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Christian Associations and Unions of Nigerian Churches

Christianity first came into Nigeria in the 15th century, brought in by the Roman Catholic Portuguese. It did not take root, but the foreigners brought some of their arts and crafts which they left behind. However, when Christian religion was reintroduced into Nigeria in a humble way in the mid-nineteenth century it took root. Even then it was watered with the blood of unsung martyrs here and there and today it is a wide-spread faith.

On December 7, 1842 an Anglican missionary, Reverend Henry Townsend, on the invitation of the Yoruba descendants in Sierra Leone, arrived in Badagry. He was later joined by Reverend Thomas Burch Freeman, a Methodist minister, on 20 December 1842. The latter was coming from Abeokuta and they celebrated Christmas together that year in Badagry (25 December 1842). Some church historians have it that the Methodist Church (of Burch Freeman) entered Nigeria via Badagry in 1846 while the Baptist church came through the same place in 1850, brought by Reverend Thomas J. Bowen from the United States of America.

These foreign missionaries were joined later by eminent indigenous missionaries such as Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Charles Golmer and Joseph Murray Harden, the latter for the Baptists. These men of God built the foundation of Protestant church work in Nigeria.

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The Church of Christ grew and today there are many churches and denominations in West Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular. Each of the major Orthodox Churches remained separated according to their various doctrinal emphases and polities. There were occasional interactions in the matter of evangelism, revivals and invitations to give lectures. There were other areas of cooperation, especially among the Protestant churches, such as in the joint founding of schools.

The Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN)

In the early thirties (1931), the Protestant churches — Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and other denominations that accept the Trinity and monogamy as the norm of Christian marriage—got together to form The Christian Council of Nigeria. This council has a standing committee which meets yearly and holds an assembly every five years. The general secretary of the CCN, Mr. C. O. Williams, is the Educational Advisor to all Protestant churches. He is himself a seasoned educator and a former senior officer of the Federal Ministry of Education.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)

By some act of providence, the Roman Catholic Church (The Catholic Secretariat) of Nigeria joined with the Protestant churches to take up an issue with the Federal Military Government of Nigeria in 1978.

From this “joint Christian effort” which proved to be successful, the question was raised, “Why cannot we form an organization to unite all Christian Churches in Nigeria so that we can speak with one voice to the Government on matters affecting the Church?” The answer was, “Why not?” And so was born The Christian Association of Nigeria.

The CAN has a Standing Committee of 20 members who are drawn from the Protestant CCN and the Roman Catholic Secretariat, spec-

tively. The remaining four members of the Standing Committee come from (for lack of a better name) "the other churches." These are mainly members of the Apostolic or Pentecostal and Spiritual Churches, the Churches which are not in the orthodox mainstream of Christianity.

The Standing Committee of the Christian Association of Nigeria meets twice a year statutorily, but can hold emergency meetings on matters of national importance and urgency concerning the church.

The CAN Assembly meets once in every five years. The second Assembly will meet in November this year (1988) in Kaduna, the seat of the 1987 religious debacle where 159 churches were destroyed by Muslim fanatics and lives and property were lost.

Church Growth in Nigeria

Apart from the Orthodox Churches, which continue to expand through the founding of "Preaching Stations" or "Baby Churches", as well as growth in membership through evangelistic outreach, there are many Pentecostal, Evangelical and Spiritual Churches proliferating almost daily, especially in the case of the "Evangelical" churches.

Since it is not unlikely that these other churches are represented in this consultation, I shall leave them to speak about themselves, inasmuch as they are better informed than I on their churches.

The Church and Islam

Until the sixties, Christianity and Islam co-existed without many problems, especially in the Southern part of Nigeria where each family was religiously heterogeneous. In recent times, especially in one or two of our universities, religious fanatics have brainwashed some students to resort to violence and illogical arguments in order to suppress Christian witness. Still, the church is marching on in spite of oppression and persecution.

Whereas in 1900 the population of Christians in Nigeria compared to other religions was only 1%, while Moslems constituted 45% or 48% of the population and traditionalists took the remaining 54% or 51% in 1980, Christians have risen to 51% of the population while Moslems are 43%. We have it on strong evidence that even in the once predominantly Moslem northern part of Nigeria, Christianity has now gained a lot of ground. This perhaps is why the tolerance of Christians by some Moslems has grown in recent years.

The Future of Christianity in Nigeria

Christians must learn to strengthen their cooperation and unity, because united we stand, divided we fall. There should be no superior or inferior church, great or small church. We must learn to cooperate in order to withstand the onslaught of our antagonists. If we can learn to do this, a great future awaits the Church in Nigeria, together with the fulfillment of Christ's promise for her in a big way: "And upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Amen and Amen.