

Church Commercialization in Nigeria: Implications for Public Relations Practice

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Abstract

Church commercialization is a phenomenon in the Nigerian Christendom. It has made the institution called church to deviate from its original tenets: sacredness, purity, holiness and promotion of truth, but rooted itself in the pursuit of materialism and mundane pleasures. Based on this premise, this study x-rayed various aspects of church commercialization, its causes and their implications for public relations practice. Survey research method was used to assess this situation and empirical results were found. From the results, this paper posits that church commercialization is a violation of both church and public relations ethics. It runs counter to church's tenets of sacredness, holiness and purity and cannot be promoted through public relations practice. The paper also posits that church commercialization is an aberration and dints the image/reputation of the institution of the church. To stem the tide of church commercialization in Nigeria will be a herculean task for public relations practitioners as far as poverty level among Nigeria is high. Finally, it posits that church commercialization runs counter to the philosophy and promotion of truth telling, sincerity, honesty, and two-way symmetric model of communications and excellence in public relations practice. PR practitioners who promote churches or gospel preachers that indulge in the act of church commercialization violate the ethical code or code of conduct of public relations profession. The paper concludes that the era of falsehood and pernicious propaganda has gone, so church leaders; church workers and indeed public relations practitioners should embrace the practice of two-way symmetric model of communications that are nurtured in truth, mutual understanding and transparency if they must win and sustain public confidence.

Recommendations were made based on the ethical and image/reputation issues discovered.

Keywords: Church, commercialization, public relations, aberration, falsehood

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the Institution called church has been criticized for her dramatic, constant but sustained departure/deviation from its original tenet, status of sacredness and holiness. It has also abandoned its socio-religious role as character moulders/ builder and stabilization in pursuit of materialism and other mundane things. One factor that has, perhaps, helped in fanning the embers of this diversionary stance is the proliferation of churches. Nigeria is a procreant ground for all kinds of religious movements. This is particularly evident in the agglomeration of autonomous and non-centralized churches. (Essien, 2010). A plethora of reasons has been advanced by the founders of these autonomous religious groups as factors for their emergence and growth. These factors are well documented in several studies by Ogunkunle (2006); Jemiriye (1998); Essien (2010) as including:

- i. Spiritual calling/direct revelation from God through dreams and visions.
- ii. A search for spiritual development in private mannerism;
- iii. Doctrinal differences/biblical interpretations
- iv. Misunderstandings, quarrels and cheats
- v. Independence/a desire not to be controlled by others
- vi. Political motivations to establish a church for one's village as it exists in other villages (Essien 2009).

While all the above listed points are valid reasons for the foundation of these religious groups, "there is common notion that the pivotal reason of the emergence of these religious groups is commercial (Fidelis, 1998; Essien, 2009). Based on this assertion, church commercialization has been the subject of investigation for many years. In fact, Jemiriye (1998); Asaju (1988); Asaju (1989); Shimazono (1998); Olawole (2005); Tonye (2005); Ogunkunle (2006); and Essien (2010) through their studies provided enough evidence for this abnormality and also created a solid platform for further research efforts. A tight description of this ugly trend that has pervaded the church is offered as a lee-way to understanding the direction of this discourse. According to Jemiriye (1998), many of the church leaders seem to have abandoned the precepts on which the church and other religious practices are founded; but now brazenly pursue economic or commercial-oriented interests and tendencies. They way and manner some of the old and new breed churches, and other autonomous religious cum Para-religious groups conduct the business of the church indicates a string of profanities. They exhibit a strong appetite for 'love of money' and materialism-which is 'the root of all evils. Truth is sacrificed while lies, deceit are now potent weapons used by the founders and leaders of the churches and other autonomous Christian religious groups for manipulating their followers (Achor, 1999).

Further scenarios that depict commercialization of religion can be illustrated fully "when adherents of the Christian faith pay for the supposedly religious services rendered to them by 'men and women of God'.

These men and women of God blatantly refused to heed Jesus mandate or admonition of 'freely you have received, freely you must give'. The preceding scenarios and others that are subsequently discussed in the study are anomalies that are in sharp contrast with the tenets of public relations practice. A core principle of public relations practice is the promotion and sustenance of mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual acceptance backed by truth (Black 1990; Nwosu, 2002).

Based on this premise, the broad objective of this study is to identify and examine various aspects of commercialization of church as experienced in the Nigerian Christendom and their implications for public relations practice. But the specific objective is to analyze how the identified implications affect the image and reputation of the church, church authorities and their followers.

To achieve the purpose of the research, the study is guided by these research questions: Does church commercialization run counter to public relations philosophy and promotion of truth telling? Is the image/reputation of the church and church leaders bashed /dinted because of commercializing activities/services church renders to the society? What kind of image does church commercialization confers on the institution of the church? What are the various aspects of this phenomenon that is in conflict with the tenets of public relations practice? What is/are the cause (s) of commercialization of church in Nigeria? Would such cause(s) prove a herculean task for public relations in stemming the tide of commercialization of churches in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Church: A Conceptual and Contextual Description

Historically the church arose from the life and Ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In the New Testament Greek, the world church is referred to as *ekklesia*, (ecclesia) meaning "assembly". Also in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the world *ekklesia* denoted the gathering of people for worship. In New Testament *ekklesia* refers to a local Christian Community. Christians believe that God founded the church through the works of Jesus and this is sustained by the continual presence of the Holy Spirit. Based on this premise, a church is described as a group of believers in Jesus Christ, associated together, under Christ, for His purposes (Zonderavan Pictorial Encyclopedia, 1984).

The New Testament offers many metaphors for the church. First, it described it as the body of Christ; Christ is the head and Christians form the members. Second, the church is related to Christ as branches of a vine. A more intricate and pervasive relationship is implied by this image than by the image of the body. More importantly, it described the church as the people of God; a description that stresses, on one hand, the continuity of the church with Israel and on the other, the church's potential universality (Barth, 1963; Encarta 2008).

A deepened description of the church is found on theological interpretations. Based on theological explanations, the church is said to have four marks or notes: one holy, catholic and apostolic. The church is affirmed as one because it confesses one Lord and is animated by one spirit, as holy because God claims it, not because of its moral perfection; as Catholic because it transcends all the division of humanity, and as apostolic because it maintains continuity with the apostolic teaching and mission (Barth 1963; Price 2008). These marks are attributed to the church in faith and hope in the recognition that the visible condition of the church often does not correspond to them (Barth, 1932).

The church's core mission or mandate anchors on soul winning as enunciated in the Great Commission found in Mathew (28:19). In addition to this great mandate, churches are service enterprises established primarily to satisfy people's spiritual needs. The need for love includes desire for affection and for association with others. People's spiritual needs cannot actually be met without love and compassion for them (Anyafu, 1997:46). Church/Christianity provides paths that deliver individuals from bondage of sin, immortality, ignorance, and other types of impurity or disharmony and lead them towards a state of purity of soul, spiritual knowledge, wisdom, godliness, enlightenment or even eternal life.

Arising from the submissions above is the need to recognize that Christian religion, which is represented by the church does not only deal with the relationship between God and man. It equally deals with the relationship between man and man. Every religion has rules of conduct that guide the interaction of man with his fellow beings (Ogunkunle, 2006). For example, the Holy Bible as recorded in Exodus (20:1-20) deals with the Decalogue, the apodictic Ten Commandments which every man must obey as he relates with God, while Exodus (21:1-23) deals with the covenant code, the casuistic laws which guide the relationship of man as he relates to his fellow being. A deviation from this code of conduct is present in the contemporary church. And such deviation fans embers of church commercialization.

Church Commercialization: Origins, Religious Dimensions and Contemporary Practices

The term church commercialization denotes two things. First, it denotes the application of commercial principles in the running of the church or applying business principles to church administration or run it as a business with the aim of making economic gain.

Secondly, it depicts the manipulation of the church/Christianity, its services (spiritual and emotional)

with implied intentions to exploit members or prospects for economic or financial gain (Fidelis, 1998). It has also been described as conducting the church core mandate of soul winning, attending to spiritual and emotional needs of members with the sole aim of benefiting financially or profitably. Generally, commercialization of church should be conceived as every action, activities of church leaders, pastors, prophets, etc. that have economic or profit making annotation. Having explained the concept of church commercialization, it important to discuss its early practices/origins as recorded in the Holy Bible. The Bible, which embodies the percepts of Christianity, gives series of accounts that depicts commercialization of religion or the church.

From the Old Testament, prophets Amos, Micah and Ezekiel decried this aberration. Prophet Amos raised his voice in protest against the religious and moral corruption of his day by condemning the following sins: exploitation and oppression of the poor and needy, corrupt and degenerate religious practices, corruption of justice and honesty, excessive indulgence and general disregard for the laws of God (Amos 2:8:5, 4:1; 5:11; 8:4-6; 6,8; 4:4; 5:7,10; and 6:12). "The negative attitude of prophet Amos towards commercialization of religion came out in the clash between him and Amaziah who refused to acknowledge in any way the divine sources of Amos' prophecies, but considered him as a political agitator". Commenting on this attitude, Ogunkunle (2006) opined that "the fact that Amaziah and other priests in Israel had commercialized religion is indicated in his derogatory advice to Amos that he should go to Judah and earn his bread there" (Amos 7:12). To them religion was for making money.

Micah (1:7; 3:5-7) spoke against his listeners for their apostate life style. Their sins include perversion of worship practices, empty religious formalism (6:6-7), oppression of the poor and defenseless (Amos 2:2.8-9) perversion of justice through bribery and dishonest business practices; idolatry and violence. As recorded in Micah (3:11; 6:11; 73), religious leaders were charged of commercialization of religion by serving the people because of the economic gain. Rather than serving and caring for the people as the Shepherds of the nation, these false prophets were leading the people astray.

John (1985) described the scenario painted of these religious leaders thus:

These leaders were giving the people false hope by telling them they would not be punished by God, that there would be no calamity. If someone paid the false shepherds well, they would pronounce peace on him. In other words, they told a person what he wanted to hear for a price.

The prophets were concerned with their own welfare, rather than the nations' welfare. Materialism was their master (John 1985).

Ezekiel was particularly against the false prophets and prophetesses who were into business of commercialization of religion. In the New Testament, commercialization of religion got to its peak at the time of Jesus-Christ as illustrated in Mathew (21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; and Luke 19:43-46). Jesus expressed his indignation against the people changing money and selling doves in the temple. William (1979:273-4) gave more insights into this phenomenon of selling doves in the temple. Usually, every Jew had to pay a temple tax of one half shekel a year. William (1979) noted that the tax had to be paid in one particular coinage which means that the Jews that came from all over the world with all kinds of currencies had to change their money with an exorbitant charge. This made the festive period a busy time for temple authorities who were involved in the business of changing money rather than leading the people in the worship".

During the feast of Passover, selling of doves as reported by Ogunkunle (2006) became popular. The organizers of the feast of Passover strictly advised worshippers to buy doves at the temple stalls, through at an exorbitant price. Ordinarily these doves could be bought cheaply outside the temple but the temple inspectors would be sure to find something wrong with them. (Ogunkunle, 2006). Again, the exploitation of the pilgrims by the temple authorities who were treating the pilgrims not as worshippers but as things to be exploited for their own end is another dimension in the commercialization of religion. This attitude was condemned by Jesus, the head of the church. He rebuked the religious leaders for the desecration of God's holy place. These scenarios depict commercialization of religion (church) as a violation of religious ethics.

The Contemporary Church and the Pandemic: The Nigerian Situation.

Having taken a histo-analysis of the pandemic – church (religion) commercialization as practiced by the ancient Israel, it is apposite at this juncture to discuss how church is being used as an instrument of exploitation in the contemporary Nigerian Christendom. However, discussion on that will follow after understanding the stand of the church on issues of economic pursuits and activities.

In his book 'Protestant Ethics and the spirit of capitalism', Max Weber (1936) provided the best-known discussion on the influence of religion on economic behavior. According to Weber the 'spirit' preaches hard work and this produced disciplined and rational pursuit of economic gain. It was believed that long before man was born, he was predestined to either salvation in heaven or damnation in hell. This brought about anxiety and to relieve such anxiety and resist temptation, man could only turn to self control and serious labour (Olawole,

2005). The church then believed that whether saved or condemned, the faithful must work hard for the glory of God. They saw hard work as a calling from God so as to establish His Kingdom on earth. To them the purpose of hard work was to glorify God and that they should not spend their wealth on worldly pleasures, instead they invested in the propagation of the gospel.

In Nigeria today, reverse is the case, our churches do not preach hard work; they preach prosperity. Deprived Christians have turned Christianity into a huge business franchise marred by mischief. They carry out this act through various ways and forms. A critical analysis of observation and literature on commercialization of religion indicates avalanche of strategies employed by the unethical gospel preachers in this unwholesome venture. Those strategies are reflected in their daily conduct and they include manipulation of the gospel, brainwashing, subtle threat/use of imprecation psalms, subversion of truth, unethical marketing and extortions, etc. (Olawole, 2005; Ogunkunle 2006; Achor 2010; Essien 2010).

The manipulation of the gospel is played out in several ways by prosperity-minded gospel preachers. For example, instead of preaching hard work, they have twisted and upturned the concept of miracle and tithe that literally mean 10% of one's income. They congregation is deceived to believe that once they give 10% their incomes will be doubled. They emphasize clichés like 'he who sows sparingly will reap sparingly', 'you cannot sow maize and reap yam', etc. (Olawole, 2005). To make sure naïve congregation yield to their selfish demand, they resorted to the use of imprecation as threat (Ogunkunle, 2000; Achor 2011). Divination is prevalent today, the preachers who practice this abhorred act predict the future, explain the present and uncover the past for their clients and collect exorbitant fees for the supposedly religious services rendered. The church is now seen as something vendable or a lucrative business venture.

Another strategy used by prosperity preachers is mounting of big programmes such as citywide crusades, during which special offerings are collected. To entice people to attend, big and attractive titles are used as themes for their supposed messages. Big posters are used to advertise and publicise their programmes. Churches today compete amongst each other with the sole aim of having or maintaining the greatest noise-share.

Again, some of them print newsletters with exaggerated news and stories mainly to solicit for money. Unfortunately neither Jesus Christ nor any of his apostles used this method in their days (Ogunkunle 2006; <http://www.funkypastors.com>). Stories are rife of pastors who steal tithes, involved in money laundering, adultery, and material acquisition of wealth. It is common to see a founder of a ministry having fleet of expensive cars at the expense of development of the flock and society. According to Olawole (2005) "some churches have gone to the extent of becoming stockbrokers forcing their flocks to invest in companies where their shepherd has equity interests. We now see vigorous advertisements of crusades, revivals and various carnivals, people are deceived into buying holy water, miracle oil, miracle candle, magical handkerchiefs, blessed pen and pencils (Abeguniru 2001; Olawole 2005; Asaju 1994).

Miracle healings have become the 'real thing' or the most current issue in African Christianity today. In some of these miracle healings, magical powers are combined with Christian faith. Very many of the so-called miracles today are mere fabrications intended to attract crowds and make money. (Abegunrin, 2006; Adewolo, 2006). The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) described majority of the so-called miracles as baits to lure people to various churches. (NBC, 2006).

Given the spate of unwholesome church practices by some church leaders, the church has been described as 'cash cow' and the establishment of churches today is considered to be one of the quickest ways to amass wealth (Tonye 2005; Adewolo 2010). The real purpose of the church, which is evangelization or soul winning as documented in Mathew (28:19) has been jettisoned or at most paid lip service to.

Causes of Church Commercialization

As noted earlier, the main cause of commercialization of church in Nigeria is poverty (Jemriye, 1998; Asaju 1988, Ogunkunle, 2006; Essien, 2010). Poverty is described as lack of opportunity to develop one's abilities and to control one's own life because of economic deprivation. Some factors have contributed to poverty in Nigeria. These include over population, inadequate health care, illiteracy, ethnic strife and corruption (Kunhiyop, 1990).

Unemployment is also a major contributing factor to the commercialization of churches in Nigeria. Due to long search for gainful employment, many frustrated people resorted to pastoral work without genuinely being called by God. Their taking to pastoral duties serves as means of livelihood. Some of them that possess oratory and communication skills open ministries which later metamorphosed into full churches. This situation has led to proliferation of churches, which apparently fan the embers of church commercialization. Today, Nigeria is known to have the highest number of churches per capital in the world (Jemiriye, 1998). Unfortunately, the emergence of these autonomous churches has not really solved various social evils bedeviling Nigeria.

Conditions of some churches have made some ministers of God to take to commercialization of church. Some of them are poorly paid, so they use various gimmicks to earn more money.

Public Relations: A Conceptual Framework

Having offered insights on various aspects of church commercialization, it is now appropriate to conceptualize and/or define public relations so as to understand its meaning and position on church commercialization.

There are many definitions of public relations as there are many definers. There are nonsensical, commonsensical and as well as technical/professional definitions (Nwosu, 1997). Our interest here is not on the first two definitions paradigm because they are more or less derogatory and commonsense-based conceptualizations that negate the core and managerial purposes of modern public relations practice. This study adopts the professional cum technical definitions, which are research-based and offered by professionals with versed experiences spanning many years of professional practice. A number of these definitions exist but we adopt three for clarity purpose and for avoidance of definitional dilemma.

Edward Barneys who is universally regarded as grandfather of public relations described public relations as “information given to the public, persuasion directed at the public to modify attitudes, actions, and effort to integrate attitudes and actions of institution with its publics (Barneys, 1961). Based on this pioneering definition, Black (1990) described public relations as the art and science of achieving harmony with the environment through mutual understanding based on truth and full information. The third definition that follows is all encompassing and address core functions of public relations.

Stripped of all technicalities, public relations is that function of management that utilizes series of well-researched, planned, systematic and sustained actions and communication to build and sustain mutual understanding, mutual respect, mutual acceptance, mutual recognition and lasting relationships or partnership between any organized group or corporate entity (e.g. a church, a government) etc and its internal as well as external stakeholders or publics (Nwosu, 2003). Modern PR emphasizes solid image and reputation building and sustenance based on truth, solid performance or actions that are well-communicated.

Public relations permeates every sphere of human endeavour because of its crucial role in cementing and sustaining understanding. Therefore, public relations applies in businesses and non-business organizations, etc., such as manufacturing and service company, Army, Police force, churches and charity organizations. Its functions in these organizations are to ensure mutual understanding based on two-way symmetric communication that is backed by truth.

Public Relations Philosophy: Ethical Dilemma and Challenges of Commercialization of Churches

The common denominator in all the preceding conceptualizations of public relations is mutuality in terms of understanding, respect, acceptance, recognition and partnerships between an organization and its many stakeholders (publics). However, an organization or institution can only achieve or pursue this lasting mutuality principle when its actions, policies, etc. are founded on truth and backed by two-way communication and information flow.

Based on this premise, public relations in its truest sense is the practice of telling the truth with a group of people in order to ultimately secure a favorable response (Craig, 1977). The purpose of public relations is not to promote falsehood, deceitful actions or intentions as seen in some churches or other social and corporate organizations. In fact what public relations does is to promote causes that provide genuine answers to questions of the four-way test of the things we say or do: Is it the truth? Will it be beneficial to all? Will it create understanding and goodwill? Will it build a better society? These are key, but ethical questions that should agitate every discerning mind, for whatever one or organisation does determines his/ its acceptability or otherwise by the people.

The above questions are platforms upon which to dissect the ethical dilemma that underpin church commercialization and other unwholesome practices prevalent in the contemporary Nigerian Christendom. The ethical dilemma here denotes difficulty either in choosing or not the established moral norms of behavior expected of church leaders (i.e. Reverend Pastors, prophets, Evangelists, etc.) and so-called Christians. Viewed from public relations angle, ethical dilemma is premised on the empirical evidence that church leaders who apply ethical principles in their shepherding the flocks or taking decisions tend to attract greater respect (Gruning 1992). The critical values that are imperative for ethical practice include honesty, integrity, promise-keeping, fidelity and fairness. The values imply that to be ethically orientated is to maintain high standard moral integrity. It entails developing the attitude of mind to fathom the right from the wrong; the good from the bad; and the just from unjust (Josephson Institute 2003; Nwodu 2007: 87).

To better understand the import of this paper, we may ask: what is ethics? Merrill (1975) described ethics as “a normative science of conduct which stipulates guidelines, rules, principles and code that are designed to lead individual to make moral decisions”. The Church has ethical code or codes of ethics for the ordained (clergy) and the laity. These are found in the Decalogue, the apodictic Ten Commandments (Exodus 20: 1-20) and the covenant code, the causative laws which guide the relationship of man with his fellow being (Exodus 21-23). Apart from these Biblical ethical codes/ prescriptions, individual churches have written codes for their clergy. The question now is do the church leaders, gospel preachers adhere to these ethical

considerations in their daily conduct and an if yes, why is it that the church is bedeviled with commercialization intents and other unwholesome practices?

The Ethical Questions and their Implications

Four ethical questions are stated as platforms on which to examine the ethical dilemma that underpin church commercialization. Let briefly examine the ethical questions.

Is it the truth? This is one question the church and those who practice church commercialization must answer. What then is truth? There are many opinions as answers to this question, but James (1907) argues that “truth means agreement” as false implies disagreement” with reality. True ideas are those that we assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.

Arising from these descriptions of truth is that truth is the obvious, the certain, the worth and all of an object, event or phenomenon (Nwodu, 2007). In line with this submission, the question now is: church commercialization a true Christian or church practice? Are there scriptural interpretations supporting it or against it? In fact from the literature reviewed on commercialization of religion, the practice is abhorred and regarded as an aberration. A deviation from the tenet or church ethics cannot in any way promote truth. This departure from the truth has implications for public relation practice. Modern public relations emphasizes image and reputation management. Managing corporate and even personal image and reputation as a matter of fact requires that the church or an individual be properly positioned as a credible, reliable and trustworthy one. Public relations directed to church should build and sustain network of mutual understanding and respect between the church and its publics. Moreover, to achieve and sustain understanding requires that openness in virtually all its actions including its communication with the public. Openness in this context means standing on the part of the truth (Nwodu, 2007).

Will it benefit all? Will it create understanding and goodwill?

The practitioner of church commercialization needs to answer this question. Nwodu (2007) says such question is at the core of ethical dilemma. Church commercialization is an aberration and cannot be of benefit to the congregation or the society. It is only the practitioner who benefits from it through his use of deceit, lies and outright perversion of truth.

Creating understanding requires one party mutually agreeing with other party. Both parties must subscribe to the objects or terms of their relationships or transaction with each party supplying credible and truthful information that could cement such understanding. Promotion of understanding built on lies/deceit cannot last and therefore there will be no goodwill to rely on.

Will it build a better society?

When the church deviates from its ethics and ethos the society suffers its consequences. Church commercialization is like a pandemic; it cut across all churches, Para- religions bodies, and some other faith-based organizations, etc. Like pandemic more and more so-called ‘men of God’ are infected. A disease can never build a society rather it destroys it. The church has jettisoned its character building role due to greed, materialism and pursuit of mundane pleasures. With commercialization prevalent, a vicious circle of deceitful men of God, liars and fraudsters will be produced and the society is worse off.

Hypotheses Formulation

Base on the various aspects of literature reviewed, research questions in the introductory section coupled with empirical evidence on commercialization of church, certain hypotheses are formulated. The first hypothesis anchors on the heeding the purpose of the church, its tenets of sacredness, purity, holiness and admonition on commercialization of religion as found in several scriptures. And in the light of this, Craig (1977:10) states, “ public relations in its truest sense is the practice of telling and living the truth with a group of people(church) in order to ultimately secure a favourable response”. Thus, the first hypothesis is stated thus:

H1: Church commercialization runs counter to public relations tenet of truth telling.

Hypothesis 2

Modern public relations practice lays emphasis on image/reputation management. This is because everything an organization does define and shapes its corporate image. This reputation/ image is an amalgam of many variables, which when pursued in sincerity and honesty translated to favourable image/corporate reputation (Stuber, 1951; Craig 1977; Conrad 2008; Egwu, 2008). Thus it can be hypothesized as follows:

H2: Church commercialization is an aberration and dints the image/reputation of the institution of church

Hypothesis 3: Factors responsible for church commercialization in Nigeria

Available empirical evidence and literature on causes of commercialization of religion in Nigeria tilt towards economic conditions of the Gospel preachers and their inordinate quest for materialism (Ogunkunle, 2006; Kunhiyop 2001 Nebechukwu, 1990; Essein 2010; Ogidi, 1997; Jemiriye, 1997). To this end, how his affects

public relations practice in stemming the tide of this violation of religious ethics forms the basis of this hypothesis. Hence, it is hypothesized thus:

H3: Stemming the tide of church commercialization in Nigeria will be a herculean task for public relations professional as far as poverty level amongst Nigeria remains high.

Methodology

Given the nature of this study, survey research was used in the execution of the study. Survey research method was adopted because it allows the researcher to focus attention on representative samples denoted from the entire population. The population of the study includes: public relations executives of corporate and nongovernmental organizations and adherents of Christianity from different denomination of churches in Nigeria.

Samples studied were selected by means of purposive sampling technique. The choice of purposive sampling method was to ensure that only public relations executives of corporate/non-governmental organizations and Christian faithful of different denomination of churches studied were sampled. Specifically, secondary data sources like journals, books Bible, internet, etc were also utilized and gleanings from these sources help greatly in the review of literature.

A total of 600 copies of a questionnaire were distributed to the respondents with the help of three research assistants. The questionnaire is made of 18 questions aimed at eliciting information about the respondents' demography and their responses to the research questions. The questionnaire contained open-ended and closed-ended questions. The study area included the five capitals of the five eastern states (Awka, Umuahia, Enugu, Abakaliki and Owerri). 120 respondents were sampled from each of the states capitals which give a total of 600 respondents. Opinions of clerics serving under different church or Christian denomination were sought on church commercialization. Their views were analyzed as shown in the results section of the study; their views too helped in framing the questionnaire. The study was limited to South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria largely due to influx of all manner of orthodox and independent churches. Also the south east was chosen as study area for proper coordination. Descriptive statistics such as percentages, frequency tables and mean. Further analysis was done using five-point Likert scaling. The five point Likert scale was to show the respondents feelings or perceptions on the research questions. The data collected and collated was analyzed using the mean.

Data Analysis and Results

600 copies of questionnaires were distributed to the respondents, of these copies only 566 were correctly filled and returned which accounts for 94.3%; 34 questionnaires were not returned which accounts for 5.6% mortality rate. The high return rate was due to the fact that the researcher and the assistants administered the questionnaires face to face to the respondents.

The analysis of the demographic data of the respondents shows that only 304 (53.7%) were male while 262 (46.2%) were female. The lowest educational qualification of the respondents is National Diploma (ND) i.e. 51 (9%) respondents. 270 (47.7%) respondents are Degree Holders or its equivalent while a total of 200 respondents representing 35.3% holds second degree while 45 respondents representing 7.9% of the total respondents hold their doctoral degrees. Further analysis of the demographic data of the respondents shows that 156 (27.6%) respondents are Anglicans; 167 (29.5%) are Catholics; 128 (22.6%) are protestants while 115 (20.3%) are members of Pentecostal churches. Questions 5, 6, 7 were not analyzed because they were used specifically as test questions. All the respondents-- 566 (100%) are quite aware of church commercialization and its various forms. They also agree that church commercialization is a deviation from church ethics. Analysis of the data that address the issues in the research questions are presented below.

Table 4.1: Respondents' opinion on church commercialization running counter to public relations' philosophy and promotion of truth telling.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	383	67.5
No	91	16.1
I can't say	92	16.3
Total	566	100

Source: Field Survey, 2011

Table 4.1 reveals the opinions of the respondents on whether church commercialization run counter to public relations philosophy and promotion of truth telling. Majority of the respondents (383) representing 67.5 percent answered in the affirmative, 91(16.1%) answered in the negative while 92 respondents accounting for 16.3 percent of the respondents were neither here nor there.

Table 4.2 church commercialization dint/bash the image/reputation of the institution of the church/Christendom

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	404	71.4
No	74	13
I can't say	88	15.5
Total	566	100

Source: Field Survey, 2011

Table 4.2 above sought to know the opinions of the respondents on whether the practices of church commercialization dint/bash the image of the church and the entire Christendom.

It can be deduced from the table that a higher percentage (71.4%) or (404) of the respondents answered in the affirmative that church commercialization dints the image of the church and the Christendom. Only 74 (13%) answered in the negative while 88 respondents accounting for 15.5% had no opinion.

Table 4.3: Aspects of church commercialization in conflict with public relations tenets.

Response	Frequency	Percentage
(i) Deceit	68	12
(ii) Manipulation of the gospel	15	2.7
(iii) Telling of lies/subversion of truth	82	14.5
(iv) All of the above	401	70.8
Total	566	100

Source: Field Survey, 2011

It can be deduced from the table 4.3 that 401 (70.8%) out of 566 respondents identified deceit, manipulation of the gospel, telling lies/subversion of truth as aspects of church commercialization practices that are in conflict with public relations tenets. 68(12%) agreed that deceit which is weapon used by practitioners of church commercialization practices that are in conflict with public relations tenets. 68(12%) agreed that deceit which is weapon used by practitioners of church commercialization is in conflict with public relations tenets. 15 (2.7%) said manipulation of the gospel is in conflict with public relations tenets, while 82 (14.5%) respondents agreed that telling lies/subversion of truth is in conflict with public relations principle and philosophy.

Table 4.4: Kind/Description of image church commercialization has given to the church

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Good/favourable image	28	4.9
Bad/unfavourable image	384	67.8
Neutral	154	27.2
Total	566	100

Source: Field Survey, 2011

Table 4.4 above presents the kind/description of image church commercialization attracts to the church. Three options were given: two are descriptions used to denote kind of image in public relations practice. The other option is neutral disposition of the respondent. It can be seen from the table 4.4 that 28 (4.9%) respondents believed that church commercialization has attracted good/favourable image for the church while 384 respondents representing 67.8% believed that the act of church commercialization has attracted bad/unfavourable image for the church. Unfortunately, 154 respondents accounting for 27.2% of the total respondents sampled neither agreed on good or bad image.

Table 4.5: Cause(s) of church commercialization

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
(i) Poverty/poor economic conditions	302	53.3
(ii) Inordinate quest to amass wealth	100	17.6
(iii) Greed amongst Gospel Preachers	100	17.6
(iv) All of the above	64	11.3
Total	566	100

Source: Field Survey, 2011

Table 4.5 reveals the causes of church commercialization. 302 respondents out of 566, representing 53.3% believed that poverty/poor economic conditions are the main cause of church commercialization. 100 (17.6%) believed that inordinate quest to amass wealth make people to indulge into church commercialization. 100 (17.6%) also believed that greed amongst gospel preachers leads to church commercialization. Only 64 (11.3%) out of the 566 respondents believed that all the listed factors cause church commercialization.

Table 4.6: Factors/cause(s) that pose a herculean task for PR professional in curtailing the spate of the phenomenon.

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
(i) Poverty/poor economic conditions	393	69.4
(ii) Inordinate quest to amass wealth	97	17.1
(iii) Greed amongst Gospel Preachers	46	8.1
(iv) All of the above	30	5.3
(v) No of the above	-	-
Total	566	100

Source: Field Survey, 2011

Table 4.6 above reveals that among the causes of church commercialization, poverty/poor economic conditions will pose a problem to public relations professionals in their attempt to stem the tide. Hence, 393 respondents accounting for 69.4 percent choose poverty/poor economic conditions. 97(17.1%) choose inordinate quest to amass wealth, 46(8.1%) choose greed amongst gospel preachers, while 30 (5.3%) of the respondents choose all the causes as factors that will pose a problem to public relations professionals in their efforts in stemming the tide of church commercialization.

Findings /Discussion of results

Some illuminating results have emerged. These are summarized as follows:

1. Significant number of respondents attested to the fact that church commercialization runs counter to public relations philosophy and promotion of truth telling. Hence 67.5% of the total respondents answered in the affirmative when asked the questions. The import of this finding to the church is that church commercialization is also a deviation from church's sacredness, pure and holiness.
2. Church commercialization dints/bash the image/reputation of the institution of the church/Christendom. Majority of the respondents sampled, that is 404 or 71.4% answered in the affirmative when asked question relating to church image.
3. Practitioners of church commercialization adopt deceit, manipulation/twisting of the gospel and telling of lies/subversion of truth; these strategies are in conflict with public relations tenets. 401 (70.8%) of the respondents admitted the above assertion/premise.
4. Significant number of the respondents (384 or 67.8%) admitted that church commercialization attracts bad or unfavourable image to the institution of the church. The import of this image description to public relation practice is that bad image is equivalent to black image. The black image refers to or depicts organizations that are known for negative practices, shady deals, etc. These organizations have no room for ethics; they lack human touch and work towards the realization of their often dubious goal at all cost. To them, the end justifies means, and any step taken towards goal accomplishment is unquestioningly welcome (Odigbo, 2007).
5. To stem the tide of church commercialization in Nigeria will be a herculean task to public relations professionals as far as the poverty level among Nigerians is high. Apart from poverty/poor economic conditions, inordinate quest/desire to amass wealth, greed amongst gospel preachers and deprived Christians are also causes of church commercialization in Nigeria. This corroborates the work of Ogunkunle (2006).

Implications and Conclusion

Church commercialization is deviation from ethical code of the institution of church. And since this deviation portend deceitful practices or twisting of the scriptures, etc. for economic gains; the church is faced with image/reputation problems. Image here refers to the overall reputation of an organization as determined by the various pictures, impression, knowledge, information and perceptions that the publics of that organization have of it (Nwosu 1996), while reputation refers to a good image, character, identity; a good name; respectability; honour, superiority, majesty and grandeur (Egwu, 2007).

The implication here is that church commercialization runs counter to church's tenets of sacredness, pure, holiness and Jesus admonition of 'freely you have received, freely you must give' and cannot be promoted through public relations practice. Public relations cannot be used to promote unethical behaviours because public relations is founded in truth telling. Arising from this fact too, is implication of abandonment of ethics of duty by gospel preachers. The point here is that inadequate consideration is paid to the moral obligations like 'truth telling or promise-keeping by those people who trade the gospel in exchange for money and other material gain. Public relations practitioner hired to promote churches or 'men of God' that indulge in the act of church commercialization must sincerely answer the ethical questions of the things we do or say. This is because the practice of public relations is guided by ethical code, and practitioners must subscribe to the code of conduct. Ethical code or codes of ethics of any profession by implication determine to a large extent, the right or wrong

actions, conducts or behaviours which practitioners should put up or Jettison as the case may be in the practice of their profession (Nwodu, 2006:134). However, “the import of this to public relations practice and promoters of God’s work is that the practitioners as facilitators of social communications need to be morally guided as well as conducting their official duties in a highly credible manner that would promote common good conscience and serve public interest (Nwodu, 2007).

Finally, church commercialization is an aberration and dints the image/reputation of the institution of church. And stemming the tide in Nigeria will continue to be a herculean task for public relations professionals as far as the poverty level among Nigerians are high. Public relations role as far as curbing the act of commercialization of the church is to manage the issues arising from this aberrant behaviour; and to make sure the church image is restored to its original form-sacredness, purity and holiness. This original image is an amalgam of many variables, which when pursued in sincerity and honesty translates to favourable image/corporate reputation (Stuber, 1951, Craig 1977; Conrad 2008; Egwu, 2008).

The era of falsehood and negative propaganda has gone, so church leaders, church workers and indeed public relations practitioners should embrace the practice of two-way symmetric model of communications that are nurtured in the truth, mutual understanding and transparency, if they must win public confidence.

Recommendations

Based on what is discussed so far, the following recommendations are made:

1. The church leaders (clergy, prophets, etc) should see themselves as the mirror through which the congregation or the immediate society sees the church. They are like front office staff of organizations and chief public relations executive of their respective churches. So whatever they do in the name of promoting God’s work has their moral, ethical and image considerations/implications.
2. To stem the tide of church commercialization, there must be moral and ethical re-orientation for both old and new ministries of God. The ethical behavior of ministers of God must be in consonance with established conventions and church ethics. As professionals in their calling, ministers of God must maintain high standard of professionalism. Professionalism must include a moral philosophy that governs behaviour in a formal and systematic way leaving no room for ambiguity or confusion, and that focuses on fairness, honesty, integrity, safety and authenticity as well as moral and legal propriety (Achor, 2000; Keghtu, 2002).
3. There should be public relations training on image/reputation management for church leaders, church workers and other stakeholders in the ministry of Jesus Christ.
4. The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations in conjunction with the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should design behavior change communication (BCC) strategies that will help to dissuade Christians from commercializing the services of the church and to promote the original ideals of Christianity.

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