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Olarewaju Oluseyi Ifatimehin

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THE CHURCH AS A TOOL FOR CREATING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS: A CASE STUDY OF ANYIGBA COMMUNITY.

IFATIMEHIN, O.O. AND UFUAH, M.E.
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND PLANNING,
KOGI STATE UNIVERSITY. ANYIGBA NIGERIA

ABSTRACT
The ineffectiveness of environmental awareness in the society today has been a major source of concern to stakeholders. Environmental degradation and its problems are increasing geometrically with industrialization and agricultural intensification. This study examines the role of religious organizations especially the church in environmental matters. It x-rayed the level of environmental awareness in the church and suggests how the church can create environmental awareness among its members. Copies of questionnaire were administered and analysed. The study revealed a low level of awareness among members of the church and their willingness to be enlightened on environmental issues. Finally, the church accepted to be used as a tool in creating effective environmental awareness among its members and the society.

INTRODUCTION
The Nigerian environment is saddled with many activities in which its quality is being degraded. Such environmental problems like deforestation, flooding, erosion, industrial pollution, oil pollution, rainstorm, bush burning, solid waste management to mention but a few are bedeviling the country (Ajibade, 2000). These sets of problems have encouraged underutilization of resources and generated or subjected many of the populace to poverty.

Many preventive and corrective measures (River basin Development, Environmental Sanitation, Forestry decrees, Ecological Disaster Fund, Relief Fund) are being carried out everyday. The public who are vulnerable to the consequences of their own actions with respect to their interactions with the environment should be given proper enlightenment. Man interaction with his environment is obeying Newton’s third law of motion – To every action there is equal and opposite reaction (Nelkon and Parker, 1992).

Chokor (1988) referred to environmental awareness as a synthesis of peoples’ conception, interpretation and perceptions of environmental issues with affect their behaviour and the quality of responses and reactions to environmental problems. Therefore, public participation in terms environmental awareness (Education) should be paramount for it will bring about a positive change and thereby prevent any future catastrophe that can arise (Ajibade, 2000).

Various public awareness programmes (Tree planting, Monthly Sanitation, waste baskets in commercial vehicles, building incinerators, etc) on environmental issues have been designed and some implemented in many parts of the country, yet many people are not
aware of some of the immediate environmental problems around and within their domestic environment.

In all the techniques of creating environmental awareness: training programmes, Drama, Discussions, print and electronic Media, establishment of environment related clubs and associations, etc; listed by Ajibade (2000), the religious approach was not included. Iwugo (1991) suggested that issues of the environment required both multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach such as the Government, Academia, Researchers, Multinational firms, law firms, etc.

The International Church showed their concerned about the negative consequences for humanity and for all creation resulting from the degradation of some basic natural resources such as water, air and land. Bartholomew I (2002) declared that “To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin….. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation for humans to degrade the integrity of the earth by stripping the earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetland… for humans to contaminate the earth’s water, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances…. These are sins.” His statement is premised on two biblical passages, which read:

i. “And God saw everything that he had made. And behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

ii. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till and keep it.” (Genesis 2:15).

Based on the above biblical injunctions the Christians are caretakers of the environment and the aim of this study is to:

i. ascertain the local church involvement in environmental issues;

ii. examine how they can educate its members on environmental problems; and

iii. to suggest solutions to how the government can use local churches to its benefits in environmental awareness issues.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Anyigba ward s fast growing university town is located in Dekina Local Government Area of Kogi State, Nigeria. It is located within latitude 7°29’14”N’’ and longitude 7°11’00”E with an altitude of 420 meters above sea level. It has an estimated population of 56,000 (Ministry of Information, 2000). Anyigba ward accommodates three religious groups – Islam, Christianity and traditional, with a population ratio of 46:47:7 respectively. The Christian community worships and fellowships in about 12 churches and Christian groups.

For the purpose of this study, a dual approach for the sourcing of primary data was employed – questionnaire and oral interview. Simple percentages and tables were used in the analysis of the three hundred (300) copies of questionnaire distributed in the study area. Six (6) Churches were given equal opportunity of being picked, and in each of the churches fifty (50) copies of the questionnaire were distributed at random. The University community was earmarked as a church and 50 copies of the questionnaire were administered. Eighteen (18) copies of the questionnaire were administered to church
leaders, three (3) in each of the six (6) churches, giving a total of three hundred and eighteen (318) copies questionnaire in all.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
In all, two hundred and eighty copies of the questionnaire were returned from the members of the churches. Seventy nine percent of the respondents were of the opinion that environmental problems such as erosion, flooding etc and its awareness are too important to be ignored. They all suggested for a need for environmental awareness in their various churches and the community at large.

About Sixty-seven percent of the respondents declared that churches only laid emphasis on personal hygiene of an individual and their immediate surroundings but not on the global consequences of environmental problems on their local environment.

It also revealed that majority of the respondents are in the dark when it comes to environmental matters. They showed their expectation for their various churches educating them on these issues since most of them are not educated. Fifty-nine percent declared that the level of awareness among them is low.

Fifty three percent of the respondents who are educated declared environmental awareness is being introduced in churches globally, but in their localities where getting out of the fold of poverty is the order of day, it has to be done through the heads of various churches.

It was gathered from the respondents (45%) that church can effectively create environmental awareness among their members than any other institution or agencies to the entire public if their leaders can include environmental issues in their sermons, such as making emphasis with biblical examples.

About seventy five percent of the respondents in the University community declared that the two institutions that claim to be their ultimate guides as regards reality and value, the university and the religious establishments have offered no adequate ethical guidance about the environment. They suggested that environmental programmes and clubs should be set up in Churches and their University to educate both members and students alike on the inherent dangers of the impact of their activities on the fragile environment.

Eighty-two percent of the leaders welcomed the idea of the church participating fully in environmental matters because of the enormous importance of God’s creation to humanity: Plants for food and beautification, water for life, clean environment for good health, etc. They believe that many of our current practices while interacting in the environment, if not checked would put the future that we wish for human society and other beauty of creation at a serious risk. They emphasized that since the church has done well in its awareness programmes of HIV and AIDs to their members most especially during their weekly meetings and also when they go out for outreaches (Evangelism) to the outside communities, they will ensure that environmental awareness programmes be tackled with tact.
The Church agreed that this approach would be a new one in their fold as ninety percent of all the respondents indicated that the church could effectively create awareness, disseminate information and educate the populace about environmental problems.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
This study revealed that majority are ignorant of the impending dangers associated with reckless interaction with the environment. The church is also lacking behind in the matters of environmental awareness which is not suppose to be because the bible revered and upheld the beauty of the environment and this is to be practiced by all Christians. The human race constituted a single sacred community with the environment that would prosper or decline, live or die, be redeemed or not redeemed as a single sacred community (Barry, 1996) but it is not incorporated into ethical teachings in our society. Anyigba is fast urbanizing with a University as its growth centre and so will local environmental problems increase putting its residents at risk.

It is recommended that the religious institutions should be recognized and given adequate attention on the issues of environmental awareness because they are centres of attraction by majority of the people. The religious leaders teaching all over are revered by their members. Institutions such as FEPA should corroborate with religious organization so that the consciousness of humans will be awaken to the grandeur and sacred quality of our fragile environment (Barry, 1996)

REFERENCES


