

## The Role of Nigerian Pastors in Empowering Church Members

Rev. Peter O. Awojobi, Ph.D

---

### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is richly blessed with a lot of mineral natural, material and human resources, yet there is untold hardship and suffering today in Nigeria. This sad situation is on the faces of people walking on the streets talking to them indicating that all is not well. The major factor responsible for this menace is bad governance and inequitable resource management in the country.

In the early days when the western missionaries brought Christianity to Nigeria, the church was at the forefront of society's development building schools, hospitals, vocational skills acquisition centers, farms and cottage industries, among others. The welfare of members' was the satisfaction of the church and the success of the church was seen in the number of lives touched.<sup>402</sup> In view of this development, the church became a centered of love, cares and safe for solidarity because if it is well with families it will be well also with the church. Today's church is an epitome of modernity operating from state-of-the-art, imposing edifices fully air-conditioned and complete with evolutionary camera, klieg light and other stage facilities for live broadcast from the pulpit. Yet poverty ravages average numbers of the same establishment.<sup>403</sup>

Due to this religious paradox discerning Nigerians have begun to ask a pertinent question – has the modern church abandoned social service that the old church used so effectively to warm itself into the hearts of many? What

---

<sup>402</sup>Nken Jacob et al., *Rich Churches, Poor Members*  
<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/10/rich-churches-poor-members> (Accessed 27th February, 2015).

<sup>403</sup>Ibid.

can pastors do about this situation? It is based on this premise that this paper seeks to examine the role of pastors in empowering church members today by exploring relevant information from books, internet, published and unpublished materials.

## **EMPOWERMENT IN BIBLICAL LITERATURE**

To empower, according to Advanced Learner's Dictionary means "to give somebody power or authority to do something or to give somebody more control over their own life or the situation they are in."<sup>404</sup>

In another attempt, Loren L. Fenton said even though the word "empowerment" is a popular buzzword used in business and management circles these days, to him, "true empowerment for church members means giving them whatever authority, resources, and knowledge needed for the job they are asked to perform."<sup>405</sup>

From all indications, both Old and the New Testaments show that God champions and cares for the poor in a very special way. Therefore, this section attempt to examine the basis for pastoral response to church members.

### **The Concept of Empowerment in Old Testament**

**In Exodus 3:7-10** Israel was an enslaved nation in Egypt, subject to oppression and poverty, God revealed himself to Moses in verse 8 and commissioned him to 'rescue' the Israelites and take them to a 'land of promise.' Here, God advocated for freedom and justice for the oppressed (see also Psalm 146:6-9). The Hebrew word 'nasal' fits in this context. Primarily in the causative stem, it implies 'to snatch away.' Nasal indicates removal or liberation from all types of restrictions.<sup>406</sup> The background for the usage of nasal is in relation to God's plan to rescue the Israelites from

---

<sup>404</sup>Salley Wehmeier, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary Seventh Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 479.

<sup>405</sup>Loren L. Fenton, *Empowering the Saints for Service and Ministry* <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2000/04/empowering-the-saints-for-service-and-ministry> (Accessed 27th February, 2015).

<sup>406</sup>W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 200.

the bondage of slavery (Ex. 3:8). This expresses Yahweh's saving activity (Ex. 5:23; 6:6; 18:48). It also applies to spiritual salvation from sin (Ps. 39:8), destruction (Ps. 22:9; 102:2), or illness (Ps. 39:9).

Concept of Empowerment in Leviticus 19:9-10:- Leviticus 19:9-10 is concerned with the social responsibility towards the poor and foreigners, and it is within the framework of the Law that God's people are called to responsibility towards the needy by feeding them (Lev. 23:22; Deut. 24:19-21; Rt 2:15-16; Jr. 23:2, 4). Those who 'have' must support the 'have not.' This shows God's love for the less privileged. It was actually one of the most specific tests of spiritual maturity – that is to care for those less fortunate. Therefore, to offer peace offerings was to claim to be at peace with God. But if he offerer did not provide for the needy, it was a hollow claim and hypocrisy. Hence anyone who disobeys the commandments concerning their care is desecrating as far as God's holiness is concerned. Only those who follow his lead can achieve holiness and blessings. VanGemeren states that the Hebrew word 'leget' as reaping refers to the picking up of left-over produce by the poor and landless after the harvest. It is commanded in the legislation of the Pentateuch, when harvesting the field, to leave the edges of the field and the gleanings (leget) for the poor and aliens (Lev. 23:22; cf. 19:9).<sup>407</sup> This was intended to relieve the plight of the poor, such as widows, orphans and the resident aliens who had no land of their own.

**In Proverbs 10:1-5:-** This text forms the periscope of a 'diligent and lazy son.' The periscope explains that a family will thrive if the children are diligent in their work, but will collapse if they are lazy or resort to crime. The periscope emphasizes the economic aspect. Since sons were responsible for the care of the parents in the old age, they could either squander the family estate if they were lazy or criminals, or build it up if they were diligent or hard-working. This section forces the young man to face the economic responsibility for the family. Therefore, the Hebrew word 'asel' in this portion of the scripture implies slow, sloth, lazy.<sup>408</sup> The

---

<sup>407</sup>Wilson Asea and Ranton letsosa, *Biblical Principles Towards a Pastoral Strategy for Poverty Alleviation Among the Youth in Uganda*  
<http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/viewfile/1328/4520> (Accessed 1st March, 2015).

<sup>408</sup>W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 236.

lazy begins the day by hanging on the bed when he should be working (Pr 6:9-10; 26:14).<sup>409</sup> The law of the Lord points to the consequences of laziness (Pr 10:4). Laziness results in poverty (Pr 19:1-5). By contrast, a young man in the family of the Lord keeps bread on their table because of his diligent work (Pr 10:4; 31:27).

**In Amos 2:6-7:** Prophet Amos expressed here about the people who were filled with greed, to such an extent that they perverted justice and ruthlessly oppressed the poor and the weak. ‘God has said: do not deny justice to your poor people in your law suits’ (Ex 23:6-8). But the courts of law in Israel had become places for the rich and powerful to act aggressively towards the poor and take from them the little money or land they had and send them off into debt slavery and treat the poor house girls as sex slaves. But because of this, the judgment of God is to come upon them (Am 8:1-3). In similar reaction, Peter Olanrewaju Awojobi lamented that “god hates oppression and rebellion, God will always punish both.”<sup>410</sup> The prophets stressed God that will surely punish those who are unjust, proud and aggressive towards the helpless, because the God who defends the poor considers it an attack on himself and profanation of his holy reputation.

### **Concept of Empowerment in the New Testament**

**In Matthew 25:34-36, 40.** This text concerns Jesus’ last instruction to his disciples. He said that, in the final judgment, the standard by which the Christians will be measured is the work of compassion they had done or not done towards their poor and needy Christian brethren. Jesus had set an example of empowering the less privileged ones throughout his earthly ministry. He loves them like a brother that is why whatever was done to the needy, whether good or bad was regarded as a direct service to Christ.<sup>411</sup> The text is written to motivate churches to works of mercy and charity. It

---

<sup>409</sup>Danfulani Kore, *Truths for Healthy Churches* (Bukuru, Jos: African Christian Textbooks, 2006), 189-200.

<sup>410</sup>Peter Olanrewaju Awojobi, *Church Management* (Ilorin: Kingdom Power Communications, 2003), 61.

<sup>411</sup>The lesson in this text is that, in God’s Kingdom, achievement would be measured by how much we invested in building others not how much we invested for our self. For more information, see: Gene A. Getz, *Building up One Another* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1976), 68-77.

was often seen as an expression of love, humility and righteousness or lack of insight on the part of the unrighteous. Hence the Lord challenges us as Christians to produce good fruits by helping the disadvantaged (Mtt. 7:20-21) (Bloomberg 1992:377).

**In Acts 2:42-47.** Life in the early church according to the scenario in this text show how the rich Christians were united and they cared for the basic needs of life, not excluding the poor. They were not just Christians who worshipped the same God, but they were Christians who cared to the needs of others. They would sell their property and possessions and distribute the money amongst all according to what each needed (Act 2:45). Luke describes the beauty of the growing and developing church; he portrays the action, dedication and devotion of early Christians in relation to God in the worship services in Jerusalem. Salvation in this community consisted of elements such as prayer, listening to the teachings of the apostles and breaking of bread. They were in one mind and heart, males and females.

The Greek word “κοινοζ” means ‘common’ or ‘common sharing,’ that is, the sharing of anything, participation, fellowship, enjoyment together is paramount.<sup>412</sup> Thus it is used for the common experiences and interests of early Christians (Act 2:42; Gal. 2:9). The fellowship of believers with the Lord wrought by the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Christians is an outcome of faith, (v. 6), and joint ministration or services are rendered to the needy brethren (Acts 2:44; Rom 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13; Heb. 13:16). The gesture by the rich members in the early church did not only alleviate poverty from the church, but make it to become: “[1] Center of love and cares (Acts 2:43), [2] Salt and light to the society (Acts 2:44-45) and [3] multiplied rapidly (Acts 2:46-47).”<sup>413</sup>

**In James 2:14-26:-** James writes of justification by works as the outward evidence of inward faith (James 2:20-22) which results in love and goodness (Heb. 10:24). The Greek word ‘ ’ which denotes work, deeds or action is relevant to text. The idea of work is stressed in Romans 15:18. It frequently

---

<sup>412</sup>W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 113.

<sup>413</sup>Umaru Danjuma Anzaku, “Investigating the Teaching Ministry in the Early Church with Emphasis on Acts 2:41-47 and its Decline Among the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians in Nigeria” (*M. A. Thesis, E.C.W.A. Theological Seminary, Igbaja*, November 2010), 50.

occurs in an ethical sense of human actions; good or bad (Mtt. 3:3; 26:10; Jn 3:20-21; Rm 2:7-15; I Th 1:3).<sup>414</sup> In James 2:14 the fact that God does work in an inner transformation underscores James's concern over those who claim to have faith, but whose lives are not marked by appropriate actions. He says such kind of faith is both useless and dead (vv. 20, 26), for the regenerated person will have a new heart that will express itself in what he or she says and does. All in all, Christians must love and care for those in need to affirm their faith (Mt. 12:33-37), otherwise their faith is in vain without good works. However, James condemns those who claim to be religious but do not concern themselves with putting their beliefs into practice. Without action, good doctrine is useless. Pure and acceptable religion before God shows itself in good behavior. He gives an example of the type of such religion: looking after orphans and widows (James 1:26-27).<sup>415</sup>

From our exploration of biblical concept of empowerment, we discovered that not only that God champions and cares for the poor in a very special way, but it is a determinant standard for rewards in God's kingdom. This is because everyone whether mad, disables, poor, rich, orphan, widow etc is an image and likeness of God. Moreover, those who oppressed or neglected such service will not escape God's judgment.

### **THE ROLE OF PASTORS IN EMPOWERING CHURCH MEMBERS**

Having discovered that God did not only champions and cares for the poor in a very special way both in Old and New Testament, but also call us into partnership, this section seek to discuss various role pastors have to play to empower the church members. When you are sent to a church as pastor, what will be your respond to those persons who have just lost jobs or farms

---

<sup>414</sup>W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 683.

<sup>415</sup>This example derives from the Old Testament, which commanded God's people to care for those who had no one to support them financially. Orphans had no fathers, widows no husbands and foreigners no land to cultivate. But pure religion is not just a non-governmental organization, an NGO doing social work. The work done by believers is the product of their faith and the religion that is characterized by the holy lives of its members as evidence of their relationship with God whose glorification is their ultimate goal. See Tokunboh Adeyemo ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 1511.

or businesses, the long-time unemployed, the financial problems of persons and families and even whole communities where there is unemployment, persons and families who are evicted from their homes, the poor and the hungry ....?<sup>416</sup>

In such situation, a pastor should guide against falling into two common extreme teachings on this subject propounded by some liberals and evangelicals. In talking about the church's relationship with poverty, it should be noted that prosperity teachings by liberals has caused more problems to the poor than good as rightly observed by Walter Kaiser that,

The poor have suffered due to those in the church who without warrant preach the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel, incorrectly stating that God wants everyone to be equally rich. Proclaiming this false gospel turns out to be a get-rich-quick scheme for those who lead the movement while the benefits rarely – if ever – each those at the bottom of the pile, and this is done in the name of the Almighty!<sup>417</sup>

On the other hand, the church stood at the forefront of giving freely to the poor, caring for widows, and taking in destitute orphans, visiting the sick, and caring for the dying. Despite this long and often- appreciated legacy of support for the poor and the needy, the evangelical church ceased or slowed to provide such ministry in the years that followed 1925. This was probably due to the emphasis on the “*social or feel good gospel*”<sup>418</sup> in liberal

---

<sup>416</sup>D. K. Switzer, *Pastoral Care Emergencies: Ministering to People in Crises* (New York: Paulist Press/Integration Books, 1989), 6.

<sup>417</sup>Walter Kaiser, *The Church's Role in Poverty Alleviation* <http://blog.tifwe.org/the-churchs-role-in-poverty-alleviation> (Accessed 2nd March, 2015).

<sup>418</sup>**Social or Feel Good Gospel** seeks to please and satisfy only human urges and desires at the expense of real word of God: Are you anxious? Christ will bring you peace! Are you lost? Christ will give you new direction! Are you depressed? Christ will fill your life with joy! Are you poor? Christ will enrich you! All this is true, and it is part of the good news of Christ that he longs to meet the deepest needs of each one of us. But that by itself is only one half of the story. On its own, it mirrors the deceitful approach of the false cults. In practice many of our needs will be met as we give ourselves in service both to Jesus and others. It is those who are willing to lose their lives who will find them. It is only when we give that it will be given to us – ‘good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back (Lk. 6:38). It was when the seventy went out to preach and heal that they returned filled with joy because

theology, which many evangelicals began to view with deep suspicion.<sup>419</sup> This turn of events is regrettable for evangelicals historically supported the oppressed. It appears church members are example of a child receiving the ideas of two fathers; the rich and the poor. One dad would say, “The love of money is the root of all evil.” The other say, “The lack of money is the root of all evil.”<sup>420</sup>

The prayer of Agur in Proverb 30:8b-9 clearly presented the biblical view of the empowerment “Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘who is the Lord.’ Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of my God. So the aim of the empowerment is to help people get the daily break that is to be able to meet up with their daily needs as in our Lord’s prayer (Mt. 6:11). Therefore, the role of the pastor in empowering church members will include the followings:

**1 Give Them Enlightenment:-** One of the common causes of poverty is ignorance. People suffer and even perish for lack of knowledge on relevant information and opportunities around them (Hos. 4:6). This implies that the pastor needs to study the conditions and the causes of his members’ problems. For pastor to make impact in the life of his members, J. M. Perkin said that the pastor should, “Go to the people live among them, learn from them, love them, start with what they know and build on what they have.”<sup>421</sup>

This means he should be conversant with current developments so that he can connect his needy members appropriately. I. Parker Maxey was of this view when he opined that for a pastor to be able to address social issues of

---

of all that they had experienced. See David Watson, *Discipleship* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1999), 27.

<sup>419</sup>Walter Kaiser, *The Church’s Role in Poverty Alleviation*.

<sup>420</sup>Robert T. Kiyosaki and Sharon L. Lechter, *Rich Dad Poor Dad* (New York: Warner Business Books, 2001), 18.

<sup>421</sup>J. M. Perkin, *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 35.



those that will seek for his guidance he must keep abreast of the time by reading newspapers, magazines and listen to radio and television.<sup>422</sup>

**2 Connect them with whoever can be of Help:** Some of your members may have what it takes to achieve but lacks connections to excel. For example, some have good result for seeking for admission; others may be potential employers etc. All they need is connections. The pastor should speak for them to the people he feel could be of assistance. As part of pastoral ministry, God had always being looking for people that will serve as voice of the voiceless in the society.

**3 Raise Special Funds for Business and Scholarship Support:** Another role of pastor in empowering his church members is to provide scholarship for poor students and business loans for those who need small capitals. This will require him set up a committee of people he discovered in the church that are passionate, spirit-filled, and cares for the poor. They should be responsible to raise fund and implement the schemes under the supervision of the pastor. Only poor members with outstanding result or business plan who are diligent members of the church are to be given such opportunity. All the church members are to be motivated to follow the example of the early Christians in Acts 2:42-47 in contributing towards this scheme.

**3.4 Organize Vocational Training Education:** From time to time, pastor should encourage the church to organize vocational training especially when majority of students are on vacation to get them meaningfully engaged. It is worth mentioning here that some churches are already sowing the seed.

Investigation by *Saturday Vanguard* revealed that some churches are indeed engaged in one form of welfare/empowerment scheme or the other. Daystar Christian centre runs a leadership, entrepreneurship and skill development training for members to empower them. While the leadership programme is meant to impart leadership skills, the entrepreneurship class is a case-study

---

<sup>422</sup>I. Parker Maxey, *Ministerial Ethics and Etiquette* (Salem Ohio: Schmul Publishing Company Inc., 1987), 239.

based executive business education that takes potential entrepreneurs from idea to business plan, start up and fund sourcing.<sup>423</sup>

The vocational skills development teaches members various skills such as maintenance of generators, photography, cake and confectionery making, bead making and video production among others. The church also runs a benevolence scheme under which foods, clothes and shoes are distributed to the needy whether they are members of the church or not. It is interesting to know that the senior pastor's wife has also established a 'Real Woman Foundation to care for the female folk.'<sup>424</sup>

The foundation also operates an orphanage and a street women rehabilitation centre which imparts vocational skills and education to any level. Inmates of these centers are given the kind of care and support that should have been provided by their families.<sup>425</sup> No matter the condition of the church, if a pastor will use the available information, materials, financial and human resources well, he will be able to put smiles on the faces of his poor members by God's grace.

**5 Provide Social Services.** Other areas that pastor can encourage the church to help the less privilege members are to provide social services such as water, education, health and so on. In case of the community of your members with shortage of water supply, drilling a bore-hole will be a paramount importance. Establishing primary or secondary school by the church will not only accommodate children of the poor, but will provide job opportunity for the qualified jobless members. Similarly, establishment of hospitals will help to provide health services at subsidiary rate to the poor and jobs as well.

It is interesting to know that many churches and Christian organization have involved in programs that are geared towards the alleviation of the plight of the poor and the oppressed. Bulus Galadima cited example of organizations like Christian Rural and Urban Development Association of Nigeria

---

<sup>423</sup>Nken Jacob et al., *Rich Churches, Poor Members*  
<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/10/rich-churches-poor-members> (Accessed 27th February, 2015).

<sup>424</sup>Ibid.

<sup>425</sup>Ibid.

(CRUDAN), ECWA Rural Development (RD), People Oriented Development of ECWA (POD), and many others are helping to conscientize the church to the need for holistic ministry.<sup>426</sup> The church can do more if pastors will make see it as part of the ministry entrusted to them.

**6 Encourage Youth into Farming Business.** Today, many youth are wasting their time in the cities without any achievement while they have vast fertile lands in the village. If pastors can help them realize what they are missing and encourage them with little capitals to invest using modern methods of farming, most of the will soon become productive in the society. Other aspect like poultry, fishing, been farming ought to be encourage as well. Many people are not aware of how lucrative this area of farming could be.

**7 Develop Housing Scheme.** Housing is a major problem in the cities. Church members are not exempted from the challenge. If a pastor discovered that most of his members are yet to own houses, he can come up with a vision on housing scheme for his members. According to Bulus Galadima, The Reformers saw salvation as a presupposition of life and never see any salvific value in being poor.<sup>427</sup> In fact Luther and his colleague Karlstadt made provision in Wittenberg for the city council to provide low-interest loans for workers; subsidies for education and training for the children of the poor – all designed to prevent as well as alleviate poverty.<sup>428</sup>

Like the reformers, pastor will be able to help his members own personal houses if he can organize a multi-purpose co-operative society in which members can contribute monthly according to their financial strength. As the capitals grow, plots of lands can be purchase through the co-operative and allocated to members to develop gradually be collecting loans. Although the process may not really be easy and fast, but it is a sure way to induce members to own houses in the near future.

---

<sup>426</sup>Bulus Galadima, “The Pastor’s Contribution to the Development of his Society,” *The Journal of Association of All Christian Theological Students of Nigeria Vol. 1, No 1* (February, 1999), 3.

<sup>427</sup>Ibid.

<sup>428</sup>Ibid.

From the above interaction, it is clear that poverty issues in Nigeria cannot be effectively addressed at different levels (family, community, state and nation) in isolation from the churches. However, it is against this background that Joseph Antyo recommends that:

Churches in Nigeria should see poverty eradication as a part of their mission of evangelization, since not only spiritual but also material salvation is needed to truly free someone. Some of the money that some churches have should be made available to their members in form of loans and other poverty alleviation measures, and the churches should be able to build on their greatest strengths which are trust and commitment rather than dependency. Churches should also motivate their members to work or to help create employment, since the lack of it is probably the greatest bane of Africa today.<sup>429</sup>

The agent God will use to bring this transformation into reality is the pastors. Therefore, pastor should discover this vision in the ministry, invest their life into the vision and they will be surprised to see the fruit of their labor flourishing in the near future to the glory of God.

## CONCLUSION

In the course of examining the role of pastors in empowering church members in this paper, the following facts were discovered:

1. That God did not only champion and care for the poor in a very special way both in Old and New Testament, but also expect the church to keep it up.
2. That over centuries, many churches in Nigeria have failed to do justice to the holistic gospel of spiritual, material and social empowerment of a total person.
3. That the salvation of sinners and the care for the materially and socially deprived are part of one and the same gospel. In other words, these churches could not

---

<sup>429</sup>Nken Jacob et al., *Rich Churches, Poor Members*  
<http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/10/rich-churches-poor-members> (Accessed 27th February, 2015).

handle the two gospels that are found in the Bible: the salvation of the sinners and care for the physical needs of the poor.

Base on this discovery, the researcher wish to recommends that the church pastors in Nigeria must no become involved in the process of mutual commitment to freedom, justice and care for the disadvantaged. It must develop a complete theology of the divine grace for sinners as well as the gospel for the materially and socially empowerment of poor members. Moreover, eradicating material poverty is not simply a matter of making more and better provisions available, but of expanding actual participation so that young people might be empowered to fulfill their own roles in the whole society to which they belong.