Christian Association of Nigeria and Inter-Religious Relations in Sapele Metropolis: An Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the Christian Association of Nigeria's (CAN) role in interfaith partnerships in Sapele, Delta State, and suggests strategies for improving interfaith relations. The study uses historical and phenomenological methods, focusing on primary and secondary sources. It highlights the need for understanding religious peace among Nigeria's three primary religions, Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion, and contributes to strengthening and promoting interfaith relations in Sapele in particular and Nigeria in general. The article concludes that interfaith relations among traditionalists, Muslims, and Christians in Sapele and Nigeria at large are crucial for eradicating prejudice, achieving shared goals, and promoting peace, justice, and moral ideals, despite their associated challenges.

Keywords: Christian Association of Nigeria, Inter-Religious Relations, Inter-Church Relations, Inter-Faith, Sapele Metropolis, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's recent religious strife has given rise to a number of worries. Many have wondered why religion has evolved into a weapon for influencing politics, ethic and violence. Nigeria is the only nation with almost equal numbers of Christians and Muslims, with more than 350 ethno-linguistic groupings and more than 150 million residents (Nwanaju, 2005; Ottuh, Ottuh, & Aitufe, 2014). The bulk of violent conflicts include religious problems, which are connected to issues of ethnicity, nationalism, interstate conflict, economics, territory, and culture (Unah, 2011; Dennis, 2018; Ignatius, et al., 2022). In Nigeria, religious conflicts come up so often that some of them are fanned by people and organizations with their own narrow goals. Religious crises often have less to do with religion itself and more to do with politics and ethnicity.

Religion has to be seen as a versatile tool for fostering inter-racial cooperation (Bisong, et al., 2017). The diversity of ethnic groups and religious beliefs must be a source

of harmony. If there must be true change in society, there must be harmony and collaboration amongst all levels of the religious institutions of that society. This research examined the functions of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as regards interfaith partnerships in Nigeria, with a special focus on Sapele metropolis and the Sapele Local Government Area of Delta State. It further examines strategies for future improvement of interfaith relations in Nigeria. The methodologies employed to achieve the aim of this study are historical and phenomenological methods. Thus, primary and secondary sources are utilized. The research discovers that there is a need to comprehend the idea of religious peace among Nigeria's three primary religions—Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religion—in Sapele and the nation in general. The work contributes to the underlying factors that strengthen and promote interfaith relations in Nigeria.

SAPELE METROPOLIS

Sapele is a town and harbour in Delta State, southern Nigeria. It is located 98 miles (158 km) from Escravos Bar and the entrance to the Bight of Benin along the Benin River, right below the junction of the Ethiope and Jamieson rivers (Britannica, 2011). The town is also linked to the route to Benin City by boat and is situated on the road that branches to Warri, Ughelli, and Asaba. The Okpe people think that the name is an anglicised version of the Okpe word "Uriapele," which was given in honour of a local god, whose temple is still visible in the city's centre to date (Britannica, 2011). The name was changed to Sapele by British colonial rulers (Salubi, 1960). The Okpe people, a sizable subset of the Urhobo nation, are the native inhabitants of Sapele city. Along with the numerous Okpe people who have already migrated there, other ethnic groups from Nigeria, such as the Itsekiris, Ijaws, and Urhobo from nearby cities and villages, have also done so.

Sapele was established during the colonial era on the territory that the Urhobo (Isoko) people had previously called home. Since 1925, it has served as a hub for the sawmilling of obeche, abura, sapele, and mahogany (Salubi, 1960). Its production facility for plywood and veneer is one of the biggest in western Africa. Sapele is particularly well-known for the nearby rubber plantations. With the addition of plants for the production of shoes, tiles, plastics, and chemicals in the 1960s, its industry expanded in scope. A flour mill is located in Sapele, a local market hub for cassava (manioc), fish, palm oil and kernels, yams, and plantains. The Sapele local government area population was 171,888 as of 2006 (Britannica, 2011). Two of the Power Holding Company of Nigeria's power production facilities, one of six main facilities in the nation with an installed capacity of 1000 MW, as well as an NIPP facility, are located in the city's Ogorode area. One important factor that has also contributed to the present growth of Sapele is religion. The various religions that exist in Sapele include Christianity, Islam and traditional religions.

THE CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIA (CAN)

The Catholic Church and mainstream Protestant organisations were the only ones represented in the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) when it was first established in 1976 (Osasona, 2002). The inclusion of Pentecostal congregations came later, however. The CAN opposed the implementation of Sharia law in northern states in 2000. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was founded in 1976 to act as a check on the rise of political Islam and rose to prominence during the OIC dispute in the middle of the 1980s (Nwanaju, 2005). This politics of the religious discussion eventually resulted in a deepening of the differences, as seen by the statement made in 1990 by Abubakar Gumi of the Izala, the head of one hardliner Islamic organisation, that Muslims would not tolerate a Christian president in February 1996.

For Christians, CAN has been referred to as an "umbrella body" (AFP, 1995; *Post Express*, 2000). On August 31, 1998, the All Africa News Agency said that "all faiths have joined the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), a movement that continues to speak out vehemently against injustice and corruption. The local church leaders have only experienced little persecution as a result of this. The Association served as a framework for the unity of the Christian Church, particularly as in the pastoral prayer of Jesus: "That they all may be one" (John 17: 21). As a liaison committee, its member churches can consult with one another and, when necessary, issue joint statements and take joint action. It also serves as a watchdog for the nation's moral and spiritual well-being. Its other goals include spreading the gospel and fostering understanding among Nigeria's various social groups. However, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) Sapele chapter started in 1998, even before the Delta State chapter was established. One of the pioneering officers of the Sapele chapter was Rev. Dr. S. O. T. Batsone.

INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

The phrases "inter-faith" and "interreligious" tend to be employed quite haphazardly in the mix of discourse on various faiths in interaction (Asangaeneng & Udoette, 2019). Even the vast body of literature on interreligious and interfaith studies uses these words relatively loosely and interchangeably, and the majority of persons participating in interreligious discourse and interactions fail to differentiate clearly between them (Andrabi, 2020). Additionally, the meanings of specialised lexica are not clearly distinguished. In order to clarify the phrases "interreligious discourse," "interfaith interactions," and "interreligious relations," this thought asks what, if anything, sets them apart. By defining what is distinctive about each phrase, the contrasts between these concepts are made clear.

Clearly, this is a problem for English-speaking participation in the subject, but the problem is not exclusive to English. While Italian translates interfaith as "*interconfessionale*" and interreligious as "*interreligioso*," German often employs the phrase "inter-*religiöse*" to convey or interpret both words (Abdelmassieh, 2020). Italian, like English, therefore proposes a difference, but unlike English, it is more explicit about the uniqueness of meanings. It will be established in the conclusions that the phrases "interfaith relations" and "interreligious discourse" are polysemic, i.e., they are distinct yet linked. To have a more inclusive conversation in today's complicated, worldwide society, other phrases could be more appropriate.

Interreligious relations occur when individuals from many faiths get together with the intention of having a purposeful and organised discussion (Abu-Nimer et al., 2007). Insofar as there is constructive and uplifting dialogue, this conversation is both dialogical and relational. Compared to merely existing in a relationship, dialogue is a more formal, organised, and deliberate action. The Church has acknowledged that, through Christ Jesus, God is making peace with the world. The Church has always sought to comprehend and apply the tenets of its religion to the particular circumstances in which it found itself. As it transitioned from being a part of the Jewish tradition to being a church of Jews and Gentiles and beyond its Greco-Roman context into other cultures and areas of the globe, the early Church had to constantly reevaluate its conception of itself (Moulin-Stożek, 2017). The church today is always being asked to help its members connect to people of different faiths and live as witnesses to others.

The ecumenical movement has made considerable advancements since the 1979 guidelines in order to promote interreligious interaction and discussion, but expectations for the results of our work have also increased (Fashade, 1980). Member churches have recently asked for guidelines on interreligious cooperation and dialogue that take into account the current environment. Religious adherents feel a greater need than ever for

real connections with individuals of different religions, not merely for discourse (Kalu, 1978; Okoko, et al., 2023). There are significant concerns that call for improved understanding and collaboration among people of different religions, including increased awareness of religious plurality, the potential role of religion in conflict, and the expanding importance of religion in public life.

To address member churches as Christians of many traditions, it may be done from a global perspective. There should be anticipation that local churches will research, debate, and customise these ecumenical concerns to fit their unique settings. Christians should strive to go farther in this endeavour by working with their neighbours who practice other religions to create generally accepted rules for interactions and communication that would teach, instruct, and empower everyone to embrace the path of trust and community building (Pinto, 2003). A greater understanding of religious diversity has increased the need for better communication and relationships amongst those of various religions. More individuals of different religions are coexisting because of increased mobility, widespread refugee migration, and economic migration (Wrogemann, 2019). There are chances to promote better understanding and awareness among individuals of various faiths when there are channels for communication and interaction. Unfortunately, tension and anxiety have sometimes tarnished improved relations between groups.

The above conflict underlines the need for many communities to preserve their unique identities and originality. Sometimes there is a hazy line between the righteous pursuit of identification and animosity towards neighbours who practice other faiths and cultures. There has been an increase in the power of groups and leaders mobilising their followers in the name of protecting a perceived unique identity among followers of major religious traditions throughout the globe (Balcomb, 2012). A new social order is often created on the only basis of such an idea of identity, which is fashioned by the selective recovery of doctrines, beliefs, and practices from a socialized past. There is a chance that religious feelings may be abused if religious diversity causes racial or ethnic problems.

Religion conveys significant historical memories and often appeals to unthinking confessional solidarities; it speaks for some of the deepest emotions and sensitivities of people and communities (Bkerlegge, 2001). While it is more probable that religion will make a conflict worse, it is sometimes believed to be the root of conflict. The goal of interreligious cooperation and conversation is to prevent religion from being misappropriated in this way and to provide religious people with the chance to work together as healers and reconcilers. In fact, fostering interreligious relations or dialogue in every society may be crucial to fostering peace and reconciliation for all. Religion is playing a larger role in public life in many nations, which calls for more interreligious understanding and collaboration. Governmental and non-governmental organisations are contacting religious leaders to address pressing moral concerns (Clarke & Linden, 1984). However, religious groups must identify their shared values, determine to what degree they can speak with one voice, and talk about how to avoid being influenced by political forces in order to speak collectively and with moral authority.

CAN'S STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING INTER-RELIGIOUS RELATIONS IN SAPELE METROPOLIS

Inter-religious education

The present trend in educational institutions throughout the globe is that they are actively seeking solutions to the problems of education in a religiously diverse society. This includes colleges, universities, many of which have no religious affiliation, and even some seminaries. They want to solidify a transformative process that would enable students to get an education that would prepare them to become global citizens who are aware of the plurality of religious traditions and who use pluralistic tactics to embrace diversity in innovative and fruitful ways. Interreligious education is obviously becoming more and more important for preparing individuals to be global citizens (Schneier & Ali, 2013). Therefore, regardless of their theological affiliation or inclination, all academic institutions should be required to nurture a religious component to citizenship from sociological as well as educational points of view.

The development of people's and societies' religious identities, as well as in forming ideas about each other, is successfully aided by interreligious education (Udoette, 2023a, Udoette, 2023b). It eases the strain that stereotypes or hatred against other people's religions create and drive couples apart. It expands the student's familial network and fosters positive interactions. People who are religiously literate or educated and are familiar with the background and doctrine of different faiths are more likely to have a solid grip on global politics, history, culture, and literature (Schneier & Ali, 2013). Inter-religious education provides pupils or adults with plenty of possibilities to decide, in maturity, whatever faith they are strongly inclined to pursue (Sajene, oral interview, 2022). Education that fosters religious tolerance and decreases religious strife—thus, interreligious education—enables students to see the world from a variety of religious perspectives and helps them make more intelligent judgements.

Reconciliation and peace
Growing hostility along political, ethnic, regional, and religious fault lines has harmed interreligious ties in Nigeria, which are already under stress from a lack of ongoing discussion and a struggle for resources. Extremist organisations like Boko Haram, who want to use Nigeria's religious identity for political gain, have increased bloodshed, particularly in northeastern Nigeria (Ottuh, Ottuh, & Aitufe, 2014). In a historically diverse and multi-religious community, these violent crimes have put societal cohesiveness in jeopardy. The Christian Association of Nigeria recognises the enormous potential of reconciliation as an effective tool for interfaith conversation and as a tool for religious leaders to solve these and other pressing contemporary concerns (Izora, oral interview, 2022). This tool may help fight rising intolerance and distrust. Through the creation of discussion spaces, the development of capacity, and the support of regional initiatives, the CAN has strengthened its position as a dialogue facilitator in Nigeria and laid the groundwork for long-term interreligious interaction.

Multi-religious prayer
The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) (Sapele chapter) has often organised "multi-religious prayer" or "inter-denominational prayers" in Sapele metropolis. Multi-religious prayer is a time when members of several faiths get together to organise, prepare, and pray as a group. The benefit is that they are praying in front of each other and respecting the uniqueness and purity of each tradition (Omare, interview, 2022). Some believe that doing so runs the danger of lowering prayer to the lowest common denominator and might diminish the distinctive spirituality of prayer found in each faith. These groups often speak the same language and have similar cultural practices throughout numerous nations. They often claim that the law has provided their members with equal civil and political rights. Discriminatory actions, however, deepen mistrust and conflict. Interreligious discourse must provide a chance to build inter-confessional relations.

Interreligious dialogue

Christians who engage in dialogue regularly reevaluate how well they understand the biblical and theological tradition. All communities are compelled by dialogue to examine themselves and reconsider how they have interpreted their religious traditions. All dialogues aim to forge bonds of relationship with those who are viewed as others (Smock, 2002). In the nature and manner of interaction, differences in culture, gender, generation, race, and ethnicity are significant. Instead of eradicating or avoiding differences, dialogue aims to foster mutual trust and confidence. Respecting the integrity of religious traditions in their various structures and organisations is crucial when engaging in dialogue (Balagangadhara, 2008). People who seem to be solely concerned with proselytising and other types of missionary work within their own religious groups are common. They may look uninterested in conversation or might utilise it to achieve their missionary goals (Ninian, 1998).

Such circumstances may discourage those who want to have a conversation. Adherents must actively look for these partners and consider how to restore the legitimacy of conversation (Temienor, oral interview, 2022). The invitation to discourse may sometimes be received with reluctance, mistrust, hostility, or antagonism. Interreligious interactions can convey views at odds with the principles of dialogue's culture and ethics (Shulman, 2009). Sometimes the potential results of a conversation do not seem sufficient to genuinely warrant involvement. Other issues, some of which have just come up in conversations, need serious study.

Finding points of agreement that are not religious

Seeing individuals as religious categories rather than as unique human beings is simple. Discover commonalities beyond those found in one's own religious beliefs when one comes to meet individuals from various faiths. Respecting people requires respecting their views as well (Onotu, oral interview, 2022). When discussing religion, because so many people hold it dear to their hearts, empathy is essential. One may see why it is necessary to respect everyone's views when they put themselves in the position of folks who adhere to various religious traditions or those who do not practice any religion at all. One should think about being nice, courteous, and treating others the way people would want to be treated. People will respect one another more if they treat them with respect.

Recognising the variations among other religions

Religions do not have to try to convert one another in order to coexist. In the end, respecting and being open to others is not a betrayal of one's own beliefs. In doing this, one should not try to convert; rather, one should try to understand, which is beneficial. Even if one comes to the understanding that they will disagree about religion in the end, celebrate the similarities they share and respect the differences. If one ultimately decides to part ways, he or she can do so without disparaging the other person's viewpoint. This they should do by recognising their viewpoint and avoiding sounding argumentative by using "I" statements.

Benefits of Inter-Religious Relations in Sapele Metropolis

There are several worthwhile advantages to interreligious relations. Inter-religious relations enhance adherents' experience of being human if they accept that it is a natural expression of their innate human disposition (Erhue, oral interview, 2022). The benefits of inter-religious relations include the fact that it shows the general public how different faiths can coexist peacefully without offending or insulting one another's morals (Akpeh, oral interview, 2022). Inter-religious relations teach the adherents that every religion

and its adherents must be treated with respect, so inter-religious relations should not have an aggressive attitude (Pajah, oral interview, 2022). Inter-religious relations vastly enhance adherents' capacity to comprehend another person. While reading about another religion can teach a person a lot about it, talking to people who practice that religion about their beliefs, practices, and attitudes about them transforms a person's knowledge and, more importantly, understanding.

Inter-religious relations improve mutual respect, goodwill, and a sense of community among followers of various religions. Inter-religious relations can be helpful in removing the fear from the minds of the minorities who are oppressed and helping them to cooperate with the majority community in the field of development and prosperity of the nation. Inter-religious relations help to explore and learn about each other and know more about the traditions of one's faith. Every person's inner soul is in search of a deep understanding of the truth, which includes Almighty God, the Universe and life, among others (Onimhawo & Ottuh, 2009). The process of inter-religious relations helps the participants and the viewers get an insight into the concepts of truth in other religions, which will help them get a clear vision of the different aspects of truth. Also, the knowledge and insight of other religions help to eradicate the misconceptions and misunderstandings of any particular religion.

Inter-religious relations help each religion grow and develop mutually in society. Each religion, through dialogue, helps another religion enrich itself. Inter-religious relations provide space for the religions to contribute and complement each other (Dennis & Udo, 2021 ; Udele, oral interview, 2022). Inter-religious relations help society as a whole by producing better mutual understanding among the believers of different religions. Inter-religious relations encourage the support of each other in times of difficulty. When natural or human-made calamities strike upon society, inter-religious relations help in creating people and individuals who do relief work irrespective of caste, creed, religion, language, etc. (Udele, oral interview, 2022). They only see that their services are rendered in their proper channel to everyone affected by the calamities. The best example is during this pandemic, COVID-19, in all parts of the world, including Sapele, where people help each other irrespective of their religions. For example, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Sapele Chapter, ensured that churches practiced social separation or distancing in Sapele, Delta State, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Udele, oral interview, 2022).

Inter-religious relations help people understand any religion. The experience of dealing with anyone is limited to situations such as the workplace, where you never talk in depth about your religion, what you practice or how you feel about it. By taking part in interfaith dialogue, inter-religious relations can help each other understand that the people who follow other religions are intelligent and sympathetic and can discuss their differences with members of other religions while remaining completely confident in their own. Inter-religious relations using dialogue between followers of different faith traditions are of great help in achieving the common goals of society and nation. It enhances the participation of every member of every religion in the development and prosperity of the nation. Inter-religious relations help in forming public opinion against the evils prevailing in society and thus result in their eradication from society.

Inter-religious relations minimise the gap between communities, which in turn reinforces the national integration of a society. All religions uphold the ideal of selfless service to others. Services and aid can be made available to followers of other religions with the aid of inter-religious relations. Muslim communities have historically had strong inter-communal ties with other groups. Islam itself encourages and teaches its adherents to uphold interfaith harmony in their communities. Religious organisations may focus more on these activities during the festive seasons. Many organisations and political

parties extend their aid and distribute relief funds to the needy regardless of their religion during the month of Ramadan in India. If there are some joint activities in this regard, it will bring good results and thrust for peaceful coexistence.

The paradoxical benefit of engaging in inter-religious relations is that it helps a person understand his or her own religion much better. They may have been brought up practicing their religion but that is not the same as studying it in depth to find out how it addresses fundamental issues. When a person is preparing for any formal interfaith dialogue discussions, they have to do a significant amount of research on the scripts of their own religion, as it is essential to put forward propositions that are firmly grounded in the texts rather than simply conveying their own assumptions about what they think of their religion (Onimhawo & Ottuh, 2009; Udo & Archibong, 2019). Inter-religious relations strengthened faith and beliefs. It promotes a **community of peace. I**f time is spent understanding other faiths and perspectives, misconceptions may be clarified, problems can be identified and peacefully resolved, and fear can be alleviated. When people do not feel threatened, they are more able to form a relationship. If adherents reach out to one another in love, they assist in creating more united communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends as follows:

i. Tolerance between leaders of religious groups is essential and urgent, and it would be required to first persuade the leaders of the traditional religion, Christian, and Muslim faiths that tolerance is the key to religious harmony.

ii. Organization or committee to promote interreligious relations or friendship should be established in every church and mosque in Sapele. The committee should provide mutually agreeable programmes with relevant Bible and Qur'anic quotes in cooperation with non-religious institutions in Sapele Township.

iii. Adherents of religions should jointly commemorate all traditional festivals, Muslim and Christian religious holidays.

iv. All secondary and higher educational institutions in Nigeria should update their curricula for religious knowledge to accommodate interreligious relations.

v. To lessen religious violence in the nation, the federal government should implement interreligious education at all levels of schooling.

CONCLUSION

This paper looked at the various methods for fostering better interfaith relations or interactions in Sapele metropolis by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Many of people are perplexed as to why religion, which was once the unifying element and foundation of national unity, peaceful coexistence, and national progress, has now evolved in Nigerian society into a weapon for political manipulation, violence, and the loss of lives and property. In order to ensure unity and progress with one another, the paper outlined the steps that CAN have taken to improve interfaith relationships in Sapele. Christians and followers of other faiths are entwined in a discourse of life (Bisong & Udo, 2014), with all its challenges but also its richness and possibilities, in the numerous pluralist communities where they dwell. They learn new things about their own and other people's faiths. They unearth new resources that will enable them to grow as people and improve the quality of coexistence in the world. They gain knowledge on how to be more receptive to the wants and needs of others and more submissive to God's plan for all of creation.

The finest tangible representation of peace and harmony in inter-religious relations is dialogue among adherents of various religious traditions; it is not about conversion. It does not imply acceptance of one's faith, but it is necessary to sustain societal peace. It is crucial for everyone to be able to debate their religious and cultural differences in a democratic society. Interfaith communication among traditionalists, Muslims, and Christians will aid in eradicating prejudice and misconceptions. It will assist in achieving shared goals including the development of national peace and justice, safeguarding families from breakup, defending human rights, and advancing moral ideals. To engage all three groups (traditionalists, Muslims, and Christians) of people with the message of humanity and peaceful coexistence is the challenge facing those working toward interfaith relations in Nigeria.

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