TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN CHURCHES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Abstract

The society we live in cannot avoid conflict. The church in particular is not devoid of conflict of all kinds. Church leaders and other stakeholders in the church have not only to resolve these conflicts, they have to also transform the conflicts and ensure that people live in peaceful co-existence as much as it is possible. The advent of the Internet in general and social media in particular has affected the way people are doing things tremendously. This includes conflict transformation in the church as well. This paper gives a brief introduction to conflict transformation in general and conflict transformation specifically in the church. It gives a brief biblical basis on conflict transformation. Furthermore, it delves extensively on the biblical basis for conflict transformation in churches through social media. It concludes that stakeholders in the church should blend theology together with technology, especially the social media, in transforming conflicts that are arising within the church.

Key Words: *theology, conflict, conflict transformation, peaceful co-existence, social media*

Introduction

Inasmuch as conflict is unavoidable in the society, it is expedient not only to resolve the conflict, but also to manage it, or rather transform it. Unfortunately, churches and Christians are not immune from conflict (Folarin and Adelakun, 2016). Managing conflict effectively would guarantee a better peaceful society (Clements, 2004). Christians, as major stakeholders in the society, have pivotal roles to play in managing conflict whatever the type or cause of the conflict. Social media have become a major way of communication among people in this twenty-first century, especially as the world of today has transformed from an "analog" world to a digital one where technological tools are taking important roles, and the advent of social media in particular has enormously altered the expression of communication globally (White et al., 2016). While many studies have been carried out on conflict, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation in general, this paper specifically aims at offering a theology of transforming conflicts in churches by using the available social media.

Theological Basis for Conflict Transformation

Brief Introduction to Conflict Transformation

Although scholars have found it difficult to give a precise definition of the term "conflict transformation", it is presumed that the term can be better explained than defined (see Lederach, 2014b). So, Lederach (2014b) gave this explanation that conflict transformation is

> a way of *looking* as well as *seeing…. to envision and respond* to *the ebb and flow* of social conflict as *life-giving opportunities* for creating *constructive change processes* that *reduce violence*, *increase justice* in *direct interaction and social structures*, and respond to real-life problems in *human relationships*.

Lederach (2014b) deliberately italicized some words or phrases in the proposed definition above in order to make the definition more understandable as he further analyzed the italicized words or phrases. He, as cited by Aderayo and Olayinka (2016), went on to argue that conflict transformation deals with the way conflict begins and progresses and how it can bring changes in the personal, relational, structural and cultural levels for the conciliator to promote peaceful change through peaceful means.

Many other scholars rather explain the concept of conflict transformation in using terms like process, approach, theory, principles, task, and the likes. As a process, conflict transformation engages "with and [transforms] the relationships, interests, discourses and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict. Constructive conflict is seen as a vital agent or catalyst for change" (Miall, 2004). Conflict transformation surpasses the conflict itself

because it does not only pay attention to the conflict but also pays attention to the people involved in the conflict (Aderayo and Olayinka, 2016).

In explaining the task of conflict transformation, Akanji (2011) opined that engaging in conflict transformation is more than ending conflict. It seeks to look backward to the origins of conflict and to look forward into what and how things should be, so that there will be less recurrence of past violence in order to ensure peaceful coexistence.

Conflict resolution and conflict transformation are similar, but they are different in some aspects. The former shows an inclination to focus upon the immediate and shorter term of resolving the conflict, while the latter encourages long-term processes that lead to deep changes. Conflict transformation incorporates what comes after the conflict resolution like traumas, fears, hurts and hatreds. All these aftermath are of less importance in the conflict resolution approach (Kulska, 2014). This is the reason why conflict transformation is considered as the "holistic approach" because it includes personal, relational, structural and cultural changes (Lederach, 2014b).

Conflict Transformation in the Church

The existence of conflict within the church cannot be overemphasized. It is even considered normal in a church setting (McKay, 2009). Right from the early church to the church in this twenty-first century, the church has been experiencing one conflict after the other (Afolabi, 2012). Inasmuch as the church is made up of different human beings, it will continue to experience conflicts. Pneumann (2001) as cited by McKay (2009) identified the following as "predictable sources of conflict":

    1) members disagree about values and beliefs;

    2) the congregation's structure is unclear;

3) the pastor's role and responsibilities are in conflict;

4) the structure no longer fits the congregation's size;

5) the clergy and lay leadership styles do not match;

6) the new pastor rushes into changes;

7) communication lines are blocked;

8) church members manage conflict poorly; and

9) disaffected members hold back participation and pledges.

Since the church is so exposed to conflicts from time immemorial, the creative management of the conflicts is not an option but a necessity. The way these conflicts are managed and transformed will determine the peaceful co-existence of the members of the church and the growth or otherwise of the church (Oppenshaw et al., 2018).

Biblical Basis for Conflict Transformation

Conflict is not bad in itself. It is natural with human beings as the Holy Bible in many places presents it. Having explained that conflict started with the creation of man in Genesis 1, Lederach (2014a) concluded that Christians understand conflict as something built on some basic commitments of creation. In his words, "God is present in each of us because we are created in the likeness of God. God values diversity. God is committed to giving us freedom. [Therefore] these elements make our lives rich, ever-renewing, and interesting. They also make conflict a natural part of our relationships."

Apart from tracing conflict to the creation of man, conflict actually commenced in the Holy Bible when the serpent (that is generally assumed to be the devil) came to mislead Adam and Eve (the first human beings on earth) in the Garden of Even (see

Genesis 3). This action truncated the relationship of people with God. It distorts the relationships between people. So also, relationships between people and the environment become impaired. God acted straightway to resolve the conflict by first questioning Adam and Eve. Although, God gave instant chastisement, yet, He provided a way of reconciliation for humankind. Other part of the Bible is how God worked (and is still working) out this reconciliation or conflict transformation (Blackman, 2003).

Theological Basis for Social Media

(This section is an adaptation of a section of Afolaranmi, 2020b)

New media, "alternate media" (Aslam, 2016) and online social network services are terms used intermittently with social media. Although the term "social network services" is mainly used for an aspect of social media, it is more used for social media in general (Afolaranmi, 2020a). McFarland and Ployhart (2015) simply defined social media as "digital Web 2.0 platforms that facilitate information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration across people." Social media concentrate on building online groups of people that share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in finding out the interests and activities of others (Olasinde, 2014).

It is noteworthy that God is an interactive and information-sharing Creator (see Genesis 1:26-30) (Okai and Ampomah, 2017). The whole creation was made possible because God communicates through Word, and the fullness of God's communication and revelation was revealed completely when the Word became flesh and lived among us as stated in John 1:14 (Macalanggan, 2017). Someone has translated John 1:1-5 thus,

"In the beginning was the communication and communication was with God and Communication was God. Communication was with God in the beginning. Through communication all things were made; without communication nothing was made that has been made. In Communication was life, and that life was the light of human beings" ("Communications").

God created human beings in His image as communicating and information sharing creatures (Genesis 1:27; 3:6-12). So, "communication and information sharing are fundamental and paramount in relationships — thus, interaction between God and human beings and vice versa (Gen. 4:1-10)" (Okai and Ampomah, 2017). As image-bearers of God who did not stop communicating after the creation process, but still communicates till date in various ways (see Hebrews 1:1-3), it is expected of Christians to imitate God in communicating with other people in diverse ways also. One of the ways to do this is social media.

Christians, as salt and light of the world (see Matthew 5:13-16), are to be like the tribe of Issachar, "who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chronicles 12:32) and do things that will sweeten the bitterness of the world and brighten the darkness of the world. For the improvement of the society, they should team up with other people that have invent many things including "the sartorial, the architectural, the orchestral, the automotive, …discursive communicative media such as spoken language, smoke signals, forms of signage, …written language [and] electronically mediated communications, such as the telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and Internet" (Groothuis, 2010).

Information and communication technologies (ICT) in general and social media in particular have linked to two biblical bases. The first basis is "Everything is created by God" (Rojas-Díaz J. A., 2018). God in His sovereignty, generousity and self-

sufficiency created everything (see Genesis 1). This creation is sustained and maintained by the word, wisdom and power of God (Job 38-40; Am. 4:13; Mat. 10:29-30; Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:3; 2 Pet. 3:7). "Technological advances and ICT [in general, and social media in particular] are essentially 'very good' [compare Genesis 1:31] because they come 'from the Father, from whom all things come' (1 Cor. 8:6)" (Rojas-Díaz J. A., 2018). God has enabled human being to discover and develop things for the good of humankind. Social media are parts of such invention and development, and humanity should engage them for their good. "Everything is corrupted by the idolatrous attitude" (Rojas-Díaz J. A., 2018). The "very good" scenario of Genesis 1 was ruptured with the disobedience (or the Fall) of man in Genesis 3. This started the era of idolatrous relation of the created order with the Creator. So, the "nature, source of well-being and fulfillment, is now cursed, generating discomfort and pain (Gen. 3:17)" (Rojas-Díaz J. A., 2018). It can also refer to the event of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 "where people were amazed with the result of their work" (Macalanggan, 2017) and it has resulted in "the current reality of ICT, where the relations with the other and the environment are distorted and negatively affected, are symptoms of a problem greater than that of excessive, unlimited and irresponsible use" (Rojas-Díaz J. A., 2018). This has made many people to view technologies in general, and social media in particular as god (Macalanggan, 2017). This is referred to by Rojas-Díaz J. A. (2018) as "cyberidolatry". The aftermaths of this are pornography, "cyberharassment" or "cyberextortion", cyberbullying, "cybermatoneo", cyber fraud, online gambling, "sexting" and other vices (Rojas-Díaz J. A., 2018).

Despite the shortcomings that are associated with technological tools in general and social media in particular as mentioned above, technological tools in general and

social media in particular are good instruments to foster religions because they (that is, ICT and social media) "can enhance religious practices through the expansion and creation of religious communities" (Kgatle, 2018), and as they now probably "play a vivifying role in religious organizations' ongoing adaptation and composition as spiritual communities" (Cheong, 2017). Against the backdrop of the fact that "demonstrated unprecedented magical powers of speed, efficiency and cost effectiveness in attaining many facets of human endeavour" (Orlu-Orlu, 2017) of social media, social media have greatly reinvigorated the accomplishment of the biblical orders about mutual living and relationship with fellow humans to ensure a flourishing society (see 1 Corinthians 1:10; 12: 25-17; 1 John 1:7; Galatians 6:2; Proverbs 17:17; 27:17; Matthew 18:20; Romans 12:5, 16; Hebrews 10:24-25; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Acts 2:44-47; Ephesians 4:2-6).

Macalanggan (2017) was of the opinion that since God was the Creator of man that invented technologies and social media, God has to interact with man who is imperfect in man's invention. So, man can use technologies and social media to disseminate the things of God to other human beings and "nourish the spiritual growth and development of the person as well as his relationship with God" (Macalanggan, 2017).

Okai and Ampomah (2017) underscored "some of the positive impact Facebook [and other social media have] on Christians." Among them are church marketing, global mission, online prayer group, introduction of new songs, photos and videos sharing, increase traffic to church website, biblical counseling, and Christian conferences, seminars and workshops. However, Okai and Ampomah (2017) further gave some of the bad effects of social media. These include short attention span/limited learning style, low view of authority/over-focus on equality, "shallow"

interactions/artificial relationships, lack of physical presence, low commitment/accountability, social isolation, poor sleeping habits, deceit, immorality, spread of fake news, and vulnerable to scam.

Conclusion

As Afolaranmi (2020b) has asserted, social media are ones of the suitable means when it comes to transforming conflict situation into having a sustainable society. It would be good if Christians could incorporate theology and technology together and help the people encounter God in the use of cybertechnology and maintaining a sustainable society. Social media may have bad influences, however, if employed purposefully, prayerfully, and carefully, social media can add a new dimension to people's social interactions especially when transforming conflicts.

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