



The future and prospects of ecumenism in the rapidly changing world

Doherty K Fagbiye

PhD, Department of Theology, Wesley University Ondo, Nigeria

Abstract

Lack of understanding and cooperation among Christian's denominations in some quarters especially in Nigeria and some other countries across the globe is becoming worrisome and concern for some church leaders and church historians. Although, fighting, schism and division is not entirely strange to the church, however, when such misunderstanding persists, then, there is fear of what the future would look like. Consequently, this paper focuses on the future and prospect of ecumenism or church unity in Nigeria, and the world at large. If the future of the churches would be prosperous, there are things that should be emphasised, because they are common and unifying factors to all Christians. Such things include: God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, faith, baptism, bible, hope, love, prayer and resurrection among others. In the same vein, there are things that must be de-emphasised, because they are capable of polarizing the church in all ramifications. Such things include denominational excessive claims on doctrinal issues, regalia, nomenclature and structural issues among others. If what should be emphasised are emphasised and what should be deemphasised are also strongly deemphasised, then the future and prospect of church unity would be very bright, but if otherwise, then it could be suicidal.

Keywords: ecumenism, bible, future and prospects, denominations, church

1. Introduction

The unity of the church is scriptural and was instructed by the Lord of the Church, who is Jesus Christ, However, the Church has suffered division as early as the 5th century. Barry Till (1972), observed that "It was not until the 5th century that thier, efforts broke down permanently for the first time and divisions appeared in the church which have remained unhealed until this day ^[1]. This rift he further explained is that which secured between the East and the West. Precisely, Rome and Constantinople which matured in the eleventh century. This remains the greatest divide in Christendom. The divisions created by the reformation is a lesser divide. The divisions of the reformation with the western church are, both numerically and ideologically, less serious than those of Rome/Constantinople breach ^[2].

The meaning, therefore, of the word 'Ecumenical' is tied to the Greek word 'Oikos' meaning house or dwelling. Oikoumene means the 'whole inhabited world' or the 'civilized world'. The use of the word 'Oikoumene' in Scripture can be traced to John 17:20, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word that they may all be one". The meaning of the word has shifted from concentration on the world to a concentration on the church ^[3].

Indeed, this time the word 'Ecumenical' could be used describe the church of the world, 'and was therefore virtually synonymous with the other Greek word for the universal church – Catholic ^[4]. Therefore, using historical indices, this paper seeks to explore the future and prospect of the Christian church in Nigeria through the eye of ecumenism.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: section 2 reviews related works in the problem domain, identifying scholarly views and opinions on the concept of ecumenism. In section 3, discussions are made on the models of ecumenism in Nigeria. Here, thirteen ecumenical models are identified and explored in order to project the future of the church in the country. Furthermore, the prospects of ecumenism in the country are presented which help in drawing conclusion to the paper.

2. Related works

Ecumenism refers to efforts by Christians of different church traditions to develop closer relationships and better understandings ^[5]. It is also refers to efforts towards the visible and organic unity of different Christian denominations. Ecumenism is a New Testament word. It has there a direct connection not with the church, or the churches alone, but with world. The whole inhabited world, for the Christian and a place of witness ^[6]. Anything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the whole gospel to the whole world. It is the search for unity in Christ ^[7]. Fatokun, Atowoju and Egbetakin describe ecumenism as the initiative aimed at greater religious unity or cooperation. It is the movement for worldwide cooperation and unity among Christian churches. The word is predominantly used by and with reference to Christian churches and denominations separated by distance, practise, doctrine and histories ^[8]. While Edwards Jurji refers to ecumenism as the gathering of the scattered children of God, Andrew Oyalana took it in the

¹Till Barry, *The Churches Search for Unity*, (England: Middle sex Penguin Books Ltd., 1972), 21.

² Barry, *The Churches Search for Unity*, 17.

³ Barry, *The Churches Search for Unity*, 15.

⁴ Barry, *The Churches Search for Unity*, 15-16.

⁵ A. Marcus Ward, *The Churches move Together*, Denholm Press, 1968, 8-12.

⁶ Ward, *The Churches move Together*, 12.

⁷ Ward, *The Churches move Together*, 13.

⁸ Samson A. Fatokun, A. A. Atowoju and W. A. O. Egbetakin, *Ecumenism: The Nigeria Experience, End-Time*, (Publisher House Ltd, 2010), 67.

perspective of the common and divided ^[9]. Oyelana’s emphasis focused majorly on the need for Nigerian churches to witness together even with their differences.

Jim Collins cited online, pointed out that to succeed in this wise (Ecumenism), the churches should face the brutal fact, which is the mind and intention of God ^[10]. On discovering, it should be bold enough to offer her services and faithfulness to that end. The future of Ecumenism cannot be ensured if she remains complacent in this age that is rapidly changing in all ramifications. The church puts a blind eye to the bone of contention that fuel disunity instead of truly exposing it and confronting it with the vibrant spiritual passion and biblical vision, that has the power to break down the barriers.

Three questions were posed by Collins i.e.

1. Will we be ecumenically or institutionally protective?
2. Will we be driven fundamentally by spiritual vision or organizational momentum?
3. Will we seek “incremental change” or “deep change” in pursuing this future?

The answers to these questions are not far-fetched but we know the truth. For church to ensure the future of ecumenism

should follow the truth. Yes the truth of emphasizing and pursuing the things that unite us Christians should be focusing and emphasizing them and de-emphasizing things that divide us. Therefore, Collins puts it this way: “Could a way be found to bring the four main “families” of the Christian Community (Orthodox, Historic Protestant, Evangelical/Pentecostal and Catholics) into an international place of on-going fellowship on the global level ^[11]. There are doctrines and issues that are common to all denominations and dwelling and emphasizing on them will ensure the future of Ecumenism.

3. Discussion

A. Ecumenical Models in Nigeria

The heartbeat of Jesus Christ and the power of His grace led the church to proclaim the gospel i. e. the Good News He brought to the whole world. This Gospel message gives the household of God the common models for their propagation. This enables the household of God to think and desire to move extra miles beyond what separates them by stressing, harmonizing and emphasizing the essentials and returning to the foundation of their faith, Jesus Christ.

Table 1: The Various Models are¹²

God the Father	God the Son	God the Holy Spirit	The Scriptures
Baptism	Prayer	Hope	Eucharist
Doctrine	discipleship	love	faith
Doctrine and church			

1. God the Father

The great commission of the churches is simply to propagate the gospel, the saving power and works of God. God then should be the central content of their common gathering¹³. All the denominations come together under one umbrella of God the Father. This same God that unites them is equally enough to enable them in no small measure to speak with one voice. Any denomination who have agreed to be one of the members of the household must equally believe in one God just as it is been affirm in the words of the Apostle’s Creed. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, The maker of heaven and the earth. . . .” ^[14]. Christian groups have its model in God the Father, who justifies to Jesus Christ His begotten son, sent into the world. In a nut shell, if all denominations will come together, cooperate with one another and unite with one another, their beliefs must strongly be on one God to achieve their common desires or goals ^[15].

2. God the Son

Another model of ecumenism is the belief in the sonship of Jesus Christ by the members of the household of God. Jesus Christ is the one witness of God, true and faithful. The witness He gave to the father through his life was demonstrated through his death on the cross. In His death, to submission and dedication was disclosed. Through those events, He sent His spirit to inspire his adherents, drawing them together in other to witness also to fight their common foes ^[16].

3. God the Spirit

Holy Spirit is such an important model of ecumenism and plays a vital role in the life of every member of household of God to be able to proclaim Christ to the whole world. All the denominations must believe that it is in the Spirit that God raised Jesus Christ in Romans 8:11, not only that, they must also believe that the Spirit bears witness by means of the church. He makes the church the body and thus the manifestation of Christ in this world. This same spirit unifies the body of Christ and brings about communion among members. The Spirit comes upon the members and makes them also witnesses in Acts 1:8. Through this, the words and actions of Christians becomes a demonstration of Spirit and Power ^[17].

4. The Scriptures

Another prominent model of ecumenism is the “HOLY BIBLE”. Despite that we have various versions of the scriptures such as King James Version (KJV), Revised Standard Version (RSV), New International Version (NIV), Goodnews, etc that fact remains that the Bible still remains the cogent and prominent “TOOLS”. Christian regardless the denomination, should endeavour to have good fortune to share substantially, the same scriptures, with sixty-six or more books of the scriptures, we have more than enough to keep us together, busy, for the forceable future.

God has spoken and still speaking to men and women through

⁹ A. S. Oyelana, Christian Witness in Nigeria: Common and Divided, (Ibadan, Day Star Press, 2006), 22-29.

¹⁰Jim Collins, Ecumenism: World Council of Church, Retrieved from <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc>, Accessed 22/10/2018.

¹¹ Programmes/ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/foundation-texts/the-future-of-ecumenism-in-the-21st-century

¹² Ward, The Churches move Together, 8-12.

¹³ Oyelana, Christian witnessing in Nigeria, 3-4.

¹⁴ Oyelana, Christian witnessing, 4.

¹⁵ John O. Brien, Steps to Christian Unity, (Great Britain Press, 1965), 54.

¹⁶ H. A. Ashmal, Reflection on an Ecumenism, (IRM Press, 1984), 70.

¹⁷ Ashmal, Reflection, 74.

the scriptures. The household of God must agree that the scriptures are the fundamental and fountain head of our faith and that within them we find the Bread of life. If we want to know about the heritage we share, as brethren in Jesus Christ, it is to the scriptures that we must go. The Bible is the basic model of the faith we share, consequently, as we share our study of the Bible, we will share yet more of the faith we share^[18].

5. Baptism

Baptism is a sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one baptized with Christ and His people. Baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection, a washing away of sin, a new birth. In Baptism of every Christian, each person of the Trinity is involved, i. e. God the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The new Christian becomes a child in the family of the Universal Father.

Christian Baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus Christ, in His death and in His resurrection. Baptism is a gift of God and is administered in the name of the Trinity as fulfilling the commandment of our Lord in Matthew 28:18-20. Indiscriminate baptism should be disallowed among Christians following what the scriptures in Eph. 4:5 "There is one Baptism". The truth has to be understood and practiced among all the Christians in Nigeria. Both the baptism of Adults and the baptism of the infants were done in the church as the community of faith. Therefore, there is no need to despise each other's baptism for the sake of unity, togetherness, cooperation, speaking in one voice and common Christian witness, we need to recognize that the spirit is present in both baptisms^[19].

6. Prayer

Since we are brethren and unseparated brothers who must enter into union with one another in the area of prayer to become prayer warriors, then our unity will be fortified. Prayer is a channel whereby believers can connect or communicate with the Universal Father (God). This model, "Prayer" should also be the concerns of Christians. The issue of prayer may sound platitudinous, but if it can be stress or emphasize upon, we will discover that prayer for one another can gradually and systematically, by the power of the Holy Spirit, be transformed into prayer with one another. If this is done among denominations at least once in a month as the case may be we will found ourselves more and more engaged in praying with the household e. g. CAN Universal Week of Prayer^[20].

7. Hope

Another model of ecumenism is "HOPE" for Christian togetherness and fellowship to remain one, the issue of hope must be well sounded. Many people thrust themselves into their denominations. Members should have hope in all the activities of the body. No one should have it at his mind that no ultimate good can come out in all the inputs of the entire body. We should also have hope being with God at the end of our lives^[21].

8. Eucharist

The Eucharist was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the essentially the sacrament of the gift which God gives to us in Christ through the power of Holy Spirit. Every Christian receives this gift of salvation through communion in the body and the blood of Christ. In the Eucharist, The eating and drinking of the bread and wine Christ granted communion with himself. The Eucharist is a thanksgiving to the Father which always includes both word and sacrament. It is a proclamation and celebration of the redemptive work of God. The Eucharist is the memorial of the crucified and risen Christ which has to do with the salvation of mankind^[22].

It will be harmful to pretend that denominational differences do not exist. It is painful that what is expected to bring Christians together is used to divide them. The Catholic for instance will never participate in the Eucharist prepared by another or the Protestants because they do not recognize it as valid. The Eucharist builds up oneness in the church. The church in Nigeria needs to recognize this fundamental model of ecumenism and if there is unity in Eucharist celebration and communion, it will make possible our common goals and witness^[23].

9. Doctrine and Church

The different attitudes of the churches to some issues like marriage are another Model. While some churches rely on Pauline injunction on monogamous marriage and legislate that with the Priest and lay people must not engage in Polygamous marriage, some churches see this as not African. These different attitudes to doctrinal issues like marriage can create room for non-recognition of and the frowning at the Polygamous marriage and other related issues in the church. The main doctrine to be stucked to as a model is the one that emanate from God which also rooted in the scriptures^[24].

10. Discipleship

In the great commission also, the central work for every believer to do is to make disciple of all nations. Matthew 28:18-20. Jesus Christ did not tell us just go and preach the gospel or to go and lead people and get them delivered from demons. His Commission is that we should go and make disciples of all nations. The Discipleship model essentially means we should go and make men of all nations to become like Him regardless of their background, culture, past experiences, habits or status to become like Jesus^[25]. Ecumenism or our coming together including all our activities will not have achieved the purpose of God until whosoever repents under our co-operation has been made to become like Jesus in every respect.

11. Love

God's great offer is that of His Son, Jesus Christ, when man responds to the call of the gospel, and opens up his heart for the Lord Jesus Christ to come, God cleanses and purges him from sin. Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, I will give you rest". God forgives such a man and admits him into His bosom in LOVE. And, forgiveness of sins is such a great blessing as it restores a man into loving embrace of his creator. It brings him into a close

¹⁸ Brien, Steps to Christian Unity, 55.

¹⁹ Oyelana, Christian Witness in Nigeria, 63-65.

²⁰ Brien, Steps to Christian Unity, 60.

²¹ Brien, Steps to Christian Unity, 63.

²² John Gibaut, The Ecumenical Review, (Willey Press, 2013), 412.

²³ Olusola Igbari, The Nature of Church Ministry, (Ibadan, Day Star Press, 2004), 97.

²⁴ Gbile Akanni, Becoming Like Jesus, (Gboko, The Peace house Press, 1997), 49-52.

²⁵ Akanni, Becoming Like Jesus 7-8.

relationship and sweet communion with other believers and Most High God ^[26].

12. Faith

Every believer is saved by grace through what is called "FAITH". This faith according to Hebrews 11:1, "is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen". Faith is also the victory that overcomes the world and without it, it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Therefore our model as members of the same household, should be one faith in God The Universal Father.

B. Deep Change

Incremental change has been in vogue. This is the gradual step by step change. This is what most healthy institutions generally experience, ongoing incremental change. It's how those who learn to effectively lead institutions spend most of their time, and wisely so, mastering, and directing the process of incremental change (Jin Collins, 2005) ^[27], Quinn (2005) also cited online ^[28] came up with "Deep Change". This requires "new ways of thinking and behaving. It is change that is major in scope, discontinuous with the past, distorts existing patterns of action and involved taking risk. Deep change means surrendering control ^[29]. This indeed will take Ecumenism in the 21st century to the next level. Taking a look at the numbers:

Out of the worlds estimated 2.1 billion Christians; only about a quarter is part of the churches making up World Council of Churches (WCC). 215 million Orthodox and 342 million Protestants but many do not belong to WCC.

Those churches that formed the foundation of present Ecumenical structures are in decline and those outside of such fellowship are more often the same churches whose dramatic growth is shaping the future of Christianity.

A few decades ago, 70% of Evangelicals were in the North. 70% are in the Churches of the global South. At the beginning of the 20th century, 81% of Christians were White. By the end of the century, the number was 45%. 542 million Pentecostals (more than the total of Christians belonging to the WCC) continue their rapid growth worldwide. The Catholic Church which is projected to lose 20 million members in Europe in the first quarter of this century will gain 100 million in Africa, 50 million in Asia and 140 million in Latin America. Estimated 8,000 Churches (Denominations/Communities) around the world have web sites. Consider possibilities of making networks of Ecumenical connection in the Future.

World Christian Encyclopaedia published by Oxford University Press, estimated that there are a total of 33,380, denominations in the world. Only 347 are members of WCC and only a few hundred more who are not members belong to the complex and duplicative web of other ecumenical bodies. Indeed, there is need for 'Deep Change as postulated by Quinn for the future of Ecumenism ^[30]. Todd M. John, the author of 2001 World Christian Encyclopedia, said; "Christianity is steadily moving from this Caucasian European-dominated, modern way of life, even before

Christianity as an institution there is no central, unifying narrative ^[31]. Truth indeed, we need to listen to each others stories.

C. De-Emphasise the Issues that Divide Us

The unifying narrative needs to be emphasized and the issues that divide us de-emphasized. Such divisive factors are:

- Denominational titles
- Denominational regalia
- Denominational membership
- Denominational positions
- Denominational structures (organizational or physical) etc

Denominational titles refer to the different nomenclatures used to name the Leaders such as Prelate, Primate, Pope, Founder and President, overseer, etc. The denominational regalia are the different array of priestly robes worn such as Cassocks, Tunics, Stoles, Chains, Beads, Suits, etc. The denominational membership is the number of the people say Men, Women, Youth and Children that make up the denomination. Positions are hierarchical build up. Deacons, Deaconesses, Evangelists, Priest-in-charge, Presbyters, Bishops, Archbishops, venerable, Cannons and So on. Denominational structures include the physical buildings in their array of Architectural master piece to make it unique for a particular denomination and the organizational structures.

The prospects of ecumenism

In 1948, World Council of Churches (WCC) was founded "in order to render clearer witness together to the Lord who came to save all". That was how Willen Visser't Hosft, the WCC first General Secretary, described the council's vision. This vision of unity helped to bring together pre-existing ecumenical streams that promoted common witness in areas of theology, Christian services, mission and education ^[32].

In summary, how WCC was formed portrays great and giant strides indicating positive trend. In 1948, WCC had 147 churches in 44 countries but presently WCC has 349 churches from 110 countries representing over 560 million Christians. This in itself is amazing and gives us reason to celebrate, to thank God, to remain united and forge ahead, looking forward to another productive era when God will breathe the Holy spirit afresh on us and when many more of God's children will come into this wonderful fellowship ^[33]. There is still room for greater heights to be attained especially in the Pentecostal denominations that is growing geometrically. As the church, goes into the future with strides to achieve in the areas of Science and Technology in the face of various challenges of other faiths such as Islam etc, the church cannot afford to be slack but tap from the gains of being united in greater measures by ensuring 100% Ecumenical stand. This can only happen when emphasis are laid on the models of ecumenism and deemphasised denominational excessive claims, then the prospect and future would be great.

²⁶ Oyelana, Christian Witness in Nigeria, 71.

²⁷ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc>. Accessed 20/02/2018.

²⁸ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc>. Accessed 24/02/2018.

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³² [Programmes/ecumenical-movement-in-the-21stcentury/relationship-with-member-churches/bst-anniversaries/photo-galleries.html](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc). Accessed 20/03/2018.

³³ Lacy Wanbai Waweru, Prospects for Ecumenism in the 21st century for tomorrow, (online library.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2008.+600666.x/full, 2008).

4. Conclusion

It is indeed the will of Christ “that all may be one” and efforts should be made to make this oneness achieved. But if we do believe that Christ wills his children to be one, we must do all within our power to destroy whatever barriers that are still keeping his children divided and uphold all the aforementioned models of ecumenism. In the rapidly changing world, the church needs to understand the great power in unity, cooperation and togetherness of brethren, for it is in such unity the church can actually stand the test of time.

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