any monetary gain from it. In order to do this, a church leader must be reliable .non-partisan and with proven integrity. Church leaders can advise the politicians on the need to fulfill promises made to the electorates and to examine their activities if they are in line with the core needs of the society in which they govern using the teachings of the Bible which they use to take their oath of office. Pastor Tunde Bakare is commended on this because he can hardly preach without making reference to the challenges of the Nigerian Nation and the need for government to improve the standard of living of Nigerians (Mala and Akanbi, 2012).

**4. Advocacy:** Advocacy according to Danladi (2009) is almost influencing those in power and position of authority to bring about change for the benefit of all especially the poor. Based on this understanding, advocacy is an integral part in the mission of the church to be carried out by church leaders. Jesus Christ modeled advocacy in his ministry here on earth, he said, at the beginning of/his ministry that we came to set the captives and prisoners free (Luke 4:18). He demonstrated concern for the poor and the less privileged. Just as Jesus Christ served as an advocate, the church leaders must not shy away from advocacy. Church leaders should encourage Christian politicians to address issues that cause poverty among the people and stand in the gap for the people. The pastors should engage and challenge political parties, parliamentary hearings and government representatives with regards to the priorities they set.

**5. Speaking against the evil being perpetrated by the political leaders:** Just like the prophets of old (Nathan, Jeremiah and Samuel), the contemporary church leaders have the responsibility of crying out against wrong leadership, corruption, abuse of power and all forms of wrong doings in governance through the electronic and print media. They should be prepared to declare the oracle of God, rebuke sin and help in bringing the right leaders to rule the nation. However, it is a pity today that many Nigerian pastors have lost the corrective ingredient that restores the lost souls in their messages. The politicians, the revered in the society are neck-deep in evil because the ministers of God are not proclaiming the undiluted message of God to these people; rather the politicians are respected and praised by the pastors because of what they stand to gain at the end of the day. A true man of God must courageously speak against all ungodly government policies without fear of stepping on toes.

**6. Providing Forum for Dialogue and Networking:** The church leaders<sup>1</sup> in Nigeria can take the initiative to create a forum for regular dialogue with the government especially the Christian politicians in order to build a sustainable Nigerian future. A good example of this is the National Religious Leaders' Forum (NRLF) that lobbied the state for a development partnership - to strengthen social programmes that benefit the poor in South Africa (Okunoye, 2012). The purpose of such a forum would be to share ideas, strategies, experiences, problems and difficulties, inputs into the strategies for sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and eradication of corruption. This can be done under the broad umbrella of Christian Association of Nigeria (C.A.N.) or Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (P.F.N.). However, care must be taken to ensure that emphasis is on actual dialogue and not establishment of structures for dialogue. The danger is that structures can easily lead to institutionalization which has its own drawbacks. Again, the church leaders through their forum are in the best position to facilitate networking and collaboration among Christian politicians because it is expected to be non-partisan.

**7. Promoting Values Transformation:** An important programme for the church is moral recovery through intentional values transformation based on the biblical ethics of governance. Christian politicians should be made to realise that they must uphold biblical values above all other values. The church leaders can do this through consistent and in-depth Bible studies or seminars specially organised for those in government and preaching on various themes related to values and how they affect our attitudes and behaviour. Such values include: justice and fair play, hard work, accountability, honesty, openness, sincerity, love, moral discipline, transparency, contentment, humility, courage, patience, perseverance, faithfulness, and so on. However, the church leaders must themselves exhibit all these godly traits before they can teach them to others, Kosoko- Oyedeko (2008) buttressed this view when he says that political leaders should seek, emulate and imbibe the social, personal and domestic qualities of religious leaders who have exhibited a high level of integrity and uprightness.

### **Conclusion**

Sustainability of Nigerian future is an all-inclusive process and all hands must be on deck. However, the roles of church leaders cannot be overemphasized in this regard.

Hence, those in governance must be willing to embrace instructions, cautions and warnings from church leaders because they have a great influence on their congregation. There is no doubt that there are times when the people being governed are more open to their religious leaders than actors in governance. It is evident from this paper that church leaders have great roles to play in the quest for building sustainable Nigerian future.

Church leader carries the responsibility and authority vested in him by God to help his congregation and the society at large to recognise injustice and iniquity. He inspires them to apply Christian concepts and principles of human relationships and community needs in

building sustainable Nigerian future. Although, we have not closed our eyes to the fact that some contemporary church leaders in Nigeria have been implicated in unspeakable pervasions, compromise, treacheries that have frustrated the efforts of good citizens of this country towards building sustainable Nigerian future. Nevertheless, a few church leaders in Nigeria have truly shown themselves as true men of God and have served as caution to political leaders when they take decisions that are not favourable to the citizens and have also mediated in times of religious and ethnic crisis. Like Prophets Nathan, Jeremiah, and Samuel, contemporary church leaders in Nigeria should be prepared to declare the oracle of God, rebuke sin and help in bringing into being the right leaders to rule the nation in a bid to build a sustainable Nigerian future.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are hereby given: Church leaders in Nigeria should use their prophetic oracle to address issues in favour of God's plan for the nation. Church leaders should not misuse their political power when they are opportune to work with the President of the country, Governors and politicians, rather they should be prepared to declare the whole counsel of God. Church leaders in Nigeria should as much as possible avoid being partisans in their play of politics but should rather serve as models for the political leaders and would- be political leaders in Nigeria. Those in governance should be willing to embrace instructions, cautions and warnings from church leaders because they have great influence on their congregation.

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