

Response

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In reading this paper I could not but think about the situation in Nigeria which is to some extent comparable to the Mozambican perspective of the Great Commission as portrayed by Mrs Violeta Mandlate. The bulk of this response will focus on this comparison.

I want to commend Mrs Mandlate for her paper which shows how our church in Mozambique endeavoured to fulfil the Great Commission against all odds. While taking note of the different evangelistic methods, she depicts personal evangelism as the method that was effective during the Socialist government. The paper oozes with enthusiasm as she relates how they did it and why. She also notes the importance of the whole church in creating an environment that is conducive to the growth of the converts. At the end of her paper, she challenges Africans to use “their means and methods” to evangelize – a point I would like to pursue later as it relates to the situation in Nigeria.

The paper, however, gives a very narrow perspective of the fulfilment of the Great Commission in Mozambique for it focuses on the period of Socialism and seemingly in the Church of the Nazarene only. It would have been helpful if the scope were indicated. It leaves the reader with questions concerning the current situation. Is personal evangelism the only method used even now? If not, what other methods are currently effective? Another weakness of this paper is that it says nothing about discipleship which is an important aspect of the Great Commission.

As indicated earlier, I would like to compare and contrast the methods of evangelism in Mozambique and in Nigeria based on the statement that “... many methods of evangelism from the African perspective exist ... It is necessary that Africans utilize their means and methods” (Mandlate, page 2).

The body of Christ has made a remarkable evangelistic breakthrough in recent years in Nigeria. The ultimate desire of the Church is to remain faithful to its head, Jesus Christ, and to be in total obedience to the Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing

them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Both the Great Commission quoted above and the Great Commandment, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... And... your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39) are central to the understanding of the mission of the Church in the world.

The Church is in the serious business of proclaiming the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to Him personally and to be reconciled to God. He gave the Gospel for one purpose – namely, to get people saved or to make known God’s love to man. The Good News must be preached that all nations come to repentance.

The Holy Spirit is actively at work. The Church is tirelessly “going” for the Lord, using every available means and method to reach out to the lost souls in our nations.

As in Mozambique, Nigeria uses various methods in fulfilment of the Great Commission such as personal evangelism, meeting with and confronting sinners one on one, and an extended family method where one could go and minister to extended family members wherever they are for the purpose of bringing them into a right relationship with God.

Unlike Mozambique, other methods employed in Nigeria include mass evangelism (such as open-air meetings), where many people are reached with the message of salvation at the same time. JESUS Film equipment is another wonderful evangelism tool, where thousands can be reached and persuaded with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the list goes on and on! Yes, we have seen zealous, aggressive, enthusiastic, and vibrant local churches and ministries pooling their resources together to see to it that souls are won to Jesus Christ, and God’s kingdom is expanded in Nigeria and even beyond.

However, the most effective method of evangelism in Nigeria today is the church-planting approach. This is a method of inviting sinners and bringing those that have just accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour into the fold in preaching points and local churches. This wonderful method

came to bear in Nigeria during and after the civil war that lasted for three years (1967-1970). What was left after the civil war was diseases and famine. The arms of flesh had failed them. Many Nigerians began to learn to put their trust in God after they lost nearly everything including relatives, friends, wealth, and homes. We have also adopted the church-planting strategy in our Church and the result is incredible.

Consequently, our churches are packed and our pews filled with thousands of members. But how many of these people are genuinely converted or transformed? Some of the Christian leaders here, especially those of the Pentecostal and Charismatic divide who do not believe in theological training, are not any different from their members.

To these groups, prosperity gospels, magical healing, and tongues-speaking are the major thrust of their messages, which quickly brings material benefits to them. The message of the “cross” is always absent in their preaching. And Christians who want to shy away from genuine Christian commitment, responsibilities and accountability have found hiding places in these congested religious camps.

As a result of this unfortunate development, we have Christians who are attending churches on Sundays, but are not truly converted. And as such they cannot abide in the Vine to be able to bear the fruit of the Spirit.

The Church is seen here to be very busy making converts rather than disciples, thus posing a great challenge to the fulfilment of the Great Commission. No wonder the impact of Christianity is not felt so much in this part of the world!

The answer is clear; the Church has consciously or unconsciously neglected the concept of discipleship, which is the overall goal of evangelism. This important aspect of the Great Commission is taken for granted, and the outcome is superficial with irresponsible converts flooding our churches. What difference could they make in the society?

No wonder the Western assessment of African Christianity is: “...one mile long and one inch deep”. Also John Wesley once remarked, “How dare you lead people to Christ without providing adequate opportunity for discipleship? To do less is to beget children for the murderer – the devil”. The Church would do well to quickly avert this danger.

So what we have are Christians who are cheating and defrauding their employers, business partners, customers, neighbours, and some even defrauding churches as a direct consequence of the neglect of discipleship. We also have some Christian leaders who are more like butchers than shepherds. We have millions of converts, but few disciples, which is evidently less than the demands of the Great Commission. The Church must understand the importance of discipleship to stay alive and growing to the glory of God.

What then is discipleship? Basically, discipleship has to do with training and growing in Christ-likeness. It is a lifestyle of training believers in order to have Jesus Christ formed in their lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, which will make it easy for them to obey rather than disobey God. It also has to do with leading Christians to spiritual growth, formation, and maturity. Accountability and maturity are the twin products of effective and consistent well-designed discipleship programmes in the local church. Some of the discipleship programmes in the local church that have been proven to be very effective in producing accountable disciples and disciplined witnesses over the years are: Sunday School classes, Bible studies or fellowships, accountability classes, and Christian mentoring sessions.

Our position on this subject of discipleship is clear: We are committed to being and inviting others to become disciples of Jesus. With this in mind, we are committed to providing the means (Sunday School, Bible studies, small accountability groups, etc.) through which believers are encouraged to grow in their understanding of the Christian faith and in their relationship with each other and with God. We are to encourage the mutual support provided through such means as Sunday School classes, discipleship groups, Bible study groups, prayer meetings, accountability groups and Christian mentoring as necessary to our spiritual formation and maturity.

Finally, it is seen from the above arguments that it is not enough to go about winning souls for Jesus Christ; we must make sure that the image of God is formed in their lives. We are commissioned to make disciples, not just converts who fill our pews. To do otherwise is to “beget children for the murderer – the devil”.

May the Lord help the Church to use every available means not only to

help sinners open up and accept Jesus Christ into their hearts and become born again, but also to make disciples out of them! In as much as we are committed to sharing the Good News of the love of God for the hopeless world, we must be very ready, as well, to commit ourselves to effectively disciple these converts until they are truly restored to the very image of God.

This is what will, for sure, bail the Church in Nigeria in particular and Africa at large out of the woods. We must be committed to take the Church to the Promised Land, by His grace. It is our prayer and hope that the church-planting approach to the fulfilment of the Great Commission will also be effective in other countries of Africa and the world at large. We shall be able to make more Christ-like disciples for the Kingdom of God. He has promised He is going to be with us to the very end of the age.