

The Challenge of the Green Revolution to the Church

Address presented to the first Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Jos

26th May, 1980¹

Except for the vegetable garden of my father which I had to tend during my childhood, I cannot boast of having enjoyed a wide agricultural experience. Nevertheless, I am grateful for the invitation to share with you some thoughts on the challenge that agriculture presents to the church today, or, if you prefer, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) or the Green Revolution.² For more than a decade I have been an evangelist in the deep rural south of Gongola State. I have trekked with farmers, I have socialized with them, I have prayed with them, laughed with them and, on occasion, even fought with them. That decade has taught me something about the peculiar problems faced by the small farmer in Nigeria. You, who are basically a diocese of urban people, at this point have little rural contact.

To begin with, I would like to present you with some reasons or motivations that may prompt you to think seriously about your role in rural development. I begin in a negative tone.

The main reason for a Christian concern for rural development or agriculture is *not* first of all as a *handmaid to evangelism*. Not infrequently Christians have regarded agriculture as well as medical work and, sometimes, even education, as secondary in importance to evangelism. Missions would engage in agriculture because it would aid them in breaking down barriers of suspicion and hostility. It should aid in getting converts. In fact, in this way of thinking, if it fails to produce converts, then it has not served its real purpose. I consider myself an evangelist,

¹ This lecture has been published in *The Nigerian Christian* in two parts. First part has the same title as this paper (Sept/1980, pp. 7, 15). The title of the second part is "How the Church Can Be Involved in Rural Development" (Oct/1980, pp. 3, 14).

² These were two programmes that successive Federal Governments launched around that time.

even now in my service to the Institute of Church and Society (ICS). However, I object to placing agriculture in a position subservient to evangelism. It has a legitimate place of its own in God's creational scheme of things. We shall soon indicate various aspects of that place.

The second negative motivation I mention is the interest of the city and town dweller. Your diocese, I repeat, consists primarily of town dwellers who need the farmers to feed them. Thus, we have every reason to encourage the farmer, every *selfish* reason. Though I do not dispute that farmers have that role to play and even such a duty, it is often a one-way relationship that profits the city dweller more than the farmer. It is often a relationship of exploitation in which the farmer ends up with little money for his crop, while the city dweller makes off with all the amenities and conveniences of life. I profoundly hope and trust that it is not your intention to prolong that type of pattern and that this should constitute your main interest in agriculture. Our interest in agriculture must be more revolutionary than that. I will return to that point later.

I now move on to a number of positive considerations.

(1) We ought to be interested as a Christian community in the development of agriculture because of its created primary place in human life, in the life of my neighbour. Agriculture provides the basis for everyone's life, both poor and rich. The first commandment in the Bible is to subdue the earth and agriculture is a primary way in which man obeys that mandate. When people have no food, everything else becomes rather unimportant. Loving your neighbour includes wishing him his daily bread. In a day when receiving one's daily bread cannot simply be taken for granted anymore, it is a Christian imperative to have an active interest in providing food for our neighbour.

(2) The first commandment in the Bible, to develop the earth, is obeyed in a very concrete and primary way in farming, but this commandment has reference to much more than farming, namely to culture in general. Modern culture is increasingly complex; it is opening up at a rapid rate in both a good and a bad sense. As our culture develops, we need people with time and talents to provide leadership in the new areas of culture. These people need to eat, but if they all

have to grow their own food as well, there will be little time or energy left for them to devote to other cultural pursuits. Thus, we are now in a position in Nigeria where more people are needed in other areas of life and these increasing numbers of people need food. As Christians, we are co-responsible for the development of our national culture and thus we must help provide the basic necessities for that development. *We need not more farmers, but we need better farmers* so that the same number of people or fewer can produce more food and leave others free for other aspects of culture.

(3) Our expanding population needs more food, but traditional farming methods are inefficient and insufficient. The reasons for the inefficiency of traditional methods are deeply religious. I do not have to tell you the conservative influence our ancestral traditions have on the development of agriculture. You know that the dictates of ancestors can prohibit certain types of farming or from farming in certain places. You know that fears for certain streams, rocks or trees, dread for evil spirits, all of these can constitute barriers to the free development of modern agriculture. And even when many of our farmers have become Christians, the traditionalism that was part of their earlier religion has frequently retained its hold on much of their thinking and practice. These are *spiritual* restraints.

Modern secular agriculturalists are interested in increased production; they have little sympathy for the type of religious restraints we have just discussed. They will be satisfied with increased production even if it should mean an empty soul. However, the Christian church does not wish to create a spiritual vacuum in the hearts of farmers. We need to give them a new Biblical view of the relationship of God and other powers to farming. We want to retain the tie between the spiritual and the agricultural in such a way that the salvation of Christ is experienced by the farmer not only as a personal salvation, but also as agricultural salvation. Christ has set him free from the traditional restraints and fears. All trees, rivers, rocks, plants, areas are open to responsible farming. They are all given by God to humanity to rule over, to have dominion over them. Furthermore, God has placed all sorts of laws in His creation which, when discovered, help us in our exploitation of the soil. Thus, the church has a *pastoral* role *vis a vis* the traditional farmer. We

can provide him with the *freedom* of new methods and crops, while the agriculturalist can help him with the technicalities.

(4) The church, furthermore, has an *ethical responsibility* to the nation. The church has been one of the main agencies in reducing mortality, especially infant mortality, particularly through her medical ministries. This has resulted in a population explosion with a greatly increased need for food. This has been an uneven development: development in health care and longer life without concomitant increase in food production. Since the Christian community has contributed greatly to that problem – and it is a blessed problem to be sure – it now has an ethical obligation to help solve this resultant problem as well. I am not suggesting that clergy therefore must spend most of their time farming. The clergy are not the whole church. I am saying that the church must impress upon her members, particularly those with agricultural abilities, that as a community we owe it to the nation that, having contributed to the increase in the number of mouths to feed, we now owe it to the community to contribute to the increase of food.

All of these are reasons that the church of Christ, including the Jos Diocese of the Anglican Church, should be interested in agriculture. These are the reasons we ought to actively support OFN or the Green Revolution, etc. But now we face the bigger question as to the *how* of our involvement.

It is not a new question for the northern churches, for they have already established many rural development agencies that are scattered throughout the north. ECWA, COCIN, EYN, RCM, CRCN, EKAN Muri, NKST, LCCN – all of these churches that operate in the areas covered by your diocese and all of them have extensive experience in agricultural development. Many of these are very lively projects and a lot of prayer, money, effort and time has been spent on them. If you need technical advice, you will be better off by turning to them.

While I am impressed with the efforts of these church organizations, I have also learned to become cynical of parallel government efforts. In fact, I have the impression that our governments themselves are becoming doubtful about the effectiveness of their programmes. It was only a few years ago that OFN was

introduced. Now we have switched to the Green Revolution. While the former emphasis on the part of the government was on the small farmer, I have the impression that our governments are switching more and more to large-scale projects that involve much money and machinery. I read occasional statements in the newspaper to the effect that we should not pin our hopes any longer on the small farmer. It would appear that we are giving up on that very large group in our society.

There is nothing wrong with large-scale farming. However, it is time we ask ourselves *why* the ordinary farmer has not responded to government proddings through the years. The reason is not far to seek, I submit. I assume that those who determine policies do so with the purest of intentions, but these pure intentions get garbled as they reach into the lower chains of command. The promised fertilizer ends up on the black market in many cases. The tractor one is supposed to be able to hire at a reasonable and subsidized rate seldom ends up on the farms of those who most need it. The vaccine promised for one's chickens either is not available or is diluted. And the farmer himself? Well, he will shrug his shoulder. He will complain to his colleagues. He decides in most cases that there is little to be done about this state of affairs. Through the years he has become cynical and has largely turned his back upon government schemes.³

It is precisely at this point, I believe, that the church can strike her most imaginative blow for the green revolution to become successful. Some time ago the ICS called a consultation on rural development. The question was asked what do church rural development agencies do when the farmers are cheated out of these promised services and supplies? Their almost unanimous reply was that when the people charged with supplying these items fail to do so, the church's agencies seek to fill the vacuum. They will then supply the fertilizer, the tractor or oxen, the vaccine. Though this policy helps fill the immediate need, it does nothing to solve the basic problem. It only serves to take the pressure off those who are paid to supply them. It was decided that a better way ultimately is to help

³ I refer you to the following article of mine for concrete examples: ["Christians and Mobilization for Development in Nigeria,"](#)

the farmers themselves come to an awareness of their rights. Secondly, farmers must be shown that as a Christian community, the Body of Christ, we must stand together in the face of such circumstances. Villagers can get together and take action. Co-operatives can provide the framework for discussion and action both. In short, the traditional fatalism so deeply embedded in traditional culture must somehow be broken. This, we repeat, is where the church must strike her blow.

We are really talking about injustice, about the problem of oppression of the poor. Has it ever occurred to you how strongly the Bible speaks about oppression of the poor? Have you ever heard the *curse* the Word of God speaks over those who are responsible for such situations? Have you ever related this problem to Christ's own explanation of his mission as having come to break the chains of oppression? The new heaven and earth we are awaiting is one in which justice shall dwell, according to Peter, and one in which no clever and "respectable" citizen shall ever again walk off with the produce of his less sophisticated neighbour.

Lack of time prevents us from further developing this scheme. However, the findings of the consultation are available from reports published by the ICS in both English and Hausa.⁴ In these reports suggestions are given how church leaders can mobilize the farmers when they are subjected to such indignities.

Only a few years ago, it was said that Africa affords no good soil for Communism to flourish. The last few years have shown how false this assumption is. However, if you take a good look at every nation now under a Marxist regime in Africa, you will note that such regimes have without exception arisen in the context of oppression. And in most of the cases, the oppressors were Christian, at least in name. Some were foreign Christians; others were African Christians.

Our government wants a Green Revolution and so do we. However, a prior revolution has to take place, not a Marxist one, but one led by the Holy Spirit in the hearts and minds of our farmers. And no agency is equipped to lead in that revolution, except the church, the Temple of that Spirit. If we do not come in the

⁴ I refer you to the list of documents under "Development, Oppression, Justice" in the Bibliography in Section 2 of this page.

name of Christ and lead the farmer out of his captivity into freedom, then some other demagogue will sooner or later arise to the occasion in the name of another, less holy, spirit.

Once we have shaken the farmer out of his slumber, out of his fears and fatalism, then the way will be open for a real Green Revolution.

If you as a new diocese want to contribute imaginatively, this is where your emphasis should lie. It is an emphasis that existing church rural development programmes have failed to incorporate, possibly because their organization is not geared to that kind of radical development. You have no such organizations or programmes as yet. You are free to begin afresh. I pray to God that you will be up to the challenge. That will be evangelism in context. That will be wholistic evangelism aimed at the deepest problems facing our nation.

RISE UP, YOU MEN AND WOMEN OF GOD!