

Testing the Limits of Liberation Theology: Skills Training for Adult Women in the Techiman Diocese

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Abstract

Christianity was introduced in Ghana by the first missionaries in 1482. Christian theology was limited to the liberation of the faithful from the oppression of sin, and preparing souls for salvation. This agenda left out the economic needs of the faithful, particularly women. Women play an important role in the Church, yet they are generally oppressed by poverty due to lack of skills for employment. The need for both mundane and spiritual support have now become an important part of Liberation Theology in the Catholic Church. The Christian Mothers' Association provides its members with skills training to ensure their economic liberation. This paper aimed at testing how the skills programme is liberating women from the oppression of poverty within the Diocese of Techiman.



Keywords: liberation, mundane, theology, skills, oppression, women

Introduction

Christianity was introduced to Ghana by the first missionaries in 1482. It can be argued here that the "Cross" followed trade and colonisation of the then Gold Coast. For several 100 years in the history of Christianity in Ghana, theology was limited to the liberation of the faithful from the oppression and clutches of sin by preparing their souls for salvation in the hereafter. Women, for example, have played and still play various important roles in the Catholic Church through various women's groups since its arrival in the country in 1482. One very important women's group in the Catholic Church is the Christian Mothers' Association [CMA]. The members of this association, which has branches in all the Parishes throughout the country, sweep or clean chapels, the church or the entire mission, wash linen and curtains and cook for the church visitors. Notwithstanding these valuable contributions to the church, most women remain poor, uneducated and lack relevant knowledge and skills

to enable them earn some income to support themselves and their children. They are not only oppressed by sin but also by poverty, which might lead them to lose the salvation they aspire to achieve. The obsession to prepare souls for life hereafter seems to overshadow the socio-economic wellbeing of the faithful. In recent times some theologians and the faithful might have realised the limitation of too much pre-occupation with the future (liberating souls from sin) without focusing on the mundane needs of the faithful. Thus the theology that focuses only on preparing souls for life after death does not seem to be in touch with the realities of today's Ghana and the context of the "faithful" since it neglects the needs of the physical life.

As a reaction to the plight of its members [poverty] the Christian Mothers' Association in the Catholic Church has recently embarked on skills training activities for its members, ostensibly to liberate them from the clutches of poverty. This might have emanated from the belief that the faithful can serve God better when both their physical or material and spiritual needs are addressed. This paper is an empirical investigation into the value of the various skills training programmes provided for adult women in the Catholic Diocese of Techiman in Ghana. The paper tests the practical theology that seeks to liberate the faithful from both physical (mundane) and spiritual oppression.

Theoretical framework

The paper is underpinned by the Liberation Theology that evolved from the oppression and suffering of Southern American Catholics. The indigenous people were dispossessed of their land by the colonialists. The early Missionaries who accompanied the colonialists in the 16th century established a tradition of saving souls and rejected the culture of the indigenous people. The social, political and economic situation of the "faithful" was seen as unimportant in this process since the aim of theologians is the salvation of "souls". Under the guise of evangelisation, thousands of natives were murdered, their land taken and culture destroyed [World Council of Churches 1999]. Liberation Theology started in the 1960s when the Catholic Church underwent profound changes as a result of the second Vatican Council (1965 – 65) which provided the opportunity for both priests and the faithful to rethink their mission in a Brazilian way (WCC 1999). Liberation Theology changed the traditional view of the Church's mission which only focused on winning souls for Christ. As a result of critical theological introspection, a popular methodology which sought to liberate both the soul and the body of believers was developed. As reported by Engler (2000) the social mission of the Catholic Church in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s focused on transforming human rights within the Church.

The theory – Liberation Theology – provides a framework for socio-economic and political development of the faithful. It focuses on the social context of the believers and uses church teachings to empower them spiritually and physically. Radical liberation must be understood as intervention within an oppressive system, a movement of justice that disjoints the hegemony while the figure of the Messiah stands for the undecidable event or the incalculable and unpredictable alterity that intervenes and brings about the hegemony's collapse from within (Chatzivasileiou 2006). The essence of this theory is that the poor must not only be taught to hope in the hereafter but should also learn to take action to improve

their mundane lives. They should be equipped with skills and opportunities for employment to be able to lead better Christian lives. Zecha (2002:16) aptly points out that humans have to learn how to act and react in their environment in order to survive. Christian mothers, as humans, need to learn to improve their situations through non-formal education activities for sustainable Christian life.

Thus far, church members in general and women members in particular need to be taught relevant economic skills to enable them earn livelihoods and become better Christian mothers. In this case the CMA members in the Catholic Church could be taught socio-economic skills for their livelihoods by equipping them with entrepreneurial skills, because without true information and knowledge these church women cannot live better Christian lives. In other words, education for “mothers” of the church should equip them with the relevant and urgent information they need to become independent and much more useful members of their families, church and communities. The training must be based on the intention to assist the church women to learn skills for self-employment to improve their lives. Thus, through education, less educated, unskilled and unemployed church women can re-examine and evaluate themselves and make concerted efforts to learn or improve their abilities, skills and attitudes. The main aim of non-formal education and training for church women is to ensure their participation in economic activities of their respective communities and earn some income to support their families. Thus the theology of the church they attend should cater for both their mundane and spiritual salvation. The church women, it can be argued, will be able to serve God better when their survival needs are taken care of through the acquisition of economic skills.

The core teaching or principle of Liberation Theology, which is part of critical pedagogy, is to relate biblical teachings to the context and reality of the believers’ lives. As Giroux (2010:1) affirms, critical pedagogy is educational movement guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognise authoritarian tendencies and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action. Engler (2000) affirms that Liberation Theology brings a thoroughgoing concern for the poor and an innovative methodology of historicisation to the discussion of human rights. The theory of Liberation Theology postulates that the universal daily violation lived and experienced by the poor should be practically addressed through biblical teachings of the Church. Education is a right and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills and social relations to enable individuals [adults or youths] to explore the possibilities of what it means to be citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in family and community development activities. Citing Paulo Freire (1974), Giroux (2010) adds that critical pedagogy and, for that matter, Liberation Theology affords individuals the opportunity to read, write and learn for themselves – to engage in a culture of questioning that demands far more competence than rote learning and the application of acquired skills.

True education is that which liberates the individual from the clutches of ignorance, helplessness and poverty. The fact is that every human being, woman or man, child or adult, no matter their circumstances or how submerged they might be in a culture of deprivation and ignorance is capable of learning some skills. In this regard the mission of the Church needs to be reformulated to focus on the realities of society’s most socially, economically and politically deprived and oppressed, especially rural women believers, who live in poverty on

account of lack of knowledge and skills.

Liberation Theology and, therefore, critical pedagogy, is a moral discourse which enables Catholic intellectuals and human rights advocates to evaluate the importance of human rights and the plight of the poor and the disposed and estimate the contributions and limits the discourse can impose on the mission of the Church. The faithful may find a sense of hope in the transformative teachings of the theory of Liberation Theology, which advocates a “new Church” and a “new society” of emancipated believers made up of both men and women. From a practical theological perspective, the vision and mission of biblical teachings of the Church must be reconstructed to focus on an eschatology that puts its focus on both mundane and the hereafter – the utopian Kingdom of God. Any theological teaching that limits itself to liberating and preparing souls for the hereafter alone has great limitations in today’s world of socio-economics crises. The methods of addressing the two important issues – physical and spiritual needs – of the faithful may seem revolutionary in some way, but as Guevara (1968:6) argues “we revolutionaries often lack the knowledge and intellectual audacity to face the task of the development of a new human being by methods different from the conventional ones, and the influence of the society that creates them”.

Research design and methodology

This ethnographic study aimed at exploring and/ or testing the socio-economic effects of the non-formal education activities provided by the Christian Mothers’ Association [CMA] on its members in the Catholic Diocese of Techiman. To achieve this aim, a qualitative explorative (Creswell 2007; Meadows 2003) approach was employed to explore an in-depth understanding of the non-formal education activities of the Christian Mothers’ Association within the Diocese of Techiman. In order to get the CMA members together and talk about non-formal education activities, focus group interviews were conducted on selected members of the Association. Thus apart from being descriptive the researcher also made use of a phenomenological approach to understand participants’ personal meanings, which they have constructed from their daily or “lived experiences” (Johnson & Christenson 2000) as members of the Christian Mothers’ Association for over two decades. The members of three major towns within the Diocese – Techiman, Krobo and Akrofrom – were purposively selected for the investigation. CMA members from the three towns were selected to participate in the research for the following reasons:

- The three towns were the first to start Christian Mothers’ Association branches in the Diocese in the early 1980s.
- They have larger number of members compared to other towns in the Diocese, namely, Techiman [200], Krobo [90] and Akrofrom [88] respectively.
- The Christian Mothers’ Association branches in the three towns were the first to provide their members with practical skills training in the Catholic Diocese of Techiman.

The above reasons informed the choice of the three branches to be involved in the study, because the researcher regarded them as information rich. The entire population for the study was 400 women and the researcher employed the simple random sampling technique to select 50 members from each of the three CMA branches to take part in the investigation. In selecting the participants [i.e. the accessible population of 150 members] the researcher requested membership lists from the three branch organising secretaries, and selected only the even numbers from each group. After selecting the participants, the researcher arranged with them for the focus group interviews. He held five focus group interviews [10 participants per group] in each of the three towns. The focus group discussions focused on the kind of skills training activities the CMA offers its members, why it provides skills training to its members, when the training started and the practical effects of the training on the members of the Christian Mothers' Association.

Findings and discussion

This study was conducted in the context of exploring the limits of a theology that focuses only the hereafter. Data were collected through focus group discussions with some selected members of the Christian Mothers' Association. The lived experiences of participants as Catholics and members of the Christian Mothers' Association were narrated, shared and discussed in the various focus groups. The issues that came out of the group discussions were arranged under the following themes: Biographical information, motivation for joining the CMA, education, training and employment and the major activities of the association in the Catholic Church.

Biographical information

The discussion under the above theme revealed that the CMA members were between the ages of 20 and 65 years. Eighty-five per cent (126) of the participants were between 20 and 50 years, with 24 (15%) above 50 years of age. The discussions revealed that 80 per cent (120) of the participants are married while 20 per cent (30) were either never married, divorced or widowed. Although not a marriage contracting bureau, the CMA helps members who are single to find suitable partners in the church. The participants further revealed that the association moderates and moulds the character of its members to ensure that they are better mother and wives.

Motivation for joining the CMA

The participants provided three major reasons for joining the CMA. These reasons are summarised in table one below.

Table 1: Participants' reasons for joining CMA

Reasons	N	%
Provision of non-formal education	80	53

Reasons	N	%
Marriage counselling	40	27
Unity, Love and Concern for the poor	30	20
Total	150	100

Education, training and employment

It was learned from the group discussions that most of the members either never went to school or dropped out due to some socio-economic problems. Eighty-three of the participants never went to school, 30 of them dropped out of school and only 37 completed Grade 7. This lack of education and training makes them vulnerable in today's world where knowledge and skills matter. With the above background and concomitant lack of skills, the CMA members are not likely to access employment in the formal sector. This was confirmed by the focus group interviews, which showed that 78 of the participants were housewives, 61 self-employed and 11 employed as shop assistants, cleaners and attendants in day-care centres.

Major activities of the CMA in the Catholic Church

The Christian Mother's Association undertakes various church-related activities. The various activities are shown on the pie chart below in order of importance.

Main Activities of the CMA

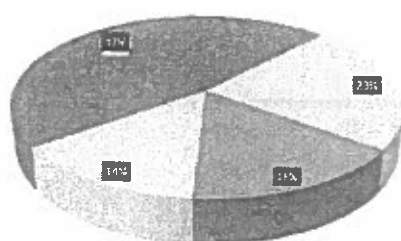


Figure: 1 Major activities of the CMA

As indicated on the pie chart, non-formal education in the form of practical skills training seems to be the dominant concern of the Christian Mothers' Association. Against the background of education and training the association teaches its members relevant skills to enable them to engage in self-employment activities. The focus group discussions affirmed that 47 per cent of the activities of the CMA focus on skills training in dressmaking, weaving door mats, making hair and body creams, soap making, baking and making ladies' handbags. The discussions revealed that members who have specific entrepreneurial skills voluntarily

teach their fellow members. Through this support members of the association are equipped with skills that enable them to engage in self-employment activities, thereby reducing poverty and vulnerability among women in the church. The church association thus integrates the spiritual, social and economic needs of its members instead of limiting its activities only to salvation after this physical life.

The focus group discussions revealed that voluntary work is a serious business of the CMA. This activity, which involves sweeping, cleaning church premises, washing of linens and providing charity to the aged and destitute in the community takes 23 per cent of the work of the association. As an organisation within the Catholic Church, the CMA members devote much time to voluntary work for the church, its members and needy community members. Apart from sweeping and cleaning the church furniture – chairs, benches and tables – and decorating the altar with flowers, members of the CMA visit the aged and destitute, wash their clothes, provide them with clothes and clean their houses. By providing voluntary services, the CMA members seem to put into practice the theological teaching which states that serving humankind is service to God.

Provision of liturgical songs and taking care of children during mass services are major activities of the CMA. According to the information provided by participants, singing to assist the priest and taking care of noisy children during Mass make up 16 per cent of the association's work. This is important because liturgical songs are an integral part of all church services and apart from the Choir the church "Mothers" also sing for successful Mass services in addition to taking care of babies or children who might disturb the church services.

Another important activity of the CMA focuses on counselling and settlement of disputes among church members, particularly women. The interviews revealed that 14.3 per cent of the association's activities focus on dispute resolution. This ensures the maintenance of harmony, peace and discipline among church members, spouses, children and relatives. The assurance of good relationships among women, families and church members is in keeping with the theological injunction of love and forgiveness. The indication here is that, as "Mothers" of the church, the CMA cannot ignore petty disputes which might undermine the teachings of the church. As God's children all church members are brothers and sisters and must live in peace and unity – a core teaching of the church.

Summary of the main findings

The main findings that emerged from the focus group interviews are summarised below:

The CMA in the Catholic Diocese of Techiman

- integrates spiritual and socio-economic needs of the faithful. As the believers work towards salvation after this physical life, they take cognisance of their current context and needs and fight poverty among women through non-formal education. The philosophy of the association is based on the fact that to be able to work for salvation women must be taught entrepreneurial skills and income-generating activities to enable them to take care of both their mundane and spiritual lives.
- engages its members in voluntary service to humankind (children, orphans, poor, aged and the needy). By adopting orphans and other vulnerable members of society and improving

their lives, the Christian Mothers' Association fulfils Christ's definition of family, which goes beyond blood relations.

- promotes true Christian life where families resolve their problems as followers of Christ, live in harmony and cooperate to bring up their children in line with the Catholic ethos.

Conclusion

In considering the findings from the study as outlined above, the following conclusion is drawn. The socio-economic realities of the contemporary world demand a new type of theology; a practical Liberation Theology, which takes cognisance of both the spiritual and physical or mundane needs of believers. Thus the faithful can only achieve spiritual salvation when their physical (social and economic) needs are recognised, catered for and integrated into church teachings.

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