

Mass Media, the Church and the Quest for Peace in Africa

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Abstract

This paper seeks to re-examine and re-evaluate the role of media in the whole process of peace building and evangelization of the church in Africa. The arguments presented in this paper are underpinned by the Agenda Setting theory and the Social Responsibility theory. This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between the church and the media, suggesting ways in which this relationship can be exploited for the edification of the church. It also discusses the challenges dogging the church and the mass media in their quest for peace and offers an array of suggestions for restructuring communication in the church and positively exploiting the benefits of media in a bid to make the church more pro-active and relevant for the modern population. The media and the church have immense power and can create a culture of peace and tranquility among Africa's diverse populations.

Keywords: Mass Media, Church, Peace, Strategies, Africa

1. Introduction

The need for peace has been articulated in various forums and it is true that homes, institutions, organizations or communities where peace has lacked have suffered the painful consequences. Nairobi Peace Initiative Africa, (2006) points out that creating a culture of peace is a challenge for modern times. According to Bujo (2003), traditionally in African communities, ethics demanded that there be peace among people as one who paid heed to the dignity of the human person also pleased God and that one who acted against the human person offended God. Similarly, Apollos (2008) contends that most religions believe that a supreme being is the source of peace and in turn gives it to us. African ethics treats the dignity of the human person to include the dignity of the entire creation. Apollos (2010) reveals that in Africa, everyone was engaged in peace making including the women and the youth.

Despite its champion for peace, Africa has witnessed numerous conflicts. A report by Heinrich Boell Foundation (2006) gives accounts of the various conflicts in the countries across the African continent. Sudan, which is Africa's largest country, has varied cultural and ecological milieu but has known few years of peace since independence whereas Uganda has been marked by instability and violence in its political landscapes since the early 1970's. Furthermore, Somalia and neighbouring countries have increasingly been facing conflicts which are worsened as a result of proliferation of small arms across borders. This means that even though the African ethics champions peace, the reality is that peace has been elusive in many parts of Africa. Such a state of affairs is not strange and Apollos (2010) explains why when he suggests that the society is made up of many social groups or segments, some co-operating with one another while others compete or conflict with one another.

Peace has been described by Heinrich Boell Foundation (2002) report as the freedom of fears of any kind, self-esteem, security of identity and sense of belonging as well as the opportunity to pursue, exercise and access freedoms, rights and self-determination.

Others view peace as the absence of war or conflict. Apollos (2008) suggests that as a process, peace building is a planned activity, directed towards achieving harmonious co-existence among people. Scholars, researchers and communicators have however agreed that it is not possible to completely do away with all conflicts; neither is it desirable.

Mwagiru (2000) points out that conflict is endemic in society that it is here with us as long as there are human beings. He further suggests that conflict is necessary and cannot be eradicated in the same way for example that we eradicate a disease such as small pox or malaria. Indeed, a society without conflict would be both stale and sterile. The challenge thus, is not to eradicate conflict but to manage it properly and learn from it. In order to effectively manage conflicts and learn from them, one must engage in peace building efforts to ensure people from diverse backgrounds, pursuing different goals co-exist in peace and harmony.

In order for the world to achieve sustainable development, peace is a prerequisite. Kamenju (2003) reveals that currently, the world's attention is turning towards the linkage between security, conflict prevention, peace building and sustainable development. Peace is also related to leadership and good governance fosters peace while lack of good governance robs a nation or a community of peace. Article 1 of the International Declaration of Human Rights asserts the importance and uniqueness of all people; that all human beings are created free and equal in dignity and right. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood. Engaging in violence, conflicts and wars negate the fundamental values engrained in these statutes.

Among the strategies that have been used to bring about peace are media and religious interventions. These strategies hinge on communication that involves, as Rayudu (1993) suggests, a process of sorting, selecting and sending of symbols in such a way as to help the listener perceive and recreate in his own mind the meaning contained in the mind of the communicator. Messages on peace building can be channelled through the mass media. Mass media consist of those channels of communication that reach a large number of people such as television, newspapers, radio, cinema and others.

The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2011), have brought into sharp focus the extent to which upsurge of technology has taken place especially in the mass media. It reports that by June 2010, the number of internet users had hit 7.8 million. In addition, the CCK assigned eleven (11) additional FM radio frequencies in 2010 bringing the number of FM frequencies in use to three hundred and fourteen (314). The church and the mass media can ably tap into this diversity of channels. Rayudu (1993) views the mass media institution as open, operating in the public sphere to provide regular channels of communication for messages of a kind determined by what is culturally and technically possible, socially permitted and in demand by a large number of individuals.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

2.1. Agenda Setting

Mcquail (2005) contends that in times of change and uncertainty it is highly probable that people are more dependent on media as a source of information and guidance thereby setting an agenda. The mass media have been shown to be more influential on matters outside the audiences' immediate personal experience. They therefore set the agenda for the masses in such matters. Griffin (2000) concurs with this and suggests that media can and do set the agenda for public discourse. Further, he posits that the media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda. This means that people will judge as important what the media deems to be important and true.

2.2. Social Responsibility

The mass media has a responsibility not only to themselves and their media houses but also to their audiences (Mcquail, 2005; Campbell, 1998). Campbell (ibid) contends that journalists have a moral and social responsibility, not only for the stories they report but for the actual events and issues they are shaping for millions of people. According to Mquail (Ibid), the media should accept certain responsibilities towards society by setting professional standards with regard to supply of information and truth. They should also practice accuracy, objectivity and balance in their reporting. In addition, they need to regulate themselves within the framework of the law and established institutions.

3. The Church-Media Partnership

The church and the mass media are both tools for development. The issue of human rights is central to both the media and the church. However, the two institutions use communication in different ways. While the church is spiritual in approach and appeals to people's sense of what is right or wrong, the media uses the essence of news; of information to assist people make informed choices (Nyamjoh, 2005).

Kizito (1992) argues that as advocates and lobbyists for peace and the right of all people to freedom and to security, both the church and the media claim to speak for the voiceless. The church and the mass media have been known to be very good at mobilizing citizens for a common purpose. In this way, they are both a unifying factor and contributors of peace. The church and the media are the two institutions that have faced most harassment from government authorities. They are the bridge that closes the gap between people and their leaders. They are the 3rd party to conflict, coming in to help warring parties reach agreement/resolution and must never take sides. (Nyamjoh, 2005)

4. Challenges facing the Media and the Church In the Quest for Peace

4.1. Poverty, disease and unemployment

Apollos (2010) argues that several studies have concluded that the relatively higher prevalence of war in Africa is not due to the ethno-linguistic fragmentation of its countries but rather to high levels of poverty, failed political institutions and economic dependence on natural resources. The Independent Task Force (2006), points out that conflict in Africa has taken a terrible toll on the people of the continent. These conflicts have become a breeding ground for international criminal activity, terrorist infiltration and the spread of diseases. Further, the Economic Commission of Africa (2004) reveals that the increase in the number of actors in peace making has not resulted in more effective peace building as there is a disturbing shortage of communication, coordination and cooperation. This is compounded by the delicate nature of 'peace' in Africa.

A study by Dar Nyawalo. (2011) concerning violence in Kenya shows that even the so called 'peaceful' areas in the Kenyan contest also contain latent but very volatile elements that can explode into full blown conflict at the slightest provocation. Although some research has been undertaken in the area of peace, conflict and related issues it is still far from sufficient. Research findings by Dar Nyawalo . (ibid) show that the catalytic factors or triggers of ethnic and internal conflicts in Africa have received less attention from policy makers and scholars.

The Independent Task Force (2006) reveals that while the conflicts in Africa are largely internal, neighbouring countries have been drawn into them, sometimes abetting them. This is true of wars in West Africa where Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Guinea were all parties to recent regional conflicts – and in the DRC where at one time nine African countries were directly involved in its internal war. Sudan's civil war has affected and been affected by Libya, Egypt, Uganda, Chad, Kenya and Eritrea.

According to Dar Nyawalo (2011), in Kenya, ethnicity creates and sustains conditions of disunity and allows nepotism, cronyism, corruption, greed, discrimination and marginalization to go unabated. Njogu (2009) concurs with this view in the description he gives of the 2007/2008 post election violence that shook the nation because of its spread speed and ruthlessness. The closely contested presidential election was characterized by unrealistic promises, fragmentation, balkanization, media hype, and strong expressions of ethnic nationalism. These are serious challenges for both the media and the church as they take the lead in championing peace for Africa.

Lack of information to sufficiently tackle issues of peace is also another challenge. The media and the church have not done enough research in the area of peace yet research is crucial in the difficult task of understanding peace and all its antecedents (Dar Nyawalo 2011).

4.2. Lack of financial support

Like any other undertaking, effective communication on how to create a peaceful world requires financial support. Funding poses one of the biggest handicaps both for the mass media and for the church. According to the Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa (2006), the church and the media require resources to enable them institutionalise meaningful peace and change. The initiative further suggests that stake holders must go beyond analysing the level of conflict and criticism of prevailing circumstances by economically empowering those affected by the conflict.

4.3. Leadership challenges

Africa's leadership has to be held to account when it comes to peace. BBC Focus on Africa (2009) reveals that most of Africa's parties are internally undemocratic, their leadership controlled by a small elite, with power, patronage and government spoils divided among competing factions based either on interests, ethnicity, class or religion. Issues of harassment, hostility from authorities and governments in African states have aided in the disappearance of peace. Security, government interference and dictatorship may destabilize peace even if the church and the media do not. Censorship, bad laws, poor leadership lack of legislative framework directly backing peace and absence of proper policies all contribute to make the work of journalists and the church doubly difficult (Nairobi Peace Initiative, 2006)

4.4. Lack of trust

There is lack of trust between the church and the mass media. The church views the media as untrustworthy, making them hesitate to partner or be seen to be working together. This has resulted from the numerous accusations that critics have levelled against the mass media. Nyamjoh (2005) posits that the media can be a vehicle for uncritical assumptions, beliefs, stereotypes, ideologies and orthodoxies that blunt critical awareness and make participatory democratization difficult. Mass media on the other hand, have not made it easy for the church to work with them. They have been accused of sensationalism, of frightening rather than reassuring its readership, of seeking to confront indecent governments with indecent language, of being unprofessional and unethical in their representations of events, individuals and groups (Nyamjoh, 2005). Concurring with this view is Mcquail (2005) who states that it seems that whenever the stability of society is disturbed by crime, war, economic malaise or some 'moral panic', the mass media are given some of the responsibility.

4.5. Gender related challenges

Although women are important contributors for peace in Africa, there is a serious absence of deliberate gender considerations within the media and the church. This is contrary to the Economic Commission for Africa (2004) which considers gender equality to be very important for the wellbeing of communities. It reveals that the objective of gender equality is enshrined in the treaties protocols and constitutions of regional economic communities and African states.

4.6. Corruption

Corruption is another stumbling block to peace in Africa. Some editors have allowed their newspapers to be used by some individuals or interest groups to hurt others for a fee. Stories about bribes, free lifts, gifts, favours and lack of responsibility are rife within the media circles (Nyamjoh, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 1996). The church is also involved in its own forms of corruption which includes favouring the rich, practicing ethnicity within the church and misappropriation of funds.

4.7. Media ownership

Media ownership in Africa is a problem that may cause or escalate conflicts, robbing communities of peace. Nyamjoh (2005) explains that pressures on journalists to please those for whom they work are such that they cannot report fairly on all sides of an issue in the most attentive and self-assured manner, suppressing personal prejudices and sticking to the facts. The media in Africa must now play an important role in setting the agenda for peace and influencing policy not only in Africa but all over the world.

4.8. Globalization

Globalization, the changing social trends and perceptions among people, have also contributed to the lack of peace in Africa. Weiss (2004) points out that peace and conflict are not the sole domain of the state apparatus. In most African conflicts, individuals, clans, tribes, and private militias are the units of war. In addition, post-economic transformation and globalization have opened markets for trafficking in weapons, drugs and human beings that both causes and escalates conflict.

5. Way Forward

The media as well as the church are powerful instruments for change and transformation of societies. They need to re-examine their traditions and adapt to society's changing needs. Rayudu (1993) points out that media must be aware of the need for new thinking with a scientific approach temper of mind and imbibe certain values which would promote a willing contribution from each for the good of the entire community.

Seeking solutions to the numerous problems afflicting societies and nations especially with regard to conflict is a good contribution of the church and the media. However, what they should work most hard at is the task of informing and educating people so that they encourage a critical awareness of the problems. In order to be relevant today and to deal with the criticism and scepticism normally levelled towards media as well as other entrenched institutions such as the church, the two institutions must be credible and take the lead as seekers of truth and justice. This means inaccuracies, bias, carelessness, omission of facts or distortion of news for media should be a thing of the past. As Howard (2008) aptly puts it, the most powerful tools for the journalists are the words they use as well as the pictures, the sounds. They can use their tools to build understanding instead of discord.

Networking and collaboration between the media and the church can completely revolutionize and transform the face of society for the better. The church can publish Christian magazines using media to tell people more about the church and influence behaviour. Church programs may be launched directly through local media such as the television, radio and print. In Kenya, media houses such as *KTN, KBC, Citizen, NTV, Fish FM, Hope FM, Sayare FM, Family TV, Waumini* Radio and others are already engaged in extending the reach of the church. Many of these programs extol the virtues of godliness, love and peace, a practice that helps to engrain these values among people, eventually contributing immensely towards peace building. Singo (2004) suggests that the church and the media can be a formidable force if they work together towards achieving their goals. To ensure peace in communities Singo (ibid.) reveals that both the church and the mass media can tailor civic education about citizens' immediate environment, their neighbours and their country to depict the benefits of co-existence with their immediate neighbours.

Like the media, the church must invest in research in order to lend authoritative credibility to both the media and the church. Such researches must be inter-disciplinary and integrative, involving as many players as possible, covering diverse topical issues and in partnerships with other stakeholder. Additionally, the outcomes of research activities will assist in tackling issues of conflict, disease, poverty and unemployment which threaten the world peace and impede peace building efforts.

Community media can and should be used to enhance peace in the family, communities and nations. Communal mobilization towards peace may be achieved through community radio, newsletters and other cultural activities such as drama, musical fetes, folklore and poetry. These activities if publicized by media act as a magnetic uniting force, bringing people together. Together with the mainstream media, the church can engage in activities like drama, essay, poster and photography competitions based on conflict and peace building themes. Media on its part must give early warning of impending conflicts or violence as well as provide the public with timely, accurate, balanced analysis of current conflicts. Howard (2008) asserts that the most powerful tools for journalists are the words they use as well as the pictures and sounds they employ. Such powerful, potent tools can and should be used to build understanding among people. It is true that the public have a right to know but the media must be engaged in more investigative journalism, champion freedom of expression and encourage tolerance.

Legal issues have a lot to do with the presence or the absence of peace. Therefore, for peace to be sustainable effective means of managing conflict non-violently must be rooted in the social structure and the law of the land. The International Alert Resource Pack for Conflict Transformation (1996) caution that such issues need to be in the form of strong civil institutions, the rule of law, the impartiality of police and the judiciary, a representative government and effective participation of the people in public life. Kamenju (2003) argue that governments can ensure a strong legal base for peace by recognizing the traditional structures of governance and linking them with government structures to enhance law and order, especially in resource sharing and peace building.

Advocacy and lobbying for peace is a job that should not be the preserve of human rights activists. The church as well as the media has to in their own unique ways agitate for peace, for justice, for community mobilization, for worthy causes and empowerment. The Nairobi Peace Initiative Africa report (2006) points out that the commitment to peace must be coupled with a deepened understanding of the nature of conflict without stopping at the level of analysis and criticisms of the prevailing circumstances. Analysis must then be quickly followed by action which includes stakeholders making a commitment to change and then institutionalize this commitment in policies, channelling resources appropriately. The church and the mass media must hold the leadership to account on issues of democracy, security and economy. Though the church may not want to make politics part of their everyday affairs, she should be seen to take a stand and to add her voice to the chorus for peace. After all, without peace in the family and in the nation, of what use will the gospel be?

Media should join the church in understanding the consciousness of people in order to understand their plight, publicize it and get help. 'Labeling' has to stop in the media circles. Referring to people in ethnic terms as 'Kao', 'Jaluo', 'Okuyo' even in popular FM stations should not happen as it reinforces stereotypes that are later used to perpetuate violence and fan ethnic animosities. Nyamnjoh (2005) reveals that this is something very dangerous and able to pull at conflict, war, and turmoil like a magnet. Media in Kenya promote peace by providing space for divergent views in 'call-in' sessions where the crew engage politicians from different parties and of diverse views in healthy round table discussions, fostering diversity of opinion and hopefully understanding. The media should not be overwhelmed or controlled by powerful people who want to suppress information and use their authority to manipulate seekers of news. It would be equally foolish to ignore them and their activities as this is what constitutes news. The church too should not cater to the whims of the 'corrupt rich' who hide in church and buy their innocence using hefty donations to the church and its activities.

The media must be gender sensitive when reporting on conflict and peace issues. Similarly, the church must move away from the traditional approach where the views of the members of the female sex were considered non-existent or inferior to those of their male counterparts. Modern communities are changing in terms of perceptions and the church has to embrace this dynamism. All voices must be heard as both men and women bring unique and important contributions to the table when it comes to early warning systems or mechanisms and peace building (Heinrich Boell Foundation, 2002). Apollos (2010) reveals that even in traditional society among the Marakwet and Pokot communities in Kenya, women play a very significant role in peace making. If a conflict escalated, women would go to the battle field and stand between the warring groups, raising up their belts decorated with the cowrie shells and popularly known as 'legetio'. Immediately the fighting will cease and peace was maintained among community members. Women also helped to diffuse bloody wars through their intermediary role of being able to cross over to any of the warring sides without being killed (Apollos, 2010: 175). Early warning systems in most communities have been managed by mostly women who act as peace emissaries. Religion has a way of appealing to people's finer sensibilities. Media should make use of this by publicizing church activities revolving around peace and conflict. Media should specifically report on the church's direct intervention in conflict in the way of material assistance, psychological support or counselling and support groups. Any appeal by religious leaders to parties involved in conflict should be publicized by the media to calm the masses and create assurance among the people. Church leaders are well placed to directly and positively prevail upon their followers to adhere to certain behaviour or attitude to achieve peace.

Training offered to people working in the church and church organizations must be integrative and must encompass changing trends in family life, politics, gender mainstreaming, economics, media and technological advancements. This integration can well stretch to partnerships and linkages with other stake holders. Weiss (2004:9) suggests that governments and donors can create and promote school and adult education curricula based on proactive conflict resolution and peace building. They can also integrate adult literacy drives in disarmament initiatives.

Increasing information available on peace building and peaceful solutions to conflict by both media and the church will help create awareness and educate people on the adverse effects of conflict, war and violence. Today with the advent of technology, the communication sphere has witnessed a multiplication and acceleration of channels of transmission and exchange of ideas. This has made contact with sources, people and destinations an every day possibility (Mcquail, 2005). The church needs to keep abreast with the changing technological advancements in the media world that can assist in modernizing their approaches and teaching for the good of their congregations

Funding cross-cultural and youth activities can assist the church, the media and other stakeholders to divert potential gun users from violence. Weiss (2004:106) reveals that in the urban slums around Nairobi and in rural pastoralist areas around Lokichoggio in Turkana, youth are empowering themselves by forming associations that promote inter-ethnic and inter-group dialogue and provide opportunities not only for peace building but also for joint activities that promote economic self-sustainability and growth. (Dar Nyawalo, , 2011) suggests that all peace interventions should be based on the recognition of the need to select and adopt methods that can connect to the people's knowledge and to their social realities in a harmonious or peaceful way. In addition, for an intervention to be sustainable, it should be conceived as a process not merely as a project (Ibid).

6. Conclusion

As they go about the business of pursuing the truth and transforming the lives of masses in profound ways through their relationships and communication with them, the media and the church must take cognizance of the crucial role they play in the quest for peace and sustainable development in the world today. They must recognize that aside from science and technology, they are the other two most influential forces that hold society's fate within their grasp potentially able to either harm society or enrich it through communication. The church and the mass media need not to give up the quest for peace in Africa. In the words of Mason (2003), no one has ever achieved genuine success who did not at any one time teeter on the edge of disaster. The church must tap into the rich potentialities of the media world in order to succeed in evangelizing the church among the nations of the world. Conversely, the media needs the church as a partner in its role as the watchdog of society. There is a highly productive symbiotic relationship that should be encouraged. Using the combined power of the media and the church to promote peace is a sure way of managing conflicts and empowering all members of society for posterity.

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