

**CROSSING THE NIGER
AN ECUMENICAL OPTION FOR THE POST-REFORMATION
MISSION CONFLICT IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

In carrying the Gospel to mission lands, the missionaries equally carried with them the division that came out of the 16th century Reformation. Both the Gospel and the division were planted in these mission territories with detrimental effects till date. In the light of this problem, this article discusses Christian division in South-eastern Nigeria, otherwise known as the Lower Niger Region. In other words, it traces the division from the period of the missionary enterprise in the Lower Niger and links the division to the bitter consequences of the Reformation. The article however seeks an ecumenical option as a remedy to the situation today and thus argues that the ecumenical key to resolving the division can only be located within the traditional African structure of community rather than in the doctrinal discussions that often take the centre stage in contemporary ecumenical dialogue. In offering this ecumenical solution, it is suggested that the starting point of dialogue should be the question of African identity.

Introduction

The Lower Niger represents the modern region below the confluence town of Lokoja², spanning from Onitsha down to the Niger-Delta in a region that is today known as the South-South. The missionary territory designated as the Lower Niger Prefecture includes the present Onitsha, Owerri and Calabar provinces, and covers the present South-East (Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia) and South-South (Delta, Rivers, Cross River, Bayelsa and Akwa-Ibom) geo-political regions of Nigeria.

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² Reuben K. Udo, *Geographical Regions of Nigeria* (California: University of California Press, 1970), 46. The Lower Niger region extends for about 185 miles in the South towards the town of Aboh, commonly seen as the apex of the Niger Delta.

This domain constitutes the geographical centre of Igboland within which Christianity was overwhelmingly received in Nigeria, which till today remains dominantly a Christian region. However, the reception of Christianity in Igboland was not without difficulties, since the different missionary bodies in the area came with the conflicts that characterized the post Reformation Christianity. The ripples continue till today.

This study examines how the Reformation-borne rivalries and acrimonies were embodied in the Lower Niger mission. This problem, which has continued to play itself out in the Nigerian Christian communities today, makes a sincere and radical ecumenism necessary. In this study therefore, I shall examine (a) the seeds of denominational discord which came at the heels of the Reformation; (b) the breeding of this antagonism among missionaries in the Lower Niger; (c) concrete historical instances of the denominational rivalry; (d) the current state of rivalry among churches; and finally (e) an appeal to an ecumenical platform as a solution to these conflicts among Christians with some recommendations. These recommendations will focus on the potential of the uniquely African culture and identity as a way of reversing the seed of Christian discord among the churches in Nigeria.

Reformation: the Seed of Denominational Discord

Luther's condemnation of the "sale" of indulgences and his teachings on repentance, grace, Eucharist and justification, gradually emerged as a new authority within Christianity and, as a result, brought the Pope's authority into serious dispute. The fiery preacher of indulgence, Johan Tetzel and the Catholic professor Johan Eck provided a counter debate to Luther's. Luther later had to denounce papal authority and even identified the pope with the Pauline antichrist (2 Thess 2:8).³ More so, the entire controversy led to the definitive break away from the Roman Church and to the founding of the Protestant movement. With Luther's refusal to

³ Luther addressed his perception of the papal corruption of the Christian faith in most of his treatises especially in: *Address to the Christian Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*; and *The Freedom of a Christian*.

recant at the Diet of Worms⁴ and the burning of the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* on October 11, 1520, which led to his formal excommunication on January 3, 1521, the Reformation was born.

The Roman Catholic Church had, in response to the controversies, reacted with an institutional renewal initiated by Pope John III which found its high-point in the Tridentine reforms. However, before the conclusion of the Council of Trent, which was marred by myriads of crises, the Catholic-Protestant relationship had already ruptured. In fact, division and outright animosity became the norm. Carter Lindberg throws more light to the crises:

The Dutch broadside depicts 16 Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Beza, Bucer, Bullinger, Vermigli, Knox, Jerome of Prague, Zwingli, Hus, Wyclif, Zanchi, Perkins, Flacius, and Oecolampadius) crowded around a table with a group portrait of six others (George of Anhalt, John à Laski, Farel, Sleidan, Marnix, and Junius) on the wall behind them. This harmonious union of Reformers, including their “fore-runners,” Wyclif and Hus, are presented in a kind of Last Supper scene. In the place of Christ is Luther, with a bible open upon the table, flanked by Calvin, also pointing to a book (bible?). Opposite them, in the place of Judas, are a cardinal, a devil, the pope, and a monk, who represent the fourfold form of Catholic false faith. There is a blazing candle in the center of the table, also set upon the bible, that signifies the truth of divine light brought into the open by the Reformers. The Catholic opponents are depicted as servants of darkness who are attempting in vain to blow out the candle.⁵

⁴ In April 1520, Luther presented himself before Emperor Charles V and the nobles of the German nation and there he refused to recant the content of his writings, appealing to Scripture and to his conscience. It was on this event that Melancthon, his biographer records the famous statement “Here I stand! I can do no other!” “God help me. *Amen.*” See: Michael A. Mullett, *Martin Luther* (London: Routledge, 2004), 120-128.

⁵ Carter Lindberg, “Introduction” in Carter Lindberg (ed.), *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 5.

The above illustration by the Protestants drew a line, which not only depicted the divergent positions, but also evoked a moral judgment of the contrast between the good and the evil. Such a triumphalist presentation of the Reformation has a way of ignoring the Catholic Reform.⁶ In the same vein, any attempt by the Catholics to dismiss the truths in the Reformation would end in a perduring and unabated antagonism against the Protestants. The historical events of the time present us with both sides of this bitterness. Little wonder then that when the oil of fraternal accommodation had dried up in the Lower Niger mission field (with the reality of competitiveness), the missionaries had little to serve one another other than a bowl of antagonism.

However, we must admit the risk involved in addressing the conflict that involved many churches from a single historical background. For instance, one cannot ignore the fact that Anglicanism had a slightly different relationship to Luther's Reformation. It is clear that the 16th century Anglican antagonism towards the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Methodists (Puritans) did not arise primarily from Luther's agitation. Nevertheless, all these conflicts played out in the Lower Niger mission field. Associating the different Protestant missionary churches that operated in the Lower Niger (whether Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Qua Iboe, etc.) with the 16th Century Reformation, remains thus a matter of convenience since, in one way or the other, most of the Protestant missionaries could be linked to the Reformation event.

The results of the 16th Century Reformation were not restricted to Europe. Much theological discourse continues to invoke its import. As Bernd Moeller puts it, "We need the spiritual and intellectual energies that the Reformation has to offer. Moreover, the Christian life, the church, and contemporary theology have so many ties to the Reformation that for our own self-knowledge we should always be aware of this relationship, and should continually examine it and test its relevancy for today."⁷ It is thus no surprise that the Reformation (and its effects)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bernd Moeller, "Problems of Reformation Research" in Bernd Moeller (ed.), *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, trans. H.C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1982), 16. Francis Higman equally argues that one of the valuable contributions of church history is that it enables a better understanding of the society in contemporary

became the grounds for ecclesial conflicts in mission territories. Nigerian Church historian, Ogbu Kalu, reminds us that during the nineteenth century Christian missions in most parts of Africa “the theological and doctrinal voices were decidedly plural and the various missionary groups came into Africa with a strong feeling of intolerant rivalry and mutual suspicion carried over from the reformation event.”⁸ The attitude of the missionaries reflected the carry-over of the bitter wars that followed the Reformation with all the doctrinal as well as political connotations.

The Missionary Battleground: Setting the Stage

The Lower Niger region started experiencing missionary activities over three centuries after the tumultuous events of the Protestant Reformation. By 1846, the Presbyterian Church had already consolidated their base in Calabar with networks in other towns like Arochukwu, Ohafia, Uburu, Abiriba and other Igbo towns close to the Cross River. Coming from the present South-South region, they made no further incursions into the hinterlands due to territorial agreements with other Protestant churches.⁹ Meanwhile the Church Missionary Society (CMS-Anglican) missionaries entered Onitsha on 26 July 1857, led by Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Christopher J. Taylor. They were cordially received by the indigenes with whom they signed pacts for the establishment of missions. The Catholic missionary team was late in arriving to this part of the world: Fr. Joseph

times. Francis Higman, *Lire et Découvrir. La circulation des idées au temps de la Réforme* (Geneva: Droz, 1998), 14.

⁸ Ogbu Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: Africa World Press, 2007), 225.

⁹ The reason for the agreed territorial delimitations was to avoid conflicts. Those involved in this arrangement include: the Church Missionary Society, CMS (Anglican), the Niger Delta Pastorate, NDP (Anglican), the United Free Church of Scotland, the Quae Iboe Mission (Protestant/non-denominational) and the Primitive Methodist Missions. Cf. Edet A. Udo, “The Missionary Scramble for Spheres of Influence in South-eastern Nigeria 1900-1952” in Ogbu U. Kalu (ed.), *The History of Christianity in West Africa* (London: Longmans, 1982), 160.

Lutz, Fr. Johan Horne, Brother Hermas and Brother Jean-Gotte arrived in Onitsha in 1885.¹⁰

Despite the late arrival, the Catholic missionaries soon advanced in the field. Before them, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, dominated most missionary activity. Initially these Protestant groups received them with charity.¹¹ But it did not last long. Friendly relations began to dissolve as soon as Catholic missionaries began to record success. Edwin Udoeye observes: “the Christianity brought by the various Christian Churches from Europe and America to Igboland and to Nigeria in general bore the divisive and cicatrices of the missionary fractionalizations, frictionalizations and rivalry from the missionary fatherlands.”¹² Indeed, division and intolerance which resulted from the Reformation seemed to be happening all over again as the missionaries quarrelled amongst themselves, with each group seeking for relevance and converts.

One can therefore speak of the transregional and trans-historical effects of the Reformation, transposed through these missionaries to Nigeria. Despite taking place in sixteenth century Europe, the Reformation, in a way, flowed into the Lower Niger through the missionaries of the different Christian denominations. Kalu again reminds us, “even though the actual event seemed to be in the dim past, its effects, its echoes, the religious structures and cleavages it unleashed were abroad and seeking firmer consolidation. The fragmentation of the one church by the reformation events had continued unabated along national lines, along cultural lines, and along linguistic lines. The reformation gave various

¹⁰ Celestine Adizue Obi, “Background to the Planting of Catholic Christianity in the Lower Niger,” 1-26 in Celestine A. Obi et al, *A Hundred Years of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria: 1885-1985* (Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers, 1985), 13; see also Felix K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 73.

¹¹ According to Chigere, “The Catholics nonetheless enjoyed initially the cordiality and mutual coexistence with the other non-Catholic Christian denominations, especially the CMS with whom they shared even land, roof and are supposed to have reciprocally exchanged ideas and feelings about evangelism in the areas.” Nkem Hyginus M. V. Chigere, *Foreign Missionary Background and Indigenous Evangelization in Igboland* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2001), 212.

¹² Edwin Anaegboka Udoeye, *Resolving the Prevailing Conflicts between Christianity and African (Igbo) Traditional Religion through Inculturation* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011), 212.

groups that resented the authority of Rome the opportunity to seek their freedom and hoist their own religious flags.”¹³ Much as it is not purely an attack on the authority of Rome, one could argue that with the disintegration of Latin Christianity, disunity, and concomitantly, ecclesial rivalry became a norm. At that time the Ecumenical Movement was yet to kick off and so there was almost nothing to hold unto as a robust platform to seek Christian unity.

Indeed, disunity in the mission field was one of the reasons behind the massive mobilization of Christians for the ecumenical movement, of which the Edinburg Conference of 1910 was an acute expression. This conference collated into focus the mission-oriented ecumenical efforts of the nineteenth century. Its purpose was “to help coordinate the activities of the national missionary organizations of the different countries and to unite Christian forces of the world in seeking justice in international and inter-racial relations.”¹⁴ Serving a more globalized attempt, it called for unity in missionary activity and common fellowship among Christians.

Throughout the history of promoting Christianity in the multireligious and nonreligious world, the International Missionary Conference has acknowledged the variety and complexity of beliefs of its constituent members. It has not insisted upon a single doctrinal statement but has emphasized the need for Christian fellowship and united action. Thus, it became a key element in the development of the ecumenical spirit among the main branches of the non-Roman Catholic churches. Among its many publications that advocated fellowship and cooperation in missions the most important is the quarterly journal, *International Review of Mission*.¹⁵

¹³ Kalu, *African Christianity*, 223.

¹⁴ Ans Joachim van der Bent, *Historical Dictionary of Ecumenical Christianity* (Mctuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1994) 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 205-6. It must be recalled that the journal, *International Review of Missions* was launched in 1912 and immediately it became an effective and efficient platform for ecumenical reflections on the Christian propagation of the mission of Christ in the world. Cf. Nicholas Lossky et al (eds.), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 690.

It is plain that the Roman Catholic Church is excluded from their notion of “Christian fellowship.” While propagating open dialogue in and engaging in publications, this effort already gives us a glimpse of the state of the mission field amongst the Protestant missionary groups who warred against each other. It is no wonder, then, that when Catholic missionaries entered the scene in the Lower Niger, they were seen as a common enemy. But how, precisely, did this happen? We turn now to examining concrete instances of the conflicts.

Initial Denominational Conflicts in the Lower Niger Mission

Catholic Antagonism

Denominational conflicts can be seen through the lens of competing missionary strategies. The Catholic missionary expedition in the lower Niger, the Onitsha Wharf mission, quickly made some remarkable inroads. In 1891 Chief Idigo of Aguleri converted and later became the head of the St. Joseph Christian village, Aguleri. Idigo’s conversion had a huge effect on the Catholic mission in Aguleri, such that by the end of 1900, over sixty-five families in Aguleri had been converted. Despite the success recorded in Idigo’s conversion, Catholic evangelism in the Lower Niger up until 1900 went on a snail speed.

The missionaries seemed to have designed their conversion strategies in a manner that reflects the policy of “*cuis regio eius religio*”¹⁶ which focuses on converting prominent leaders of communities as the first task. One of the most successful of such conversions was the conversion of Samuel, the Obi of Onitsha. Fr. Alexandre Léon Lejeune, the new Superior of the ‘Holy Ghost Fathers’ and the successor of Lutz, in a letter to Msgr. Alexandre Le Roy expressed excitement over the attitude of the new convert and its significance for the mission.

¹⁶ This formula was developed after the mid-seventeenth century religious wars in Europe, at the Peace Treaty of Augsburg 1555. According to this principle, “the sovereignty of a territory determined the religion of its population”. Cf. Reinhard Henkel, “Germany: Recent Changes on the Religious Map,” 59-74, In *The Changing Religious Landscape of Europe*, edited by Hans Knippenberg (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2005), 59.

According to him, Samuel “refuses to be treated as divine, he spurns homage uttering the words of the psalm, *non nobis Domine non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*. Monseigneur, I consider his conversion as the greatest possible victory that could be inflicted here over Protestantism and slavery.”¹⁷ The tone of this letter, which speaks of the Catholic attitude at the time, reveals their viciously competitive relationship with the Protestant counterpart. The letter speaks of “inflicting” victory on Protestantism, and compares it to the victory over “slavery”, thus depicting the Catholic offensive. A similar message was equally sent to Cardinal Ledochowzki by Fr. Lejeune.¹⁸ Pope Leo XIII was informed of this progress. He soon had a medal struck for Samuel, the Obi of Onitsha, with the inscription ‘*et Niger agnovit Pastorem.*’ He sent a statue of the Blessed Virgin, and admonished that Samuel’s duty is to help in obtaining freedom for the slaves, and to preach the gospel to them afterwards.¹⁹

Anglicanism and the Eucharist

As intended, the conversion of the chiefs had a positive ripple effect. With the conversion of Idigo and Samuel, others followed, such as the Anglican deacon Ephrem, an heir to the throne of Onitsha. It was alleged that Ephrem claimed to have entered the ‘true’ church in the aftermath of a dispute on the proper understanding of the Eucharist with the CMS pastors. According to Clarke, “doubts in the Protestant camp about the doctrine of the Eucharist seemed to have been widespread.”²⁰ It seemed that a kind of reverse-Reformation was taking place: the presence of Catholic praxis and doctrine caused others to reflect upon their own theology.

¹⁷ Quoted by Peter Bernard Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology of the Holy Ghost Fathers in Eastern Nigeria 1885-1905” in Ogbu U. Kalu (ed.), *The History of Christianity in West Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), 47.

¹⁸ C. S. Sp. Archives, Paris (30 Rue Lhomond), Boîte 192, Dossier B, Vol. II; Lejeune to Ledochowzki, 15 November 1900 quoted by Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 47.

¹⁹ C. S. Sp. Archives, Boîte 193, Dossier B, Vol. I; Ledochowzki to Lejeune, 15 February, 1901.

²⁰ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 47-8.

The Irish Catholic scholar of Religion, Peter B. Clarke²¹ further reports that, “Jacob, an Anglican catechist, joined the Roman Catholic Church because he found the doctrine of transubstantiation both rational and in accordance with scripture.”²² This soon had some political bearings, and the event did create a negative perception of the Anglican theology of the Eucharist. On this account, it is reported that at “Ossamori an estimated seventy local people were instructed by the Anglican deacon and catechist, Akonbeza²³, to join the Roman Church. They did so and took over the Protestant church and school.”²⁴ This conquering of territories and mission areas already belonging to the Anglicans worsened the already battered relationship between the two groups.

Doctrinal Implications

From this lens, the methods of evangelization taken by the two denominations bear out the doctrinal conflicts of the Reformation. As Clarke puts it,

The Roman Church’s approach to evangelization was sacramental, it was the administration of the sacraments, a ministerial function, which was all important. The Protestant approach, and this difference was born at the time of the Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe, was fundamentally scriptural: the preaching and understanding of the ‘Word’ was all-important.²⁵

The methodological differences between the missionaries had consequences on the work of evangelization. The Protestant approach paved an easy way for the integration of the indigenes in evangelization,

²¹ Peter B. Clarke is an expert in Religion in Africa, where he spent some time in teaching and researching. He is also the founder of the prestigious Journal of Contemporary Religion.

²² Ibid., 48.

²³ “Akonbeza” is probably Clarke’s mistaken rendering of the Igbo name “Akubueze”.

²⁴ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 48.

²⁵ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 49.

while the Catholic missionaries accepted a late integration of indigenes into the missionary enterprise. Catholic missionaries adopted the use of laymen for catechetical works, but this use of the catechists did more harm than good. The catechists often suffused catechetical instructions with fragments of traditional practices and superstitious beliefs, and this was not received well by the missionaries. Perhaps the focus on the sacraments, as reported by Clarke, led the theologically unenlightened catechists into thinking that everything in the form of rituals is acceptable. Hence, there was a tendency to indulge in a syncretism of some sort. Indeed, the sacramental, ministerial approach with its performative character easily captured the attention of the locals. People were enthused by the priest as he ‘performs’ the Eucharist. However, with insufficient catechesis, the Catholic approach remains problematic since it does not provide sufficient reasons behind the *performances*.

On the other hand, the Protestant missionaries were contented with their lay apostles provided they were able to read out and proclaim the content of the Scriptures. In this period, the emphasis was on the Apocalypse and the message was ‘doom for the unconverted’.²⁶ The perception of the local people as pagans/heathens and the scramble for converts may have necessitated this sort of preaching. It must be noted that even in the CMS circles the practice of some sacraments (like Eucharist and baptism) was not the primary focus since the aspect of transubstantiation was not emphasized. The Protestant strategy of preaching really brought about the conversion of many indigenes, despite their quick condemnation of the unconverted.

As a result of the deficiencies of both methods, the missionaries had to further explore the use of other less theological methods of evangelization in their effort to win over the indigenes.²⁷ These included the establishment of schools, the building of hospitals and dispensaries, and various forms of humanitarian programs. Already, for other reasons such as the low literacy of catechists and the need for adequate representation of Roman Catholics within the Colonial government, Fr. Lejeune had started a strong educational approach to mission in the East.²⁸ Bishop Shanahan was later to build on this already existing

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kalu, *African Christianity*, 241.

²⁸ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 48-49.

educational policy when he took over leadership around 1905. With these schools, the missionaries found a key to a more integral conversion of the indigenes. In the first place, they had absolute control of the schools, and secondly, they targeted children as a sure way of safeguarding the future of their missionary efforts. In fact, as Kalu Ogbu puts it, in multiple ways, the school became “the locus classicus of missionary conversion efforts.”²⁹ The same could be said of hospitals where the potency of Western medicine was perceived by the indigenes as a sign of the missionaries’ ‘compassionate hearts’,³⁰ especially towards women who had many health challenges relating to child bearing. Yet, the missionary strategy of caring for the sick, though evangelically rooted, was also used as a conversion tool by the missionaries.³¹ Interestingly, even in these common methods, the rivalry among the missionaries persisted, though it was more pronounced in the school system.

Impulses to the Development of the Conflicts

The Protestant approach, which focused mainly on preaching, was fiercely criticized by the Catholic missionary, Fr. Lejeune, who already had become unpopular within the Catholic mission due to his highhandedness. His comments against the Protestants did not help his already despised persona, as the people’s displeasure with him culminated in the revolt of 1903 by 19 catechists at the Holy Trinity, Onitsha. Under the aegis of the laity, these catechists composed a letter of protest against Fr. Lejeune which they sent to Holy Ghost Society Headquarters in Paris. It was signed by 70 individuals who sought for Lejeune’s removal on grounds of his public distasteful attitude both

²⁹ Kalu, *African Christianity*, 242.

³⁰ Kalu, *African Christianity*, 243.

³¹ Felix K. Ekechi, “The Medical Factor in Christian Conversion in Africa: Observations from Southeastern Nigeria,” *Missiology: An International Review* 21, no. 3 (1993): 289-309. Ekechi explores how the missionaries used medical services as ‘bait’ for converts, and equally examined the rivalry between Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries through the provision of medical care.

towards the Catholic and Protestant brethren.³² In response to his Superiors, Lejeune dismissed the charges and blamed the whole ploy on the greed of the catechists who wanted an increase to their pay. By this time, it was clear that catechists were indispensable in establishing missionary posts in the villages, which spurred Lejeune to change his approach to missionary activity.

Lejeune's new attention towards establishing schools also helped in undermining the conflict with the catechists. It is important to note that,

The Roman Catholic method of evangelization through the schools has to be seen against the background of interdenominational rivalry. This rivalry in part occasioned and accelerated the growth of the school system of evangelization used by the Holy Ghost Society in its work in the East. The missionaries themselves were French and often showed grave concern and fear at the possible intervention of a non-Roman Catholic government in Roman Catholic schools. Things could go the same way as they did in France in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and one could be faced with the horrible problem of *école laïque*. The benevolent attitude of Sir Ralph Moor, however, dispelled this anxiety and the contest with the Protestants to gain the upper hand through the schools began.³³

Lejeune's move deepened the gulf between the Catholics and the Protestants, as expressed in the above letter with the language of "contest" and "upper hand". Everything was now seen from the perspective of 'a war.' It is important to note that at this point the focus, like many of the Reformation conflicts, concerned territorial boundaries just as much as theological boundaries. Indeed the successor of Lejeune, Fr. Joseph Shanahan, had in 1905 boldly claimed that he would use the

³² C. S. Sp. Archives, Boîte 193, Dossier A, Vol. II. A similar letter of protest was also written and signed by one 'Bernard O. Oyo' and sent independently of the collective letter. Part of the letter reads: "*since one year and a half the Christians are dropping their faith through the bad example of Mr. Lejeune who has no patience or courage ... who is that whip? We hope he will be sent away, he is not a 'Father' but a man who never has pity even unto a dog and who always thinks he is right in everything he does.*" Cf. C. S. Sp. Archives, Boîte 193, Dossier B, Vol. II.

³³ Clarke, "The Methods and Ideology," 51.

Catholic schools “to strike the last blow at the Presbyterians and others.”³⁴ His vision was to establish a Roman Catholic empire which would span from Itu River (in present day Cross River State) to Oguta Lake (in present day Imo State).³⁵

The Protestants were by no means asleep amidst all this. For instance, Bishop Herbert Tugwell reacted against the Catholic strategy to gain dominance through schools by imposing excommunications upon any Protestant that attended a Catholic school.³⁶ Bishop James Johnson, of the Anglican Communion, had to make urgent visits to Bende, Aba and the surrounding towns with the purpose of dissuading the people from welcoming the Roman Catholic schools.³⁷ It must be noted that this ‘James Johnson mission’ was not directed to the adherents of the Protestant denominations but to whole villages, most of whom had no ecclesial affiliations. His aim was to make the area immune to the Roman Catholic incursion, even if the said incursion brought about better welfare. Such a strategy, that was even ready to frustrate human development, poignantly illustrates the animosity felt on both sides.

Indeed, the conflicts divided Christianity all over again. The Methodists equally were not ready to surrender the Igbo territory to either the Roman Catholics or the Anglicans (CMS). They had before 1902 conquered the Cross River area while at the same time spreading towards the ‘Qua Iboe’ area. They bargained for territories in the heart of Igboland and were strongly opposed to Catholic school establishments in the Old Calabar region.³⁸ In fact, they made an appeal to the British colonial government in 1907 to forestall other denominations from entering the Ibibio, Annang and Efik areas, thereby claiming exclusive rights.³⁹

³⁴ C. S. Sp. Archives, Boîte 191, Dossier B, Vol. II; Shanahan to Le Roy, 5 December 1905.

³⁵ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 51.

³⁶ Rt. Rev. Herbert Tugwell, DD (1854-1936) was by 1894 made the Anglican Bishop of Western Equatorial Africa and later in 1919 installed as the inaugural Bishop on the Niger.

³⁷ CMS Archives, G3/A3/O, Report of a missionary journey into interior Iboland, 24 February – 8 April 1903.

³⁸ PMMS Methodist Archives, London, Bocock to Slater, 23 March 1903.

³⁹ Clarke, “The Methods and Ideology,” 52.

However, despite the disagreements which the Protestant missionaries had among themselves, they saw the Roman Catholics as the common enemy and so had to rally together to fight the Holy Ghost missionaries. A conference to this effect was held in 1907 in Calabar where the Protestant missionaries agreed to collaborate and co-operate with each other in the mission.⁴⁰ The Holy Ghost missionaries were resolved the more to pursue their school system of evangelization aggressively since they saw it as the only sure way to victory in the 'war.' With the school, they succeeded in dismantling Protestant dominance in the region.⁴¹

Present Rivalries and the Challenge of Ecumenical Dialogue

Elizabeth Isichei reports of a Nigerian Catholic priest who gave an account of his experience as a child in the wake of the 'mission war' between the Catholics and Protestants: "For all practical purposes the first article of our creed which was our first Commandment was: "Thou

⁴⁰ CMS Archives G3/A3/O, Minutes of the Missionary Conference, 7 – 9 November 1907.

⁴¹ Fr. Lejeune and Fr. Shanahan succeeded in "creating and maintaining a vast network of State-subsidized schools and, by doing so, acquired a dominant position among the Igbo that they were never to lose. In 1906, there were 2500 Catholics in the Onitsha-Owerri vicariate; by 1926, the number had risen to 58 thousand; it was 250 thousand by 1946." Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (London: SPCK, 1995), 271. Ejizu also records that "Before the Government take-over of Mission and Voluntary Agency Schools in Eastern Nigeria in 1970, out of a total of 5,986 Primary Schools, the Anglican Mission owned 930, the Baptist had 21, Lutheran Church 78, Methodist 279, Presbyterian Mission 225, Qua Iboe Mission 170, Salvation Army 37, Roman Catholic Mission 2,406, while the County Council and the government ran a total of 1,484 Primary Schools. The story is virtually the same in Western Nigeria and the central parts of the country, especially in Benue and Plateau areas." Cf. Christopher I. Ejizu, "Christian Evangelism in Nigeria: A Blueprint for the Future" in *Mission Studies*, Vol. 5, no.1 (1988): 32. See also, Eastern Nigeria Ministry of Education, *Directory of Elementary Schools 1964* (Enugu: Government Printers, 1965).

shalt hate 'paganism' and all that is connected with it, with thy whole heart, with thy whole mind, with thy whole soul and with thy whole strength." The second was like the first, "Thou shalt regard 'Protestants' as thy enemies."⁴² On the other hand, Protestants "did not mince words in describing the Catholics inter alia, as 'a masterpiece of Satan', the 'ancient Roman paganism rebaptised', a religion that panders to the weakness of humanity to the neglect of true Christian life."⁴³ Both sides condemned and preached against each other. This divide was passed down to later generations.

Part of the consequences of the rivalry and enmity, was the rise of African Independent Churches (AICs), also known as African Initiated/Indigenous Churches. These Christian communities arose as a result of different reasons which included sentiments of nationalism like in the case of Ethiopianism.⁴⁴ In general, AICs represent efforts to seek a

⁴² Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (Lagos: Macmillan, 1976), 170; see also, Hilary O. Ochulor, *The Function of Dialogue in the Process of Evangelisation*, (Owerri: Edu-Edy, 2006), 62.

⁴³ Ochulor, *The Function of Dialogue*, 63; Ikenga R. A. Ozigbo, *A Roman Catholicism in South Eastern Nigeria 1885-1931: A Study in Colonial Evangelism*, (Onitsha: Etukokwu Publishers, 1988), 90. Analyzing the 'divided' version of Christianity that we (Africans) got from the missionaries, Stan Anih comments: "The Christianity which was preached to us here in Igboland and Africa in general was already pregnant with both British culture – Anglicanism, and Irish culture – Catholicism. When the British and Irish domesticated Christianity was preached to Igboman and to African people we found ourselves instinctively participating in the historic cultural war between the British and the Irish, thus the Igbo Christians and indeed Africans in general found themselves in the very first century of their Christian history already acting as great captains and majors in the Britanico/Irish cultural war which of course is only cultural Christianity and not Christian Christianity." Stan Anih, *Christian Christianity versus Cultural Christianity: A Meditation* (Enugu: Snaap, 1982), 2-3; see also, Chuks Vitalis Azike, *Religious Pluralism in Nigeria and the Challenges of Contextual Ecumenism* (Paderborn: Theologischen Fakultät, 2001), 78.

⁴⁴ John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity: The Growth, Gifts and Diversities of Indigenous African Churches – A Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 22-23. It must be noted that the nationalistic sentiments evident in the emergence of some AICs may also have been driven by anti-colonial sentiments at that time. Cf. Kenneth Enang, *The Nigerian Catholics and the Independent Churches: A Call to*

unique African mode of Christian expression.⁴⁵ Evidently, the emergence of AICs reveal levels of discontent with what was going on in the missionary churches at that time, including divisions along cultural or nationalistic lines among the missionaries. This assessment confirms to a certain extent that the division within the mainline churches in Nigeria derives more directly from denominational missionary rivalries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries which was fuelled by the nationalism of the missionaries.

Today, the problem is further made complex with the explosive schisms, rivalries, inter and intra Christian bickering and politics. Christian denominations continue to grow daily within the erstwhile Lower Niger area, which remains predominantly Christian. All these require that ecumenical dialogue be taken seriously. In fact, several other trajectories of division have appeared that reflect the missionary divisions of the past, and they make the same clarion call for a serious ecumenical engagement.

First, are distinctive gestures of recognition. This is mainly found in the popular greetings adopted by different denominations in Igboland. For the Roman Catholics, it is “*Otito dīlī Jesu! – Na ndu ebebe. Amen*” (Praise be to Jesus! – Now and forever. Amen); for the Anglicans,

Authentic Faith (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2012), 32-33. British colonialists established themselves in Nigeria by subduing the locals and so colonialism was never accepted by the people. Since both the colonialists and missionaries were considered as coming from the same origin, the missionaries were often associated with the colonialists, even when their intentions might not be the same. Thus, the anti-colonial sentiments were also visited on the missionaries and contributed to reasons for the founding of the AICs. Enang’s conclusion was based on the investigations by R.C. Mitchell and H.W. Turner. See, R.C. Mitchell, “Religious Protest and Social Change: The Origins of the Aladura Movement in Western Nigeria,” 458-496 in Robert I. Rotberg and Ali A. Mazrui, eds., *Protest and Power in Black Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); H.W. Turner, *African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord (Aladura), I-II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). However, contrary to the reason offered by Mitchell and Turner, the Italian Ethnologists Vittorio Lanternari, traces the origin of the AICs to the rift between Christianity and indigenous African culture. Cf. Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religion of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Cults* (London: MacGibbon, 1963).

⁴⁵ Pobee and Ositelu II, *African Initiatives in Christianity*, 24.

“*Toonu Chineke anyị n’ihi na O dị mma! – N’ihi na ebere ya ga-adịgide ruo mgbe ebighị ebi.*” (Praise our God for He is good! – For His mercy endures forever).⁴⁶ To greet any person or a particular Christian community with the ‘religious vibe’ of another church is a clear indication that one is an outsider. While such identity markers are not wrong in themselves, one however observes that a problem of deep-seated repulsion of one another may arise where a person is booed or cajoled for using the wrong greeting in a particular community.

Second, is the problem of mixed marriages. Despite the canonical provisions concerning mixed marriages for Catholics⁴⁷, the reality is that such marriages still manifest clearly the depth of interdenominational bickering. In Igboland, mixed marriages are rarely celebrated. In most cases, the woman is compelled to follow the man to his church.⁴⁸ Until recently some parents even had to face punishments from the church for allowing their children to defect to other denominations for the sake of marriage. While the sanctions are no longer existent (to the knowledge of the writer), the problem continues for many parents who see their sons/daughters crossing over to the ‘enemy’ camp because of marriage.

Third, the denominational rivalry also plays itself out in the public political sphere. The denominations in the Southern part of Nigeria, which is predominantly Christian, always feel they have a great role to play in determining who wins an election, especially the gubernatorials. In some states in Igboland, elections are purely concerned with the battle between Catholics and Protestants. There is the classic case of the 2011 elections in Imo State, which saw the incumbent governor, Ikedi Ohakim (an Anglican), lose mainly on the grounds of

⁴⁶ Patrick E. Nmah, “Christianity and Antagonistic Challenges in Igbo Land of Nigeria: A Reflection” in *AFRREV IJAH (An International Journal of Arts and Humanities)*, Vol.1, no.3 (2012): 80.

⁴⁷ *Codex Iuris Canonici* outlines the canonical provisions in Canons 1124-1129.

⁴⁸ There are also instances where the woman, depending on how committed she is in her church, compels the man to wed in her church. In cases where the parents of either of the couple belong to the knighthood of their church (Catholic, Anglican, etc), or where they hold an influential position in the church (for example, the Chairperson of the parish council, the CMO/CFO, CWO presidents, etc), the problem is often more complex.

molesting a Catholic priest.⁴⁹ Another instance is Anambra State where a Catholic-Catholic gubernatorial ticket provoked denominational sentiments, and so needed to be balanced in the fashion of either Catholic-Anglican or Anglican-Catholic.

Fourth, the modern proselytizing strategies of the Pentecostal and mainline churches are yet another form of the battle for denominational territories in Igboland. Often, in order to entice people and win members, church programs are given attractive titles: Power Crusade, Holy Ghost Service, Cross-Over Night, Restoration Night, Atmosphere of Miracles, etc. Prosperity gospel is in vogue since people are besieged by economic and socio-political problems. Instead of focusing on the doctrinal teachings and practices which are peculiar to their specific Christian communities, most preachers spend time castigating other churches in a bid to win more adherents.⁵⁰ The above issues present serious challenges to ecumenical dialogue. Indeed, the situation today calls for an emergency review of ecumenical relationship among the churches.

Bridging the Gap with the Ecumenical Option

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Christian ecumenism has developed as a response to the division among Christians. According to Vatican II, Christian division “openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”⁵¹ Ecumenism in contrast represents efforts

⁴⁹ It would be so unfair to state categorically that he lost by virtue of being an Anglican in a State with a Catholic majority, but there were indications that Ohakim would have won the election if his arrogance had not involved the molestation of the priest. This singular action attracted the condemnation of many, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Besides, it is a general impression that the ex-governor was notorious for his arrogance and total disdain for the poor while in office.

⁵⁰ This situation is equally taken up in televangelism as Pentecostal pastors become today the greatest financiers of electronic media houses. Their programmes on the TV often end with such messages as: “Worship with us at ...”; “Join a Bible-believing church...”; “Join a living church...”, etc.

⁵¹ Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (21 November, 1964),

toward unity, and it follows the model of the inner Trinitarian life of unity (UR, 2). The Council Fathers describe this unity as a ‘sacred mystery’, which can only be achieved “in Christ and through Christ”, with the continual vivification of the Holy Spirit (UR, 2). However, at the heart of ecumenism is the goal of visible unity of the church, which does not do away with the diversity or plurality of Christian communities, as expressed in their liturgical, theological and spiritual traditions. And in taking diversity seriously, dialogue as the means of achieving the desired unity, involves mutual learning and understanding to overcome obstacles in the path to unity.

For one thing, telling our stories, seeking the sources and causes of our division, defining its excesses and counting its beauties help us to understand one another especially within the ecumenical context. The divides brought about by the Reformation and its discontents are thus not to be considered irresolvable. Indeed, many beautiful things came out of it. At least the churches in the West now live in relative peace, particularly after the 20th century programs of ecumenism. A re-conception of unity as not necessarily implying uniformism helps to avert such thoughts that ‘difference’ or division is all too negative an idea. With such understanding, churches learn how to co-exist with much tolerance and mutual recognition of one another. More still, dialogue as a better means of fulfilling the mandate of Christian unity is provided a favourable ground to thrive. In line with the above, Christians in the Lower Niger (Eastern Nigeria-Igbo land), as well as the different churches in Nigeria, can learn to embrace one another in mutual tolerance and recognition. Ecumenism presents before us the opportunity to re-discover the philosophy of ‘live-and-let-live’ which is typical of traditional Igbo (African) culture.

From a historical perspective, the 1903 revolt against the attitude of Fr. Lejeune, which was partly caused by his ‘un-ecumenical’ vituperations, showed that the traditional Igbo society, despite the present divisions along religious confessional lines, did not accommodate such divisive tendencies prior to the advent of the Christian mission. The Igbo traditional religion knows of no denominations as we have in Christianity

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html (accessed 02 April, 2017), no. 1. Henceforth, UR.

or other world religions. While the concept of the Supreme Deity 'Chukwu' unites all, the differences could be found in the personal deities 'Chi' that dot every family or clan. These religious identities along family lines do not in any way instigate divisions within the community, rather they represent legitimate boundaries which ought to be respected but which also could be transcended in the interest of the communal good. One cannot totally deny that sometimes, there might be conflicts along these family or clan lines. However, even where clans may have their common shrines/oracles for sacrifices and divination, these do not prevent anyone from consulting other oracles.

This internal religious flexibility is further expressed in the Igbo philosophy of life, the principle of peaceful co-existence. This philosophy of 'live-and-let-live' could be sifted from such Igbo proverbs as: "*Ugboguru mịara m, mịara nwunye di m*" (May my pumpkin blossom, and may that of my neighbour equally blossom). This philosophy of communality is often admixed with the theology of retribution. Here the Igbo while praying with their traditional *Ofo* (symbol of truth and justice) randomly employ statements that highlight the rhythm of blessings and curses in relation to a person's attitude towards fellow human beings: "*Egbe bere, ugo bere, ma nke si ibe ya ebene, ka nku kwaa ya*" (Let the kite perch and the eagle perch as well, but let the wing of the one that refuses the other to perch break.); "*Ihe onye na-echere mmadu, ka Chineke na-echere ya*" (As a person plans for others, so God plans for him or her) and so on.

In the light of such commonly held presuppositions, indigenes of Nigeria do not understand why the missionaries of the different denominations found it difficult to live peacefully with each other, particularly when they all spoke of the same crucified God. They could not come to terms with the mutual rivalry and 'destruction' of one another. If different missionary camps could agree that baptism is a common principle of Christian membership, then why can they not live in unity? It is in recognition of this typical African religious worldview that Parrinder states, "It has been said that God might have been banished from Greek thought without damaging its logical architecture, but this cannot be said of African thought, as God is both the creator and the principle of unity."⁵² This is not peculiar to the African or Igbo mind. St

⁵² Parrinder, G., *Religion in Africa* (London: Harmondsworth, 1969), 40.

Paul acknowledged that there is one God who is the source of all things and for whom all beings live (1 Cor. 8:6); the same God, who is the Father of all, operates through and in all despite their diversity (1 Cor. 12:6; Eph. 4:4-6). As a principle of unity, God brings about the reconciliation of all things in Christ (Col. 1:20, 22; 2 Cor. 5:18-20), and this task of reconciliation has been given to the Christians (2 Cor. 5:20) of today all over the world, including those in Igboland. The structure of this ministry of reconciliation is to be patterned according to the model of unity which exists between the Father and the Son (John 17: 21-23). One can argue then that the understanding of God as the principle of unity from the uniquely Igbo background can offer a starting point for exploring the ecumenical option.

To be derived from the above ‘God principle’ for unity is the aforementioned Igbo philosophy of co-existence. The principle of ‘live-and-let-live’ which is not contrary to the Scripture could be appropriated for ecumenical reasons, even though dialogue is more than mere tolerance. This philosophy demands that Christians “beat their sword into plowshares” (Micah 4:3-5); that they desist from destroying others who preach the same gospel message (Mk 9:38-40; Lk 9:49-50) even when there are serious reasons to raise concern. Where concerns for caution exist, these must however be addressed in fraternal attitude. Without this level of tolerance, true dialogue⁵³ remains elusive and the goal of ecumenism is defeated at the onset.

⁵³ Dialogue happens in different forms but all them are interconnected. Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) lists the forms of dialogue as including a) *dialogue of life*, which involves neighbourly day-to-day interactions and harmonious co-existence, b) *dialogue of action* in which actions are taken together for the development or good of the society, c) *dialogue of theological exchange*, involving experts who discuss doctrinal issues, and d) *dialogue of religious experience*, according to which people share their spiritual heritages with one another. Cf., PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html (accessed 02 April, 2017), no. 42.

Concluding Recommendations

A genuine ecumenism, one that is grounded on the above expressed Igbo philosophy of life, 'live-and-let-live', calls for co-operation and collaboration through fruitful dialogue among the different churches in Nigeria. This "endeavour to promote understanding and co-operation between different denominations becomes part of the universal task of establishing peace on earth and goodwill among men within and beyond Igboland of Nigeria."⁵⁴ There is need however to address the idea of denominationalism, which, as already indicated, is foreign to indigenous African culture and constitutes part of the obstacles towards ecumenical unity in Nigeria. In his account of the collapse of the *Church Union Movement*, the pristine ecumenical movement in Nigeria which was slightly modelled after the Church of South India⁵⁵, Kalu asserts that "denominationalism is a subversion of the Church of Christ;"⁵⁶ it played a key role in the failure of *the Union*. Kalu argues that denominationalism succeeded in creating "new tribes in Christ, vested interests whose powers threaten the strength of organic bonds,"⁵⁷ and therefore ought to be completely rejected.

One wonders if such a radical recommendation to reject denominationalism would still apply in any attempt to promote ecumenical dialogue in Nigeria today. Given the ethnic divide in Africa,

⁵⁴ Nmah, "Christianity and Antagonistic Challenges", 86.

⁵⁵ The Church of South India which was inaugurated in 1947, emerged out of a union of both the episcopal and non-episcopal churches (Church of England, Methodist Church, and Church of Scotland) in India. For an historical account of the formation of the Church of South India see, Bengt Sundkler, *Church of South India: The Movement Towards Union, 1900-1947* (London: Lutherworth, 1954); John Wilson Gladstone, ed., *United to Unite: History of the Church of South India, 1947-1997* (Chennai: Oxford University Press, 1997); George Oommen, "Challenging Identity and Crossing Borders: Unity in the Church of South India," *Word & World* 25, no. 1 (2005): 60-67.

⁵⁶ Kalu Ogbu, *Divided People of God: Church Union Movement: 1875-1966* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1978), 47. *Church Union Movement* was the attempt by the Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches in Nigeria to form a church union which unfortunately failed at the eve of its inauguration in 1965.

⁵⁷ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 45.

the existence of denominations should not be seen as counter-cultural, rather as I already indicated, the problem lies in the non-harmonious cohabitation of the different denominations. Kalu's verdict is based on the failure of the *Union*, and so could be considered valid in the context of a particular model of unity that may not be applicable today; namely, a model of union of churches based on common denominators. It was a union that failed for a number of reasons, including the insufficient preparation in terms of properly enlightening the laity, denominational power dynamics which controlled the pattern of negotiations, unfounded rumours boosted by inter-tribal and inter-ethnic misunderstandings, and so on.⁵⁸ In spite of this, confessional or denominational identities should not be undermined in any dialogue towards unity; rather the diversity of the Christian church must be taken seriously. Meanwhile, some lessons from the failure of *the Union* remain relevant in the practice of ecumenism in Nigeria today.

In aligning the lessons of the failure of past attempts with the future of ecumenical dialogue in Nigeria, it is important that the churches in Nigeria rediscover the African principle of communality as expressed in traditional kinship or clan structure. The clan structure provides a "cultural bond" and its inner dynamics could also afford us "a paradigm for community organization" among the churches.⁵⁹ In this, we can de-prioritize denominationalism without totally rejecting it as recommended by Kalu.

A rediscovery of the fundamental African communal structure and philosophy serves as the starting point of dialogue, because it raises the primary question of identity. Who are we? Are we to identify ourselves as Christians that are affiliated to denominations or as African Christians?⁶⁰ Either of these has consequences on the process and outcome of dialogue, because the identity of dialogue partners is of great importance. Secondly, the unique African communal structure and philosophy, helps us to seek together, from our specific background, the core of what it means to be a Christian community and to address the scandal of division within our own context.

⁵⁸ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 66-78.

⁵⁹ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 45-46.

⁶⁰ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 86-87.

Another important recommendation is the attitude of church leadership in seeking ecumenical unity. Part of the difficulty in ecumenical dialogue in Nigeria is traceable to what Kalu termed 'ingrained conservatism'⁶¹ which the missionaries instilled in the various churches, and is strongly represented in various church leaders. There is need to transcend this attitude which makes dialogue impossible because it operates on the ideology of competition where each church claims to possess superior knowledge of the truth and so rigidly protects this claim.⁶² Perhaps this explains why despite the departure of the missionaries, who may have found a more tolerant way to co-exist back in their countries of origin, churches in Nigeria are still embroiled in rivalry. Another dimension of leadership involves enlightening the people of God on the centrality of dialogue in Christianity. They must be fully carried along in the process of dialogue, in a 'bottom-top' approach, and not just be informed of ecumenical engagements among churches as if their opinions and participation do not count.

Of course, we cannot dismiss the fact that important ecumenical endeavours already exist in Nigeria,⁶³ but these efforts remain at the national level, and often do not promote real ecumenical dialogue among churches. Little seems to have been done at the state levels to address the rivalries, whether in Igboland or elsewhere. There is need thus to recover the communal principle upon which our traditional societies were structured and to re-read our understanding of the church in the light of this principle. Such a re-reading should take into account the African identity in order to ensure the success of any ecumenical dialogue that is

⁶¹ Ogbu, *Divided People of God*, 74.

⁶² David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 18.

⁶³ There is in Nigeria the existence of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which is an umbrella body for all Christian denominations. CAN, as a fellowship of churches, originally has a membership that comprises five main blocks of church groups, namely: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Christian Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (CPFN)/ Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Organisation of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), and TEKAN/ECWA Fellowship. In 2012, the CSN announced its withdrawal from CAN at the national level on grounds that the leadership of CAN at the time deviated from the original mandate of the ecumenical body.

directed towards churches in Africa. As for the churches in the Lower Niger and Nigeria in general, time is ripe for the Catholic bishops with their Protestant counterparts, who together had pioneered the first national ecumenical body (CAN)⁶⁴, to assume responsible and accountable leadership in the quest towards realizing Christ's prayer for unity. In this way, the post-Reformation conflict in Nigeria will be put to rest and a new dawn of ecumenical relations inaugurated.

⁶⁴ The Catholic Secretariat Lagos hosted the meeting that saw the emergence of CAN on the 27th of August, 1976. See: B. E. Merriman-Johnson, "Brief Statement on Christian Association of Nigeria" in *Christian Association of Nigeria: Order of Service of Inauguration* (Lagos: CAN, 1980), 10; Deji Ayegboyin, "Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience" in Ademola Ishola and Deji Ayegboyin (eds.), *Rediscovering and Fostering Unity in the Body of Christ: The Nigerian Experience* (Ibadan: University Press, 2000), 17-36. For a detailed account of the formation and the ecumenical challenges facing the CAN, see: Bauna Peter Tanko, *The Christian Association of Nigeria and the Challenge of the Ecumenical Imperative* (Rome: N. Domenici-Pecheux, 1991).