



THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Christianity in Nigeria faces a dual challenge regarding the environment: while churches, on one hand, promote stewardship of creation, the rapid expansion of religious institutions on the other hand contributes to deforestation, land-use conflicts, and noise pollution. Rivers State, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, particularly faces severe environmental degradation due to oil exploration, industrial activity, rapid urbanization, artisanal refining (*kpo fire*) and urban waste crises, which pose existential threats to both livelihoods and cultural heritage. Adopting a qualitative research design, hinged on a historical-eco-theological approach, this study examines the role of the church in promoting environmental justice, moving from the traditional sphere of ministry to embracing ecological stewardship. Granted that the church has historical ties to community development, it has been criticized for being indifferent toward ecological issues and in some cases, for contributing to noise pollution in urban centres like Port Harcourt and its environs. However, the study approaches the issue specifically through the lenses of eco-theological principles of stewardship and justice, and faith-based advocacy from scripture. This evolving role includes awareness campaigns, advocacy and mobilization, and local or indigenous initiatives. The study concludes that because the church's mission is not only spiritual but also social, it has to be effective in promoting environmental justice, align its mission with the sustainable development goals (SDGs), adopt a watchdog approach against ecological exploitation, and ensure that its own policies and activities are environmentally sustainable. It is recommended that through its leadership, the church should encourage her members to imbibe clean environmental habits and take actions to promote justice.

Keywords: Environmental Justice, environmental responsibility, Eco-theology, Oil Spillage.

Introduction

Rivers State, located in the heart of the Niger delta of Nigeria, is a region blessed by nature with enormous ecological wealth but contrasted with environmental vulnerability. The thick forests, fertile soils, and abundant waterways have sustained the various communities

inhabiting the area. It has equally experienced decades of oil exploration, industrial activity, and rapid urbanization, which have left the environment deeply messy. Flooding, oil pollution, and poor waste management pose existential threats to the environment, inhabitants, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. Within this context, it is expected that the church would play a complex role in shaping environmental attitudes and responses. The church's influence in the region is multi-faceted. On one hand, the expansion of churches, schools, and religious institutions has contributed to deforestation and pressure on land use. On the other hand, the teachings of the church on stewardship and justice provide a moral framework for environmental advocacy and community resilience. Experience shows that the abandonment of traditional ecological taboos orchestrated by the church has weakened indigenous practices of conservation while eco-theological perspectives within the church are beginning to reassert the importance of protecting the natural setting in line with God's original intent at creation. Thus, this two-fold position places the church as both a driver of ecological strain and a potential agent of environmental renewal.

The environmental challenges facing Rivers State are tripartite in context- physical, spiritual and cultural. Specifically, flooding displaces worshippers and erodes sacred spaces, thus, disrupting religious continuity, as recently experienced in the Orashi region. In addition, oil pollution contaminates rivers and farmlands, underpinning the spiritual connection between communities and their environment. Also, waste accumulation in urban centres like Port Harcourt, further diminishes the quality of life and raises urgent questions about governance and accountability. These crises by and large demand responses that integrate ecological science with cultural and religious values. This study therefore seeks to explore the intersection of the church and environmental challenges in Rivers State. Specifically, it examines how churches respond to ecological crises, the theological frameworks guiding their actions and the gaps between awareness and structural adaptation. By situating the church within the broader discourse on environmental justice, the paper argues that the Christian faith can play a vital role in advancing sustainable environmental practices, protecting sacred sites and advocating for stronger environmental policies. In all, the study highlights the need for collaborative approaches between churches, government and civil society, in addressing the ecological challenges confronting Rivers State in ways that are beneficial to both the faith, environment and humanity.

Theoretical framework

The study is predicated on the historical-eco-theology and environmental justice framework. Eco-theology draws from biblical principles of stewardship, conservation and justice, thus emphasizing the responsibility of humanity to care for creation. This provides a theological lens through which churches in Rivers State interpret and respond to ecological crises. Drawn from historical perspective, environmental justice framework focuses on equity, accountability and disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on vulnerable communities, highlighting how flooding, oil pollution and waste mismanagement intersect with social and spiritual displacement, which forms the basis of the church as advocate for environmental justice. These frameworks allow for a critical analysis of the church's dual role as a contributor to ecological pressure and as a potential agent of transformation through advocacy, moral authority and community mobilization.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the intersection of the church and environmental challenges in Rivers State, Nigeria. This choice is informed by the need to capture lived experiences, theological perspectives and institutional responses to ecological crises in the Niger Delta. Finally, it supports the examination of the role of the church in promoting environmental justice, moving from traditional sphere of ministry to embracing ecological stewardship especially in this century, with Rivers State as the focal case. Furthermore, data were collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with church leaders (Orthodox and Pentecostal), focus group discussion to elicit grass root perceptions of environmental stewardship and church-driven initiatives and field observation of polluted sites, flood-affected communities and waste disposal sites. In these, the purposive sampling strategy was adopted, mostly of selected churches and communities adversely affected by environmental challenges.

Conceptualizing environmental justice

The concept of environmental justice was first formulated in the United States of America (USA) in the 1980s but its usage has since shifted from there to other parts of the globe. Ehiemua, Okhira, & Ehiemua (2015) explain that it is *a legal concept in academic discourse to explain procedures and methods which have been put in place by a State's (or national) legal instruments and which the local people can explore to challenge any identified environmental anomalies meted out to them* (p. 200). It is on this basis that they define environmental justice as *the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, nationality or income in the development* (p. 199). Societies are human creations, organized and structured by humans in ways that serve their purposes. The implication is that anything done within the human habitat, good or bad, affects man and all other inhabitants. This is where the issue of environmental justice becomes germane. According to Ezedike (2025) *environmental justice is concerned with the investigation of social distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. It has to do with the equitable distribution of environmental resources and risks* (p. 275). In other words, within the environment are actions which either impede human wellbeing or enhance same. The extent to which this occurs, calls for the cry for justice for humanity, livelihood and the environment.

Environmental justice details the fact that the environment is not just about conserving natural resources and curtailing pollution, it also put forward a new image of Homo sapiens' place in the "intricate web of life" by raising public awareness of our inescapable interdependence with all other life forms. The science of ecology in particular helps people to realize that what threatens our fellow creatures on earth ultimately threatens us. Ecologists point out that Homo sapiens breathe oxygen produced from plant life just as insects, fish, birds, reptiles, and mammals; humans get nutrition through the food chain as ants, squirrels and other reptiles; humans build dwellings from materials supplied by the earth just birds; they drink water purified by an incredibly complex hydraulic system run by the sun like the cattle, elephants, and other animals. It is therefore posited that when people disrupt and damage the ecological balance of nature through pollution, habitat destruction, or the slaughter of wildlife, it diminishes the health and quality of life for both non-humans and humans. Environmental justice, seen as addressing misdemeanour in matters concerning environmental policies and environmental harms, also includes the right of affected communities to participate

meaningfully in decisions that affect their environment and health. In Rivers State, environmental injustice is evident in the long-term pollution of land, water and air connected with oil exploration and production, gas flaring, improper waste disposal and oil spills. Many communities, especially those in oil-producing areas, bear the greatest burden of environmental damage while other groups benefit economically. The consequences are serious: people experience health problems, loss of livelihoods, contamination of drinking water, destruction of farmlands and fishing grounds, and increased poverty.

Environmental degradation also contributes to conflict and social tension, because communities may feel neglected or cheated. In this context, the church has a major role to play. The church can promote environmental justice through moral teaching, public advocacy, community mobilization, compassion for victims and long-term environmental stewardship projects. Environmental justice anticipates that the human race would make an ecological worldview shift away from destructive exploitation toward a relationship with the land that curtails pollution, extinction and the destruction of wild habitats solely for profit. Unfortunately, this has not materialised in spite of public zeal for environmental reform through the enactment of environmental laws and establishment of institutions, aimed at stemming the tide of environmental degradation. Reasons for this failure may be attributed to politicization of the environment, lack of political will to enforce relevant environmental laws, a nature-starved generation (new generation that is less interested in experiencing nature) and lack of ethical foundation necessary for the institutionalization of environmental ethics in the Nigerian culture. Therefore, this essay discusses how the church can promote environmental justice in Rivers State by combining spiritual influence with practical action.

The Early Church and the Environment

The early church refers to the period from the Apostolic age through the first few centuries, approximately 100 to 600 AD. Though there was no agreed form of what is environmental justice as we have it today, the concept of environmental justice may be viewed from the perspectives of creation as good and sacred, the mandate of stewardship, focus on human community and charity and the position of Church Fathers including Basil of Caesarea, Augustine of Hippo and Irenaeus. In other words, the fundamental standpoint for the early church's engagement in environmental justice emanates from its belief that God created and loves His world. He values and cares for it independently of human existence. Though, the Church did not use the modern term "environmentalism", but their theology, worship, and daily practices shaped how they treated creation. Their care for the environment came from three convictions: creation belongs to God, humans are stewards not owners, and all creation will be redeemed. By this very fact, it is expected that human beings, bearing the image of God (particularly Christians) and as an integral part of that creation, should imitate the concern of God for maintaining and taking care of the environment (Spenser et al, 2007). In imitating this loving and caring attitudes of God, humans are expected to live in a wholesome relationship with the rest of creation so as not to cause such destruction that species, ecosystem and indeed large numbers of people are threatened. In this regard, Steve de Gruchy (2004), cautiously notes that we cannot *ipso facto* commodify the environment, but are obliged to respect its integrity and honour its creator and owner.

Closely related to the above is the early Church understanding of the implication of the concept of stewardship. In the opinion of Mc Donagh, God's command in Genesis 1:28 should



be seen as key text in re-shaping the human-earth relationship from the perspective of stewardship (Gitua 2000). The mandate to exercise dominion over the rest of the creation should not be seen as a warrant for domination and injustice that it has so often been taken to imply. Rather this mandate suggests that human beings as stewards have the role of managing and preserving the creation for God. Similarly, Johnson (2000), gives deeper insight of stewardship when he observes that:

The biblical understanding of stewardship implies accountability and participation. To move beyond guilt and powerlessness, we need to move from mastery, control and ownership attitudes to an attitude of stewardship toward all of life. This means becoming caretakers of creation with a sense of identification and partnership, rather than dominion and exploitation. To be a steward of creation is to embrace the world, to love as Christ did, and to be willing to sacrifice for the world rather than escape from the world (p. 287).

The overarching issue emerging from the above is the caution that humans are not the owners of the earth and therefore should treat the environment responsibly without injustice. As part of the effort to restore the divine order and God's love for His creation, early Christians are obliged to continue working for the fulfilment of what is regarded as the Jesus manifesto in Luke 4:18-19 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me; He has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour". The establishment of God's rule on earth is part of the whole redemption package epitomized in the mission of Christ. The early Church views salvation to entail not only the redemption of an individual from his or her sin, it also entails the renewal and transformation of all aspects of creation, including its social and economic structures (Kent, 2007). One of the early church fathers St. John Chrysostom in one of his homilies asserted that if one cannot find God in nature, then he will not be found in the Bible. He emphasized in his sermons that God reveals Himself through scripture and through creation. For him, nature is not just resources, it is a sacrament, a visible word of God. Destroying it means tearing pages from God's book. A Christian who ignores pollution, deforestation, and climate injustice has missed half of God's revelation. Caring for the environment is therefore not liberal politics, for Chrysostom its worship. The early church cared for the environment because of doxology (worship). To harm creation was to dishonor the creator.

Key environmental challenges in Rivers State

These include severe environmental degradation due to oil exploration, industrial activity, rapid urbanization, artisanal refining (*kpo fire*) and urban waste crises like waste management and urban pollution, which pose existential threats to both livelihoods and cultural heritage. Jaja (2016) pointed out that environmental degradation is a product of human and natural factors including land disturbance, pollution, overpopulation, landfills, deforestation, natural causes such as tidal waves. He indicated that its effects include loss of biodiversity and loss for tourism industry.



Environmental justice and why the Church's involvement matters

Environmental justice matters because environmental harms are not equally distributed. In many cases, poor communities experience more pollution and suffer more severe impacts. Environmental injustice may also occur when governments and companies ignore the concerns of local people, fail to enforce environmental laws, or provide compensation that is inadequate, delayed or unfair. When communities do not have the power or voice, their suffering continues unchecked. That is why environmental justice is not only about the environment; it is also about human dignity, fairness, accountability, and the protection of life. The fact must be stated that God permitted the human race to use nature for its purposes but with the understanding that nature belongs to Him and people are His caretakers. People do not nonetheless have the prerogative to use nature for their own consumption without any regard for the environment and wild creatures. Sadly, even though this truth is clearly taught in Scriptures, Christians have generally been reluctant to get involved in confronting environmental issues. Consequently, it was secular activists, educators, and organizations that alerted the country to environmental degradation and became the vanguard of environmental advocacy now pervading the world. However, for the most part, the story of the environment in the Niger delta of which Rivers State is a part of, has been that of neglect, misuse, exploitation, and deterioration. This situation points to the fact that humanity is messing up its own self.

i. The church as a source of moral teaching and creation stewardship

One major way the church promotes environmental justice is by teaching that the environment is part of God's creation. Christian belief from the creation stories recognizes that human beings have a responsibility to care for what God has made. Teaching creation stewardship would help members understand that protecting the environment is not optional but a part of living a righteous life. Secondly, the church could teach that justice is a moral principle. The implication is that environmental pollution and degradation is not only a physical problem but an injustice when communities are harmed without consent, without proper responsibility and without fair compensation. By reminding Christians that God's justice protects the vulnerable, the church encourages believers to condemn environmental wrongdoing and support the struggle faced by the affected communities.

ii. Raising awareness and providing environmental education

The church can address this by creating awareness through sermons, Bible study, youth, women and men programmes. It can explain that oil spills, gas flaring and poor waste management affect water sources, health, agriculture and fishing. In addition, Churches can also organize seminars and community engagements to educate people on prevention and safe practices, such as proper sanitation, avoiding contaminated water and reporting cases of pollution. Awareness leads to informed action because people who understand the problem are in a better position to adjust and demand accountability.

iii. Advocacy- speaking up against pollution and neglect

Promoting environmental justice requires public advocacy. Many environmental injustices happen because polluters and leaders believe communities will remain silent. The church can challenge this by speaking out against environmental harm and demanding



accountability. Using church platforms such as public declarations, community platforms for evangelism, radio programs and other media engagement, the church can highlight environmental problems and insist that action must be taken. Advocacy by the church can include contacting government agencies responsible for environmental regulation and urging strict enforcement of environmental laws. It can also involve writing petitions and organizing community visits to relevant offices. When the church speaks with moral authority, it can pressure decision-makers to treat pollution and remediation seriously instead of ignoring communities.

iv. Care and support for victims of environmental harm

The church is also expected to show compassion to people who suffer environmental injustice. Pollution in Rivers State does not only destroy the environment; it also affects families through illnesses, hunger, displacement and loss of income. In many situations, victims need immediate help while long-term remediation is ongoing. The support could be in the form of emergency relief for affected households, referrals to health facilities for pollution-related illnesses, counseling and spiritual support for those experiencing stress and trauma, assistance with food, drugs, clothing, basic necessities during emergencies including livelihood programmes such as providing victims with new skills (entrepreneurship). A typical example of this was in 2012 when the Orashi region of Rivers State was ravaged by flood, during which churches galvanized efforts toward assisting victims.

v. Building capacity through practical environmental projects

Apart from advocacy, the church should engage in practical action that helps communities reduce environmental harm and improve environmental conditions. Churches can work with community volunteers and experts to carry out projects such as community clean-up and sanitation campaigns, improved waste management systems, tree planting and erosion control, mangrove restoration and coastal protection, establishment of safe water sources or support for clean water projects and preparation for disaster. By this, Church members gain practical skills and become more involved in environmental stewardship.

vi. Calling for integrity and accountability

The church must act as a watchdog by promoting integrity and accountability. It should preach against corruption and encourage honest leadership. Furthermore, the church should help communities understand that true justice requires cleanup, restoration and compensation based on actual damage.

vii. Interfaith cooperation and ecumenical solidarity

Environmental pollution affects everyone regardless of religion. In Rivers State, different faith communities can cooperate to strengthen environmental justice campaigns. The church should work with other churches (ecumenism), Islamic organizations, traditional rulers and civil society groups. When faith leaders work together, they mobilize wider support and reduce conflict. Interfaith cooperation also promotes peace, because environmental justice campaigns may sometimes be misinterpreted as political battles.

ix. Peacebuilding, conflict management and health promotion

Environmental injustice can lead to anger and conflict. When communities feel abandoned, disputes may arise between communities, government agencies and oil companies. The church can contribute to peacebuilding by encouraging non-violent dialogue and mediation. It can also guide communities on how to demand justice responsibly. Additionally, churches can partner with health professionals to promote health education. Pollution-related illnesses may include respiratory problems, skin diseases, waterborne diseases, and malnutrition due to reduced agricultural productivity. By educating people on hygiene, safe water practices, and early health-seeking behavior, churches protect life while also supporting justice for environmental conditions.

Environmental Justice in Church Structures

The church's involvement is important because religion can shape people's values and influence actions. When churches preach love for neighbors and stewardship of creation, they help communities see environmental protection as a moral duty. Also, churches are trusted institutions that can unite people and guide them to take collective action. In Rivers State, where communities need both advocacy and practical support, the church can serve as an agent of justice and healing. This reluctance of not getting involved in environmental issues may be traceable to political and ideological factors in addition to Christians understanding of the scripture. Environmental stewardship is not such a popular topic on the pages of scripture like other social concerns. The New Testament in particular focuses primarily on spiritual and moral issues: the person and work of Jesus Christ, struggles with sin and temptation, how to be reconciled to God, church and family relationships and moral issues. As a result, many Christians have historically failed to recognize many verses and passages spread throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament (which is part of Christian Scriptures) that lay strong emphasis on environmental issues (see Genesis 2:15,28; Psalm 24: 1; Nehemiah 9:6; Isaiah 40: 6-8; Jeremiah 2:7; Proverbs 12: 10; Matthew 6:26; Luke 12: 24-28; John 6: 12; Romans 1:20, 25; James 3:7; Hebrews 2:8; Revelation 7:3; 9: 4-11,18).

For the church's work to be sustainable, environmental justice must be built into church structures. Churches should establish environmental committees at parish or diocesan levels. They can develop action plans for environmental campaigns, integrate environmental justice into sermons and church programs and train church leaders and volunteers. Church leadership should also ensure transparency in how funds are used for environmental projects. When environmental justice becomes part of the church's routine activities, impact becomes more consistent. The church then moves from reacting to environmental disasters to actively promoting long-term environmental responsibility.

Conclusion

The contemporary Church in Nigeria and Rivers State in particular is faced with the obvious challenge concerning the environment. While the early church did not have a formal concept of environmental justice as we have it today, there is no doubt that environmental justice in the 21st century focuses on issues of intersection of social equity and disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on communities and people. Arising therefrom is the fact that Rivers State, a critical component of the Niger Delta, faces deforestation, oil exploration, industrial activity and artisanal refining (*kpo fire*) and urban

waste mismanagement. Granted that the church has the affinity with community development, it has been criticized for being indifferent toward ecological issues and in some way, contributing to noise pollution. Approaching these issues from historical-eco-theological perspectives, the study posits that the church has enormous role to play in the issue of environmental justice based on stewardship and faith-based advocacy from the scripture. While it is noted that the mission of the church is both spiritual and social, this role includes awareness campaign, advocacy and aligning its mission with sustainable development goals (SDGs) including becoming a watchdog against ecological exploitation in ensuring environmental sustainability.

There is no doubt therefore that the church has a powerful and necessary role in promoting environmental justice in Rivers State, Nigeria. Environmental injustice is a major challenge affecting health, livelihoods, peace and human dignity. The church can respond by teaching moral stewardship of creation, raising environmental awareness and advocating publicly against pollution and neglect. It can empower communities to participate in decision-making, support victims with compassion and implement practical environmental projects that improve living conditions. The church can also help communities document environmental issues, act as a watchdog against corruption and promote interfaith cooperation for stronger collective action. Ultimately, environmental justice is consistent with the church's mission of loving neighbours, protecting life and promoting fairness. By combining faith with action, the church can help Rivers State move toward environmental restoration, accountability and sustainable development from which other communities could benefit.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from the research, the following recommendations are proposed for the Church to strengthen her role in environmental justice:

- i. The Church through its leadership, should encourage her members to imbibe clean environmental habits and take actions to promote justice.
- ii. Establish an interdenominational environmental justice desk.
- iii. Integrate eco-theology into her teachings and preaching.
- iv. Initiate and build capacity for advocacy, monitoring and evaluation of the activities of the oil companies, individual actions and government efforts.

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