

## THE VISION OF THE CONGRESS ON CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN NIGERIA (COCEN)

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"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

For centuries Christians have acknowledged a timelessness about the formula presented in 2 Chronicles 7:13 and 14 which makes it applicable to all ages. That is why we should contemplate once again the attitudes we should take, the prayers we should pray and the ethical action we should take if we are to see the nation of Nigeria truly healed by God.

The national executive committee of the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria (or COCEN as we know it in its shortened form) believes deeply that there is hope for Nigeria. It is not a superficial hope, for we are not naive about the awesome problems we confront as a nation. But we do believe there is hope. We believe that scriptural praying must be the foundation of our approach, and we have demonstrated that persistently ever since COCEN was formally established in late 1994. We also believe that direct ethical action must follow such praying--action which truly enables us to forsake our wicked ways.

COCEN is not the first national effort since Nigerian independence to attempt to solve the mounting problems of national corruption. Under the administration of President Shagari we experienced the National Ethical Reorientation Programme. Under Generals Buhari and Idiagbon there was a more comprehensive effort styled the National Consciousness and Mobilization Crusade, leading to the launching on March 20, 1984, of the War Against Indiscipline (WAI). And in more recent years, under the regime of President Babangida, we experienced the nearly still-born War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAI-C).

As much good as may have been accomplished by some of these efforts, at so-called moral revolution in Nigeria, all of them have shared certain fundamental flaws. And whether these flaws are viewed as fatal or not--something arm-chair pundits can argue about at their leisure over the coming decades--I believe they should be instructive in our attempt to succeed where they have failed. For COCEN was raised by God not simply to beat the same worn drums and shout the same worn slogans, but to bring about real and lasting change.

First, from a strictly scriptural standpoint past efforts toward moral revolution have failed to adequately recognize that the key to moral revolution of any kind of biblical nature lies with the people of God--not with government as such, and not even with organized religion as such, but with the true people of God. God told Solomon that it would be "my people, who are called by my name" who would spell the distinctive difference. As well-meaning as they may be, deep ethical

revolution in contemporary Nigeria cannot be achieved as the result of governmental stratagems, any more than they can emerge from broad pronouncements from church leaders or church councils.

Second, and closely related, has been the basic flawed assumption that the problem of ethical failure, and the effecting of ethical change, is almost exclusively a matter of leadership. Admittedly, leadership is important. Yet the idea that national moral change must emanate from the top of the society has not always been borne out by history.

Third, there has been the fatal assumption that the Church in Nigeria can lead the nation in moral revolution simply because it is the Church--without first engaging in deep repentance. Moral pronouncements from church leadership have provided continuing goads to government in recent years, we quickly admit. Yet the Church has very miserably failed at the simple but profound task of self-criticism and genuine repentance. This is why statements condemning the errors of government and the ills of society from executives of the Christian Association of Nigeria, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, or from the Roman Catholic hierarchy will have only minimal impact until they lead the way in bringing their own people into deep repentance--repentance that goes beyond words and rituals and results in massive contrition, and open confession and restitution both inside and outside the Church. The failure to do so has caused the Church in recent years to become stunningly powerless against the tide of corruption inundating the society. Both CAN and various other Christian umbrella organizations, as well as the multiplied hundreds of Christian denominations, have forfeited their ability to effect deep moral change simply because they are almost inextricably a part of the very problem they should be solving. Frankly, it is not a very encouraging picture.

Having reviewed some of the past attempts at Moral Revolution in Nigeria, what can we say about the need for a movement like the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria? Here I move quickly to say that no matter how discouraging it may seem that we have yet to successfully tackle the issue of national moral revolution the need is today even greater than it has been at any past time in our history. In August 1979 General Olusegun Obasanjo, until the previous year our head of state, declared that Nigeria would become one of the ten leading nations in the world by the end of the century. Yet just four years later one of the celebrated writers of the country noted that "Nigeria is not a great country. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun." He continued, saying that "Corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage; and Nigeria will die if we keep pretending that she is only slightly indisposed."

Those of us who live in Nigeria day after day hardly need to be convinced that this nation is in serious trouble in virtually every sector of its life. Embezzlement, bribery and greed continue to ravage our economy. The problems are enormous, and even under the brightest of expectations they will not go away anytime in the near future. Our

educational system continues in deep trouble. Standards of excellence we were once proud of have been largely lost. It is sad that in politics selfishness is the rule of the game. True public servants in high office seem to be a thing of the past for the most part. Nepotism and tribalism are taken for granted. As in all other sectors, corruption is the order of the day. And, alas, we turn to religion only to discover that the problems are as great or greater than in the other sectors. The Church that should be a saviour to the society has instead often become the curse of the society. Not just hundreds, but multiplied thousands of churches vie for the attention of an increasingly sceptic and disappointed populace. The same selfishness that characterizes the political scene has ignominiously invaded the church world. Economic greed--the love of money--is not only unchecked and unrebuked, but also in a startling number of cases provides the fundamental rationale for the formation of many churches.

The result, frankly, is that Nigerian society today totters on the brink of potential disaster. Our problems are not small, they are not superficial, and they do not admit to easy solutions.

It was against such a background that the vision for the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria was born. After incubating the vision for over two years--discussing it among not more than a half-dozen people--a meeting with six church leaders marked the official birth of COCEN. The date was November 30, 1994, and the venue was the Sacred Heart Pastoral Centre in Jos, Plateau State.

At that meeting a national executive committee of twenty-five persons was appointed--drawn from a broad spectrum of geographic, ethnic and church backgrounds. They were men and women known for their personal stand for Christian ethics, and they came into the COCEN movement not as official representatives of their respective churches but as a result of their personal ethical conviction. That group of people, with occasional minor changes in the composition of the twenty-five members, has met since then on nine occasions, directing and shaping the forward movement of COCEN.

The first stratagem of COCEN was to look inward--in an effort to call the Body of Christ in Nigeria to scriptural repentance. It was our conviction that before we could talk about direct ethical action and before we could design strategies for moral change in the nation it was necessary to stop blame-shifting and to call ourselves, as the people of God, to heart-felt repentance. That is why all throughout 1995 and into 1996 our focus was on scriptural prayers of repentance. We took our cue from 2 Chronicles 7:13 and 14. We listened carefully to the prayers of such Old Testament prophets as Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel--who led the remnant of the people of God in deep repentance after their nation had forsaken God's covenant and incurred the awful wrath of God.

Throughout 1995 we moved into all thirty states of Nigeria, organizing state committees as best we could within the limits of our manpower and financial capabilities. We climaxed that first phase of our movement

in November 1995 with three-day national prayer conferences conducted in twenty-nine of Nigeria's thirty state capitals, plus Abuja. It was a time of serious falling on our faces before God, and a time for us to learn to stop praying about national corruption in the third person and to start confessing our own complicity and culpability. Moreover, we declared 1996 as a "Year of Prayer for the Nation", in which hopefully the same prayers would continue to be prayed until they had saturated the entire country. And I thank God that here and there throughout the nation, both before and after our own prayer emphasis, there were dozens of other similar prayer and repentance initiatives that were inspired by the Holy Spirit. The spontaneous emergence of such prayer movements in various parts of the country were clear proof that something was being engineered and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

It would be foolish for me to assume that we have prayed all the prayers that need to be prayed for this nation, and that all that is left for us is to now get off our knees and act. May God forbid such a misunderstanding. 2 Chronicles 7:14 makes it very clear that we are not only to pray but to "seek God's face"--an expression which clearly implies that we are to continue to pray until the problem is solved, and the clear smile of God is evident. Seeking God involves a commitment to continual prayer and obedience regardless of the time frame. We are not to pray one day, one week, one month, or one year, but literally until we have the smile of God. We cannot relent.

At the same time, though, we have in 1997 begun to shift our focus to include the final phrase of the requirements God laid down for Solomon in our text: we must truly "turn from our wicked ways". One of the most startling and disturbing developments within the past twenty-four months in Nigerian Christianity is an increasing phenomenon of Christians praying and praying and praying and then arising from their knees to continue their evil ways--only returning a few hours or days later to pray and pray and pray some more.

That is why in 1997 we are deliberately turning our focus to direct ethical and moral action. This year our attention is clearly riveted on the five-day national congress on Christian ethics which is set for the first week of November in Abuja. To this convention we intend to call 2,000 carefully selected Christians--drawn from all thirty-six states and from all across the Body of Christ. These delegates will be divided into thirteen workshops, each of which will examine Christian ethics within a particular social sphere. We want those workshops to carefully look at the ethical problems in their sphere encountered by Nigerians. We want them to discover the biblical principles that relate to those problems. We want them to determine where Nigerian Christians should take their stand morally in order to truly turn from their wicked ways and pursue the righteousness that exalts a nation.

Last year the national executive committee of COCEN appointed chairs for these thirteen workshops, and already across this nation these chairs are working with core committees to begin this important work. My hat goes off already to these people. In Lagos we have Gamaliel

Onosode and Moses Ihonde co-chairing the committee on Ethics in Business and Industry, Dr. Chris Omeben chairing the committee on Ethics in Law Enforcement, Nebolisa Arah chairing the committee on Ethics in Banking and Finance, and Clem Baiye chairing the committee on Ethics in Journalism. In Ilorin Dr. E. E. Soladoye is chairing the committee on Ethics in Government and Civil Service. In Abuja Professor Charles Wambebe chairs the committee on Ethics in Medicine. In Kaduna Justice James Ogebe is chairing the committee on Ethics in Law and Judicial. In Jos Professor Aaron Gana is chairing the committee on Ethics in Politics, and Sulaiman Jakonda is chairing the committee on Ethics in Natural Resources. In Enugu Dr. Don Odunze is chairing the committee on Ethics in Family Life. In Port Harcourt Professor Francis Onofeghara is chairing the committee on Ethics in Education. The Olu of Warri is chairing the committee on Ethics in Traditional Leadership. And in Akure Bishop Emmanuel Gbonigi chairs the committee on Ethics in Church Life.

Some of these committees have already met several times, and all of them will continue their work throughout the coming six months in preparation for the November congress. At the time of the congress they will release the results of their work, including papers and sample codes of ethics. And then as the congress progresses we will jointly produce and release our single most important document, which we will call simply the NIGERIA COVENANT. This covenant, which hopefully will be succinct, direct and powerful in nature, we believe will give the Church in Nigeria an instrument with which to put her foot down morally. It will involve not only a pledge to a decisive stand on the key ethical issues where corruption is eroding our society, but will also involve a pledge for covenant signers to stand together and support one another in their ethical stand.

This last element is particularly important in view of the fact that many of the literally millions of strongly moral-minded Christians in Nigeria today feel isolated and alone when it comes to open resistance to the massive extortion that surrounds us. We feel that if we speak out we will not only be the odd one out, but that we will get ourselves inextricably entangled in complications. But we have truly kept silence too long, and the NIGERIA COVENANT therefore involves a solemn pledge for serious-minded Nigerian Christians to support each other in a decisive stand for righteousness.

One of the most important premises of COCEN is that major social change does not require the action of a majority of the population. Much to the contrary, there are excellent historic examples of major change emanating from small minorities. A recent, though very negative, example would be what has been achieved in the United States by the action of the homosexual lobby. In a country where there are according to some authoritative surveys not more than one or two percent practising homosexuals the galvanizing of that small percentage has virtually turned the entire society around in what it allows and prohibits in this area. And of course there are more positive examples, such as what happened in eighteenth-century England, as we

will mention further in a moment.

The Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria moves forward on this firm premise: that within Nigeria there is a core minority of Christians who are adamantly moral-minded, and who--if they can only be catalyzed into united and open action--hold the key to national moral turn-around. These are the men and women in this society who when given the choice between right and wrong will choose right every single time, without a moment's quandary, even though it may cost them very dearly. And COCEN has been raised by God to remind those very people that they are not alone, and that they in fact have the potential to constitute the social critical mass that can save this nation.

Social theorists have for long pointed out the importance of the small percentage of true innovators in the reshaping of social groups. Everett Rogers, in his book Diffusion of Innovation, for example, demonstrates that social groups are normally made up of four types of people: Innovators, Early Adopters, Late Adopters and Laggards. Innovators, according to Rogers, normally make up 15% of the group and are the people who introduce change. Early Adopters, who are those who can be relatively quickly convinced by the innovators, make up 35%. Late Adopters, who make up another 35%, are those who can be convinced eventually to come along. The Laggards, making up the final 15%, are those who may be very late or who may never come along. It is further instructive to note that Rogers claims that TRUE INNOVATORS in a given social group make up about 2%.

I am urging us to realize today that within Nigeria when it comes to Christian morality we do have two percent true innovators, and I also believe we have the ten or fifteen percent of other potential innovators for national moral change. This is why the central focus of COCEN in 1997 is HOW TO GALVANIZE THIS CORE TEN PERCENT INTO ETHICAL ACTION--action which can in turn begin to transform the entire society. This is why we are calling together a mass of 2,000 delegates in November--not because 2,000 people are needed to carry on fruitful ethics discussions, but because we believe that if they are carefully selected and strongly motivated these are the men and women who can, and will return from Abuja to all thirty-six states and begin to lead a grass-roots ethical turn-around in this nation.

If you have followed me carefully throughout this presentation you will be quick to acknowledge that the real test of COCEN will not be what happens in November, but what happens after November. Right from the beginning we have known that in COCEN the big issue will be implementation. That is why we who are a part of the national executive have reminded ourselves over and over again that we are working on something that is long-range. Next month the executive committee will be working with others invited as part of a special think-tank to ask the questions about how we can both motivate and direct the November delegates to go back into all thirty-six states with grassroots ethical action.

In summary, I would like to remind us of what I feel are the five distinctive elements of the vision of the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria. If we continue to focus on these distinctives I believe we will have every reason to see this movement through to a resounding climax and a truly healed nation here in Nigeria.

First, COCEN right from the beginning has taken a strong position on the primacy of prayer, and particularly of prayers of biblical repentance. That is why now, even into the third year of this movement, we are celebrating a conference focused largely on prayer. Only as we continue in a spirit of true humility and repentance will we continue to experience God's favor. As I read the literature being generated in the Nigerian press these days I am dismayed to note that one of the most common themes in editorial analyses of national corruption is that "Nigerians are not more corrupt than other nationalities". I can understand the interest in Nigerian self-defense viz-a-viz a nearly constant chorus from outside the country pointing out rampant corruption among us, yet such statements as those cited are not conducive to true repentance, and under the circumstances are a sure guarantee of continuing blame-shifting. The maintaining of a false sense of self-respect still leaves our problems unsolved, while blame-shifting anesthetizes us against the painful cures that we need.

Second, COCEN is fundamentally a grassroots movement requiring continuing and deepening grassroots involvement. If we cannot and do not catalyze grassroots action then we will fail just as miserably as the moral revolution movements that have preceded us. The ultimate test of COCEN will never be what we say in conferences but what happens on the streets of places like Abeokuta, Warri and Bauchi.

Third, COCEN is taking seriously the need to examine ethics in every social sphere in this nation. We have no less serious concern about the reform of ethics in the church as we do about the reform of ethics in business and industry or the ethics of law enforcement. The breadth of ethical concern expressed in our thirteen ethics workshops indicates our understanding that the need is universal.

Fourth, COCEN moves forward on the conviction that serious-minded Christians in the country can be catalyzed through the establishment, promulgation and signing of a serious covenant. Chinua Achebe made the observation several years ago that "No one can do much about the weather; we must accept it and live with or under it. But national bad habits are a different matter; we resign ourselves to them at our peril." COCEN is convinced that the strategic remnant of strongly moral-minded Christians in this country can be galvanized through a common covenant to spring into ethical action, and that particularly after the November ethics congress a grassroots moral revolution can be launched which will revolve around common convictions and common pledges. Two hundred years ago Edmund Burke declared that "the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." That statement seems crafted for our own day, and certainly is true in Nigeria.

Fifth, and finally, COCEN focuses on the potential true innovators in Nigerian society. Someone has asked, "Why do the good among us seem so helpless while the worst are full of energy?" In 1997, and in the years ahead, COCEN is out to turn that statement around.

How do we summarize what the Congress on Christian Ethics in Nigeria is all about? Is this another exercise in futility mounted by people with unrealistic expectations? Is it based on unproven hypotheses that will not likely prove the test of reality? Obviously, only time will tell the real story. But in conclusion let me tell you about another time and another place where it did happen, and where an entire country was brought back from disaster.

The time was 300 years ago, and the place was England. As the seventeenth century drew to a close and the eighteenth century dawned England found itself in one of the most worrisome social disasters of its history. Those who think things could hardly be worse in today's Nigeria might take comfort in the fact that in the early 1700s England was every bit as bad--and probably worse. Wide-spread drunkenness, immorality and poverty combined with bribery, smuggling and every other form of public and private corruption to make it a scene of destitution and potentially for total social collapse. As a matter of fact, France, which was going through some of the same social deterioration, was to experience before the end of that century total descent into a bloody and chaotic revolution.

Yet England, which by reasonable expectations should have experienced its own disaster, was spared that ugly fate. Instead, we now look to eighteenth century England for one of the brightest social and moral turn-arounds in modern times. We sometimes call it the Evangelical Revival, for it was the preaching work of men like John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield that began to turn the tide. Yet we would miss much of this exciting story if we assumed that the essence of England's national turn-around was in the preaching of these great evangelists or even in the public response to it. A very important key, I believe, was that God gave John Wesley the genius to recognize the latent power of the masses and to painstakingly begin to organize at the grassroots level small groups of the most common people who began on a weekly basis to hold one another accountable for simple moral action. Wesley was insistent not just that the people hear the Gospel and repent of their sins, but that they hold each other accountable to act out Christian moral principles in their daily lives.

And all over England people began to make interpersonal covenants with each other, and to hold one another accountable. Something began to happen that no government power was able to do, and indeed which at first no government personage was even properly aware of. The result was that without a single helping hand from the top of the society England began to pull back from the brink of social collapse. Good men--in most cases very simple and seemingly insignificant people--began to craft a new England.



Over a century later, as recounted by one of Wesley's later biographers, a foreign visitor visited Cornwall--which had been the center of one of the most socially degraded sectors of English society at the opening of the previous century. "I see you are a hard-working, industrious and honest people here", noted the stranger. "Can you explain why that is?" "Yes," came the reply of the Cornwall native, "There once came a man among us. His name was John Wesley."

I want to impress on us today that the last chapter in Nigerian history has not yet been written. Today the clouds may hang low, and the prospects may look dim. Indeed some have given up hope--perhaps even many. But we are here to say that though we dare not be self-deceiving about the extent of the problems there is great hope. And that hope lies not so much with government, not so much with the so-called experts, but with that small minority of Nigerian men and women who are ready to stand up with all the force of their Christian conviction and say "Enough is enough", and then move out in united ethical action to shape a better tomorrow for our children and our grandchildren.