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The role of Christianity in mending societal fragility and quelling violence in Liberia

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This article has benefited from the research entitled 'The role of Christianity in post-war Liberia'. It is a study that attempts to examine and investigate how Christian faith and spirituality can play a role in a campaign for social peace, justice, development and unity. This article describes and evaluates a cross section of strategies and policies which theologians can employ to develop and sustain peace and foster reconstruction plans among perpetrators and victims of a brutal civil war. It attempts to answer the following question: what role can Christianity play to effectively lessen the animosity that engendered the years of hostilities in Liberia and facilitate the healing of wounds?

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article sets forth a debate about the role Christianity ought to play in societal conflict. Christian religion is a prophetic religion by nature and it should serve as a source of peace, reconciliation and healing for human relationships. Examples of what the role of authentic church could be are cited from a Liberian context. It is further argued that all sectors of society, women, men and children may be agents of peace and unity. The article concludes by setting parameters for sustainable peace in Liberia.

Introduction

Grounded on the results obtained from the research 'The role of Christianity in post-war Liberia' (Gbotoe & Kgatla 2014), the researchers attempt to establish that the church should consistently convene congresses whereby delegates from different backgrounds can discuss significant issues affecting the country and thus forge a way forward. In other words, the church must seek to promulgate its principles and teachings through the following dimensions: Truth, Reconciliation, World faiths, Priorities and Partnership.

According to Kraaij (2014:10), early in the 19th century groups of freed slaves and mulattoes from the United States immigrated to the west coast of Africa (specifically to Liberia). These slaves from the United States became known as the Americo-Liberians. He further affirms that in 1847, the slaves sought independence from the organisation that facilitated their immigration to Africa and named the country Liberia. The name literally means 'the love of liberty brought us here'. Kraaij places the initial number of these emigrants at 3000 men, women and children. According to Huband (1998:xvii), the Americo-Liberians subjugated and excluded the masses they met on the land. Consequently, the indigenous population strongly resisted the exclusion and oppression that resulted in a series of armed conflicts leading to the destruction of lives and properties mainly during the civil war.

During the Liberian crisis that lasted for 14 years (1989–2003), there were reports of mass killings, extra-judicial assassinations, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, widespread destruction, looting of property and use of children in the conflict (Peercy 2013:74–78). Moreover, the squabble later took on an ethnic dimension as politicians exploited the national division within the country to score a point or send a message to opponents. Today, the scars of these occurrences resonate in every family, ethnic group and religion. It is not the focus point of the researchers to highlight these vices as appalling, but to bring to focus the argument for lasting peace and stability. It is meant to buttress the question: how can the church of Liberia help to build a legacy of lasting peace in the country based on its missiological principles and norms that are completely opposite to the message of abhorrence? How can the church bridge this gap to sustain lasting peace and contribute towards the development and reconstruction of the state? The role of Christianity in the solidification of democratic processes within a nation is essential as it helps to defend the fundamental rights of people against injustices and gross human rights abuses.

The church: The promulgator of peace

Lockwood (2000:31) argues that the Greek term 'erene' in the New Testament signifies the concept of peace bestowed on humanity through Jesus Christ. It stresses that believers are inspired to make an effort to live in peace with one another and endeavour to achieve the nascent tranquillity as peace brokers. According to Thompson (2000:1–2), peace is both a gift of God and the fruit of human work that must be considered on the basis of central human values, trust, justice, freedom and love. In an exclusively biblical domain, peace is the revelation of God to humanity in the context of human activities (Baum & Wells 1997:4). As the scriptures say, 'and the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness is quietness and trust forever …' (Is 32:27–18).

The monolithic principles of the Old and New Testament teachings on peace nurture humankind to live in peace with both God and 'man' (humanity). The teachings epitomise God as the source and foundation of real peace. Humanity lives in a vast and complex world; thus, believers need the peace of God as tutelage in their lives. The peace of God helps believers to adopt the mentality of 'let it go' or a forgiving spirit and endeavours them to settle issues amicably and devoid of belligerency. As Esler (1998) argues:

> the followers of Jesus are called to relate to each other and everyone else with whom they come in contact, peacefully and harmoniously, offering them friendship and sharing with them their vision and their goods. (pp. 230–233)

Understanding the peace of God provides a wonderful insight for comprehending God correctly in light of human activities. According to Lessin (2011:3), peace is the gift of God.

The hortatory message of Paul called on believers to emulate the example of the biblical character Joseph. Joseph forgives his siblings for the evil they committed against him without vengeance. Instead, he repays their evil with good and shows them unconditional love (Westermann 1986:144–146). In this context, peace controls or averts the incalculable damage of violence. It is hard and difficult to achieve peace in a human context, but the passage teaches Christians to practise their bestowed righteousness or grace by showing the Christ-like behaviour of forgiving trespassers. Jesus calls on believers not only to preach reconciliation but also to embody it in society. One can discern that Jesus wants the church to be a true representation of his kingdom: a model of what human society would look like under his rule. The concern is that the church cannot call the world to peace if it falls short of being the model of peace.

In Matthew it says, 'blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God' (Mt 5:9). The passage illustrates the necessity of reconciling belligerent parties towards sparing the destruction of lives and properties. According to Luz (1989:241), 'Blessed are the peacemakers' is a biblical panacea for peace processes around the globe: violent conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict settlement, conflict resolution and conflict transformation. Thus, the church has the responsibility of promoting sustainable and durable peace by communicating the pre-eminence of Christ as the Lord of peace. As scripture says, 'through Him, God reconciles to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Col 1:20) and 'make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord' (Heb 12:14).

The command to 'love those who hate you' (Mt 5:45) signifies that tolerance is a worthwhile element that hones the effectiveness of peace in society. The argument is echoed by Stanton and Stroumsa (1998:175), who argue that coexistence means competition free of violence and anarchy. Abhorrence has often been the root cause of inconceivable atrocities, senseless murders and mutilations around the globe with an emphasis on the 'Liberian war that degenerated into tribal war due to tribal rivalry' (Ellis 1999:54). In essence, tolerance helps to drive out deep-rooted abhorrence from the minds of humanity and build a society of togetherness and 'mutual respect' (Forst 2013:28–30).

In this article, the researchers attempt to define and use reciprocity as positive behavioural patterns adopted or cultivated as a result of biblical teachings or practices. It is a definition that describes the actions and efforts believers take to control and avert calamities in the society by teaching good norms and standards. These norms and morals affect the behavioural pattern of inhabitants. They are external influences that seek to make a visible impact on the lives of people, especially by combating bitterness and resentment in society (Walsh & Davies 1984:185).

The theory of reciprocity is used here as a premise to stress that the continual preaching of a peace message from the church should help to lessen the hatred in its settings and achieve placidity to some degree. It brings to focus Hanna's (2006:27) assertion that 'human beings are not only logical but also rational or psychological', that is, people often act for a reason. Hanna's argument shows that actions and perceptions are inseparable. Galtung (1996:1–4) asserts that for humanity to achieve peace in the world of increasing violence and incessant confrontation, a tolerant understanding of the nature and causes of violence is required. Galtung further defines violence as being the outcome of humankind acting below the 'somatic and mental realisation' of their actual state of mind (Galtung 1996:168).

Thompson (2000:58) stresses the duty of believers to partake or provide necessary and useful services to improve the lives of the needy or the disadvantaged in society. Believers have to cooperate with other stakeholders in society to fight the egocentricity of the time, that is, to render services to society as a means of combating the economic inequality that engulfs societies around the globe. According to Esteban and Schneider (2004:2–3), 'a polarised nation is a broken nation'.

The argument posits that a divided nation is prone to embrace the culture of perpetual violence and anarchy within its fold. This phenomenon is aligned or synonymous to Achebe's (1958:114) ideology that 'when things fall apart, the centre piece cannot hold'. These philosophies demonstrate a cause–effect relationship. The assertions can also explain that disunity within a particular society or state has the inclination of giving birth to complex social issues that often bring into existence a host of social conflicts. Hence, Ngaima (2014:1–3) argues that the failure to recognise the fundamental issues that cause conflict and division can lead to greater catastrophe.

Arguably, 'human ability to address or pre-empt and forestall violence, mostly lies in understanding potential factors of conflicts' (Burton 2007:132). By virtue of its status as a country, Liberia is replete with an abundance of history and testimonies about pugnacity. In contrast to its status as a country formed on Christian principles, it has gone through numerous and countless conflicts (Ali & Matthews 1999:91–99). Based on the indubitable fact of 'an early tension' (Waugh 2011:20–21) between the free slaves and the natives, Kotia (2012:1–3) traces the cause of the bloody civil war to unresolved ethnic and political differences.

Causes and effects of civil conflict in Liberia

Liberia was established on the principles of freedom and democracy that mirrored that of the United States (Waugh 2011:21), but after one and a half centuries of its existence, the country descended into destruction in which both democracy and human rights were compromised. Kotia (2012:2) asserts that though Liberia was instituted on the principles of freedom, democracy and a permeation of society, leading lives on biblical doctrine became a myth as the country descended into a series of conflicts that led to bloodshed. The observed idiosyncrasies of the Liberian history, coupled with Kotia's (2012:2) assertion that unresolved conflicts led to bloodshed in Liberia, necessitate an argument within the framework of Durkheim's theory of conflict. According to Durkheim (Wood & Wood 2004:93–98), conflict is imminent in a society that is not held together by positive solidarity, but by force that is rooted in greed, selfishness and egocentrism. Durkheim's theory (Bartos & Wehr 2002:13) demonstrates that frustration, injustices, oppression, exclusion and persistence torment over the rule of law and good governance and are a portal or recipe for conflict or violence in a society.

Similarly, in an un-embryonic term and in citing the Marxist theory of conflict, Brecher and Harvey (2002:124) argue that if societal inequality or factors that cause gaps among society are not properly addressed, they could inflame or cause confrontation between the less privileged and the wealthy. Using the Marxist theory of conflict, one can infer that the characteristics or eccentricities of conflict find relevancy within the Liberian context because conflict often erupted as a result of inequality that existed from the disproportionate share of societal resources that gave an advantage to one group over the other. It can be stated that the involvement of the church in tackling inequality, which Esteban and Schneider (2004:2–8) point to as the core of conflict, is necessary for the transformation and growth of the church and the building of a peaceful society of tolerance, love and respect for humanity. Like Christ who breaks down the wall of partition, hatred, conflict and polarisation, the church's effort to spread this message to the masses is significant in stamping its presence among humankind (Brierley 2006:49–51).

There is a tremendous variance in conflict definitions that include a range of definitions for specific interests and a variety of general definitions that attempt to be all-inclusive. However, for the scope of this article, the researchers employ the definition of Wilmot and Hocker (2007). According to Wilmot and Hocker, 'conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals' (Wilmot & Hocker 2007:8–9). A tacit argument from their exposition is that there will always be a 'social collision' between constellations of incompatible goals or interests.

Liberia: A case study of crisis

The unique history of Liberia that witnessed the repatriation of free slaves (Americo-Liberians) on the continent explicates that, to a large extent, the misery of the country is not necessarily because of lack of food, resources and inadequate human capital but because of overwhelming incompatibilities between the two sets of people (Waugh 2011:21–26). According to historians, the Americo-Liberians showed contempt towards the culture or way of life of the indigenes that they met on the ground (Steinberg 2011:42). They segregated themselves from integrating with the people and instead coerced the indigenes to adapt to their way of life as masters (Steinberg 2011:41). The lofty attitude of the Americo-Liberians sets the stage for a systematic exclusion and marginalisation of the indigenes from the economic, political and social arena during the years of their dominance (Peercy 2013:75).

The period of inequality became known as black-on-black apartheid. According to Waart, Denters and Schrijver (1998:339), apartheid was a social system in which black people and people from other racial groups did not have the same political and economic rights as white people and were forced to live separately from white people. However, in the case of this article, the researcher has termed similar practice in Liberia as 'black-on-black apartheid' whereby the elite Americo-Liberians denied the inferior group any economic and political rights (Kieh 2008:134). The indigenes were not recognised as bona fide citizens of Liberia and, as such, were not enfranchised (Kieh 2008:47).

The experience is cited not only for its extremely divisive nature but also to point to the scars of this unfortunate evil: a poor health care system, poor school facilities and bad road networks in indigene-dominated areas. The system increased

the powerlessness and vulnerability of the locals. Attempts to 'cast out' the locals from all sectors of governance created a range of discriminations, humiliation and sometimes physical injuries and psychological trauma. It is, thus, legitimate to argue from a Marxist point of view (Brecher & Harvey 2002:123–124; Lipset 1990:11–16) that there is indeed a limpid nexus or direct relationship between suppression and conflict. A monopolisation of power is explained as an exclusive control of power by a handful of individuals within an organisation or country. Similarly, Liberian history shows that less than 5% of the country's population held onto power for over a century, subjugating and excluding the majority from participating in government organs (Steinberg 2011:44). The only party that existed within the country at the time was the True Whig Party to which all the elite belonged (Ellis 1999:45–46).

The misuse of power throws the obligation into the hands of the church to be aware of the growing disparities between the poor and the wealthy, powerful and dominant group. The arbitrary imposition of dictatorial rule on the people with no respect for the rule of the law provoked violence (Ali & Matthews 1999:92–98). To witness the emergence of a vibrant civil society, stakeholders, including the church, must promote peace and development in a pragmatic way that accords respect to every citizen.

However, when Master Sergeant Samuel Doe led the successful coup of 12 April 1980 to overthrow the restrictive Americo-Liberian government of the time, Liberians in every quarter (Ali & Matthews 1999:98; Ellis 1999:42–44) considered it as a portal to redemption and freedom from the repression of the elite (Peercy 2013:76–77). Unfortunately, this hope was short lived as the dominance of the Krahn tribe, Doe's native ethnic group, in every facet of government is seen by many as the beginning of another sectional ruling class (Ellis 1999:56).

According to pundits and political commentators, the first democratic election in the history of Liberia was marred by intimidation, manipulation and electoral irregularities (Ali & Matthews 1999:91–93). A breach of electoral rules, customs and procedures often leads to violent confrontations and war. In elections where parties are dissatisfied with the outcome or results, there is a likelihood of conflict and uprisings (Huband 1998:36–38). In Liberia, where the result of the first democratic election was marred by manipulation and thwarted in favour of the incumbent President Doe, election irregularities led to an attempted coup by proponents of the opposition camps.

This further ignited or added fuel to most of Liberia's history of ethnicity along the settler-indigene dichotomy which undermined the social, economic and political relations in Liberia. The pernicious effects or the stark reality of poverty as a result of violence calls for the denunciation of war by the church as a way of fulfilling God's purpose among humankind (Thompson 2000:58–59). The world is at a threshold whereby humanity in a contemporary age continues to experience war that causes grave human suffering, agony, misery, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment and disease that contribute to a high rate of illiteracy.

Effects of the civil crisis

The history of Liberia documents the arbitrary arrest, detention and prosecution of individuals for vaguely defined crimes or behaviours that are not inherently criminal. However, in a repressive environment like Liberia, it is used to silence, demoralise, demonise, weaken and get rid of competitors and oppositions. Liberia has a record of framing the opposition for plotting against the sitting president (Dolo 2007:65–68). These sorts of allegations are not often verified by independent human rights groups or advocates. The continual harassment of innocent citizens on political grounds was a warning of the disastrous time ahead. The unfair trial of citizens leads to wrongful conviction (Kieh 2008:135). According to a report, Liberia lost about 250 000 citizens during the civil crisis (Kaydor 2014:23).

The war had a significant impact on the country's economy and its people. The cost of the war was enormous, ranging from a drainage of wealth, a disrupted market and a depressed or impeded economic growth (Levy & Spilling 1998:40).

Liberia's unemployment rate is among the highest in the world. President Sirleaf said:

> Peace and security in Liberia is still an issue because of the young people who are unemployed, and until we can address that, there's always hanging over us the chance that there may be a resumption of conflict. (Reuters News:n.p.)

This assertion is indeed the underlying factor that fuelled the war, especially the conscription of vulnerable youth to fight for various warring factions. Apart from unemployment, there are other economic factors that affect the country's growth and development (International Monetary Fund 2013:6). Since the end of the war in Liberia, the country continues to struggle with a high rate of inflation that tends to augment the already dreadful living conditions of ordinary people. The unfavourable economic conditions lead to some dispiriting occurrences like human trafficking in search of greener pastures, prostitution among young women, child labour and a high rate of burglary and drug smuggling (US Department of State 2010).

Another point of concern is the massive recruitment of Liberian youth in the Ivorian crisis because of a lack of sustainable jobs (Dickovick 2014:84–85). The economic impact is also causing high rates of child labour among citizens. Families take advantage of their poor living conditions and lack of jobs to send their children to work on farms, to do quarry work, to work for business owners and to do hard labour in fishing and construction (Sislin & Murphy 2009:47).

The economic and social gaps in Liberia are wider than ever and thus incline to aid the breeding of a polarised identity

that remains in the hearts and minds of many Liberians. Constant cases of corruption involving the political leadership allow people to embellish violent views. Although historical events discussed in this article are inherently corrupt, the current leadership's inability to deal with the corrupt system is once again proliferating abhorrence among the people (Dolo 2007; International Monetary Fund 2007). There is a 'low level civil war' in the society, discernible through various forms of violence including the 2011 elections, the youth rampage, the forceful land acquisition from the Mandingoes in Nimba County and the arrest and imprisonment of journalists. The value of life would continue to diminish if collective effort is not made towards quelling or curtailing violence. The prolonged war has fractured the country's sense of unity and togetherness (Kieh 2008).

Christianity in Liberia

Before the advent of Christianity in Liberia, the country was strongly entrenched with African traditions, native religions and secret societies. Most of these secret societies were characterised by spirituality and rituals. It is claimed that it was the Europeans who first made contact with the indigenes. They did not make an effort to spread their religion among the people (Levy & Spilling 1998:80–86). However, the Americo-Liberians whose arrival led to the formation of the tribal lands into a country were predominantly Christian. A group of intellectual Christians directed the affairs of the newly discovered land. After a while, they declared independence for the country Liberia, which was signed by churchmen in the Providence Baptist Church on 26 July 1847 (Levy & Spilling 1998:89). To prove their Christian background or heritage, the Americo-Liberians named the capital of their country Christopolis, meaning the 'city of Christ' (Ranger 2008:229). The name was later changed to Monrovia in honour of a former American President, James Monroe, who made an immense contribution to the formation of the American Colonisation Society which was responsible for the repatriation of the emancipated slaves to Africa (Levy 2005:81).

According to a recent census (2008) of Liberia, Christianity encompasses 85.5% of the country's population. The percentage shows why it is so common to come across Christian inscriptions on public and private facilities, businesses, homes and offices. On the contrary, the Muslim population is about 12.2% and the indigenous religious beliefs population is about 0.5% (US Embassy Monrovia). However, continual skirmishes of elections, perpetual corruption, economic turmoil, especially a high rate of youth unemployment and other violence in a highly polarised society signals disquieting signs of insecurity. According to one testimony, 'Some of us whom seem to be alive from the brutal civil conflict, count our blessings that though we were exposed to such extremist we managed to survive' (Researcher's comment). These incidences confirm recent findings that place Liberia 24th on the list of fragile states in the world (fund for peace). In the face of these atrocities, one would wonder about the country's religious background or perhaps the high percentage of Christianity within the country (85.5% of Liberians are Christian). What happened to the unique history that renders the country as a Christian nation, whose capital was once called the 'city of Christ' or 'Christopolis'?

The influence of past conflict on Liberia today

Results from the study called 'The role of Christianity in post-war Liberia' (the research that this article is based on) shows that the history of the country plays a vital role in shaping the perception and mindset of the people. The history of the ethnic divide and social stratification continues to have a bearing on the integration of the populace which confirms Ngaima's (2014) affirmation that Liberia's troubling history affects its societal cohesion as a nation. This brings to mind the exhortation of Jesus to his disciples to build their foundation on a solid rock:

> Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. (Mt 7:24–25)

If one applies the analogy to a layman understanding, it is obvious that a foundation plays a vital role in the durability and lifespan of a structure as it faces the test of time and nature's relentless attacks. To have a sturdy structure, a solid foundation is paramount. In the case of this research, it is deduced that the historical background of Liberia has a great influence on its citizens. The arguments from the study brought to light that the country's divided past is still present; it is unending. It seems, in many ways, that Liberia is congenitally unable to acknowledge and fundamentally effect changes.

Throughout the history of Liberia, social division has indeed found fresh manifestations: from an unequal development scheme, job opportunities and the exploitation of the masses to the injustices and brutality of the innocent. The following reflections have taken place through the years in the country. It is probable to say that the country or nation has been built on shaky ground that continues to sink with time and conditions. However, no matter how one may see or comprehend it, Christianity has a called duty to contribute to this part of society. The research from the study reveals a paradoxical image or background of Liberia. The paradox lies in the fact that within the perception of a country built on Christian precepts (Dolo 2007), the force of disunity and destruction steered the country towards one of the worst human catastrophes. This is to say that the teaching of 'love your brother as yourself' was replaced with hate and violence in the heart of God's children. The issues of brotherly love raised or taught in the Bible are as pertinent today as they were thousands of years ago.

The research found that the church often takes a radical and uncompromising stand against well-selected social ills

or sins and ignores the rest. It vociferously preaches against adultery, fornication, drunkenness and theft, but is completely silent about the sin of discrimination, corruption, political assassination and unfair distribution of the country's wealth in favour of the elite. The church is silent on the institutionalised sin of oppression, marginalisation, subjugation and exploitation.

The research discovered that most of the violence that occurred in Liberia was politically instigated among the people (Adebajo, Adesina & Olaniyi 2002:184). It shows that tension in the sphere of the Liberian society could not evoke cooperation among opposing forces but rather provoked conflict as parties competed for fair and equal rights. The stronger party used political means to harm or weaken the other to dominate, resulting in aggression. Domination in this scenario demands powers to influence the conditions and actions against the weaker party through force. The weaker group continuously counteracted the influence and dominance of the powerful group through resistance (Ngaima 2014). The repression exploded into destructive violence that smashed everything that symbolised the existing system. The conflicts in Liberia were not only fought physically but also on an ideological level. There were several intellectual arguments to legitimise the political struggle for power between the parties. The parties employed propaganda as a means to disseminate their ideas to the populace to gain loyalists.

Another factor that entered the fray is the international interests of the United States, which nearly all the writers on the subject allude to as a key to the conflict (Sally 2006:94–99). During the Cold War, the United States made allies with countries around the world, including Liberia. A letter that was allegedly authored by the then Minister of State of Presidential Affairs addressed to President Doe explains how the defence of the United States' interest intertwined in the Liberian conflict (Fahnbulleh 2004:81). It further discloses that the Liberian conflict was a multiparty conflict.

The study has discovered that the deepest danger concerning the Liberian violence was not the level the violence had reached, but the extent to which it was justified by perpetrators who committed atrocities against humanity. According to Hook (1978:14), in the sphere of humanity, man often defends or justifies his actions of cruelty. Bringing home his assertion, the Liberian society did not only have an inclination towards violence but also glorified it. The veneration of Matilda Newport in the country's history is a case in point. Matilda Newport is gloried in the country's history as a hero who killed scores of indigenes during the scramble for land (Welch 1960:198). To a certain extent, the country has justified violence for a long time. The tool of justification is mainly used to brainwash loyalists to participate in the cause that is deemed worthy. It is used by repressive violence in upholding its cause against the masses. The repressors use the machine of propaganda to justify the cruelty meted out against the innocent.

The results of the study found an uncompromising call by Christians to mix politics with religion. According to the findings, it is dangerous to mix politics with religion which at the time leads to religious strife and conflicts. The research simply inferred that the separation of religion in favour of the rule of the law is essentially beneficial to the entire populace of the country. It is argued that in numerous instances, the attempt to fight a just war on behalf of God against his enemies portrays him as a monster who demands the total destruction of his enemy. A few examples of this include the crusades, the conquest of Latin America, the inquisition and the religious war in Germany, which made those respective countries lose many lives (Peters 1971).

In addition, the study mentions that the grinding violence and gross human rights abuses that engulfed the nation stemmed from greed and egocentrism. Politicians employed all means and ways necessary to remain in power for self-gain and, as such, committed grave acts of injustices against the people they were entrusted to lead. The culture of self-enrichment is so pervasive in the country that government institutions are used as a means of amassing wealth at the expense of the masses. This is exemplified in the perpetual corruption and embezzlements of public resources (International Monetary Fund 2008). Undoubtedly, these institutionalised crimes are clearly the scourges that evoked suffering and unbearable hardship for the masses.

The importance of leadership: An analysis of Liberia's conflict crisis

The bloody violence and deep division within Liberia point to a weak, immature and selfish leadership. Only a strong, wise and decisive leadership can steer a nation towards a progressive and cohesive state. Lawlessness and anarchy in the world's view are signs of a dearth of proper leadership. When a leader of a society lacks the vision to lead a contemporary world, it often leads to uncertainty, poverty and a total collapse in the system (Adeniyi 2007:178–179). The kind of violence witnessed in the 1990s in Liberia still compels every Liberian to question the long-term practicality, long-lasting assumptions and implications of the mode or path of reconciliation the country followed after the war. There is no doubt that the Christian religion promotes reconciliation in the form of forgiving and forgetting (Beam 2009). But can there be true and long-lasting peace in the absence of justice and closure for the victims who are still traumatised from the effects of the unspeakable atrocities committed during the war (Daly & Sarkin 2007:180–191)?

Arguably, there can be no genuine peace and reconciliation in the absence of justice. The point of argument here is that all types of conflict cannot be resolved in the same way. Peace, unity and justice within the nation demonstrate that religious leaders can transcend the divide which separates the two major religions and work together to defend the interest of the masses, defend human rights and achieve reconciliation and long-lasting peace. For peace to prevail, the citizens or religious groups in the country have to continuously work

together (Franken & Loobuyck 2011:309). Democracy should be seen as the acceptance of religious pluralism, tolerance and cooperation between citizens in bringing about democratic transformation in society. Despite the religious differences, there is a sense about the appropriateness for religious bodies to work together for the common good of the society. The reality of conflict in the Liberian society and the desire and the need for peace is beyond doubt, if stakeholders fail to work together in the interest of the masses.

The findings of the study revealed that if peace is to be realistic in the contemporary society of Liberia, then it must be related to the changing reality of society's search for social and economic justice. This is to say that for many inhabitants in Liberia, peace is synonymous with oppression, exploitation and subjugation of one group by another. In other words, there will be no peace if the existing structures do not meet the needs of the people, but rather become oppressive. If this happens, conflict will continue to exist among the people. The discussion and pursuit of peace will continue to be an elusive goal as long as the causes of conflict are not removed. From the study, a clear nexus has been identified between peace and development. There is a constant upheaval in the political and economic situation of the country. The economic and monetary policies of the country benefit the rich rather than meet the needs of the masses.

In this case, development will not only be a new name for peace but also serve as grounds for a united and prosperous nation. It is through inclusive development that real peace can become a context to achieve a society based on social and economic justice. In conclusion, human-induced poverty and grave suffering are threats to the prosperity and the tranquillity of the nation. The researchers have adopted a twofold approach as a common denominator on which the arguments in the article are categorised. The first section defines the role Christianity can play in the promulgation of peace and the second section looks at the developmental role the church can affect for the betterment of the Liberian society. The church of Liberia needs to facilitate community discussions about peace, especially because the country has been ravaged by violence (Johnson 2004:30). The community peace forum would aim to discuss issues that have the propensity of plunging the country into violence. The issue of maintaining peace and preventing violence within a society can be approached by various people and institutions from innumerable starting points.

The role of the church in promulgating peace

The emergence of a peaceful society is preconditioned or dependent on the willingness of the people to live side by side as a homogenous community. According to scripture, the homogeneity of humanity allows or makes room for lasting peace in the society. It helps to lessen the bitterness engendered by societal elements that cause conflict (Niebuhr 2008). It is part of the church's missiological duty to educate the society and create awareness against elements of division

and violence that cause great human suffering and hardship. It is important for the church to educate the society to break the yoke of violence in favour of positive relationships, mutual love and respect. This leads one to bear in mind that the inspiration of promoting and achieving peace as a Christian comes from the Gospel. It points to the prophetic function of the church to the society it exists in and can be fulfilled by urging everyone to maintain law and order, peace and security. This will allow individual Christians to make the most of every opportunity to promote peace and unity. It is through the message and practice of peace that humanity is given a new vision of how order may be restored and other improvements made in their social conditions (Shenk 2006:1–2).

The church is a reconciled community of God, that is, it is the community of people who, through his grace, have been reconciled with him (Dyrness & Kärkkäinen 2008). The church has been reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus and has received his peace in its heart. To this effect, it has to preserve the bestowed ministry of reconciliation and serve humanity in a spirit of brotherly love and peace. This means that the church of God should be characterised by the spirit of reconciliation, peace and love. It can further be explained that the church is simply forbidden by its doctrine to promote violence, condone it and justify the causes of conflict (Thirdway 1981:5–10).

The spiral of violence in the country that the people had witnessed calls for the church to face and tackle the fundamental source of this division. The church's call for peace and unity is built on the legitimacy of its doctrine as a social institution with transcendental powers to promote social change (Ormerod & Clifton 2009:6–10). The task of overcoming social divisions and rebuilding relationships or reconciling conflict-ravaged Liberia is something that should be seen by church leaders as a key part of the church's role. As reflected in the Bible, the task of reconciling conflict-ravaged society is a call for which the church is uniquely qualified and should not ignore.

The church is looked up to by the populace in the midst of crisis for moral guidance. It has the responsibility to take these circumstances seriously and, at times, confront the root causes of conflict (Rogers, Bamat & Ideh 2008:59). In order to provide this, the church must challenge the leadership of the country to uphold the rules and laws of the country. It has the message of truth that inspires and motivates people, the truth which it can also use to challenge abusive regimes (Storrar, Casarella & Metzger 2011:139). It must use its message of hope to challenge the citizens to wake up and stand against oppression (Cone 1997:15–25).

One of the great advantages of the rule of law and accountability is that it makes it easier and possible to effect changes without violent upheaval. The changing of King Saul did not only affect the structure of his office and its public administration, but also installed a sense of checks and balances on his performance asking of the people. The

removal of Saul from office highlights the basic principle of accountability of public administration. True democracy cannot survive by merely perpetuating a ritual of voting, but needs a set of precedence that holds leadership accountable for their actions. In ecumenical circles, there is a general agreement that the church cannot align itself with any political party (Hegstad 2013:33, 50). However, it has the responsibility and duty to stand for the norms and rules that mitigate politically-induced violence or ferocity. This responsibility is manifested in the word of God that says that no one is above the law.

In order to check the power of officials, the church in collaboration with other stakeholders should seek to defend the constitutional devices that protect and guide public officials (Cheema 2005:204, 214). This ethical teaching of transparency is aligned with the Christian norms of truth elaborated in the Bible (Wilcock 2013:127). One could promulgate that the church must play a role that seeks to tackle social vices that could kindle conflict and breed corruption.

On this subject, the researchers wish to infer that transparency inspires leadership to give an account of the resources entrusted into their care. It helps to curtail mismanagement and changes the spirit of self-enrichment into the spirit of solidarity and commitment. Transparency enhances the relationship between citizens within the country and facilitates discussions on burning issues as a way of finding a long-lasting solution (Transparency International 2004:6–10). The essence of distinctive leadership within a community, society or country is to guide and lead the people towards a common goal (Philips 2008:387). The Old and New Testaments profile some personality traits that people should observe in selecting their leaders. Interestingly, the scriptures make a clear distinction between the ability to lead and the outward appearance of a person. Leaders in the Bible are selected from all walks of life, family pedigree, educational backgrounds and job descriptions ranging from warriors to farmers and doctors (Finzel 1998:71, 90).

The biblical leaders are responsible, reliable, committed and unified with their followers. They work towards a common interest, serve the people and rarely abuse their position or authority (Blackaby & Blackaby 2004:100–104). These leadership traits arguably keep the people together in peace and unity. This argument is not that the leaders are infallible, but that their flaws do not affect the fundamental living conditions of the people and do not plunge the community into self-destructive war.

Conclusion: A way forward for Liberia

It is discernible from the ongoing arguments that one of the major elements or conditions of maintaining peace in Liberia is to ensure that there is a proper balance between power and responsibility (United States Institute of Peace 2009:60–69). In pursuit of oneness and peace within the country, it is

important that officials meaningfully discharge their duties in accordance with the law of the country. The church must thus teach or seek to influence the perception of the citizens to elect a responsible leader. It has been noted that in a society like Liberia the elements that ignite conflict are measured or influenced by the decisions or direction the leadership steers the country's affairs to. Choosing responsible leadership in this sense is about scrutinising potential leaders about their policy that takes into account the interest of all Liberians rather than promoting the interest of a segment of the populace.

In combating the issue of electing irresponsible leadership, the church needs to cognitively develop the minds of Liberians to make the right choice. This can be achieved through activism or a series of intellectual discourse. The church must teach the citizens to elect a responsible leader that has the ability to afford everyone the social, economic and cultural rights that are indispensable to their dignity. In the same vein, the church should be on the lookout for irresponsible leadership whose greed, exploitative means and ill decisions could derail the progression of the country. In his argument, Nordstokke (2011:22–28) asserts that the church has a responsibility to speak for the voiceless and the marginalised and that its ministry should be inclusive of all people. According to Nordstokke:

> Therefore, it has to be prophetic, lifting up the dignity of the excluded and marginalised, denouncing the powers that seek justice and life only for themselves, announcing ways of promoting human values and well-being for all. (p. 28)

The church should make a preferential option for the weak and deprived; it should be sensitive for the cause of those who suffer and should stand with the marginalised. The reason is simply because the cause of the deprived is deemed justice in the Bible (Ludy 1982:130–134). For the Bible constantly portrays God as taking up or hearing the cause of the marginalised and thus calls on the church to do the same. This does not imply that the church should side with any organisation, group or people fighting to destabilise the country or instigate civil unrest (Butselaar 2001:40). This consideration makes it clear that the New Testament provides the church with the necessity to orientate the thinking of humanity to live side by side. The church's specific contribution to peace must consist precisely in acting as an ecumenical body and not as a representation of any particular interests (Butselaar 2001:10–15).

It is only through collective effort that the country can fully recover from the devastation of the civil hostilities that claimed the lives of fellow compatriots (250 000 people) about a decade ago. The panic created by the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic in the country and its neighbouring countries cannot be subdued without putting mechanisms in place to curtail the disaster. The violence that followed suit because of the epidemic, coupled with the resonant scars of the cataclysm that occurred in the land in the past, rekindled or triggered a poignant reminder of how the desperation of

humanity can easily lead to clashes or civil unrest (Associated Press 2014).

The study has disclosed in the preceding arguments that there are higher risks of civil war breaking out when there are social grievances such as inequality, abuse of power and unfair distribution of resources in a country. These social grievances are ignited by the lack of democracy. To achieve long-term peace and stability in the country, the church and other stakeholders have to initiate economic programmes that expose the populace to the importance of workmanship, occupational efficiency, occupational appreciation and personal economic progression. Too often the talent and skills of the young generation are ignored or overlooked. Undoubtedly, talent is the epicentre of a country's economy. Skilled labour moves a country forward through the private and public sectors. The church should help to remedy talent shortages by improving skills, retooling or relocating talent to effectively fulfil the strategic imperative of national growth. The presence of skilled labour stimulates a better equilibrate supply in the labour market that leads to growth.

The research discussed the challenges, ways and means the church can employ to help a country affected by conflict and fragility to find a path towards sustainable peace and development. From the findings of the study, the researchers have promulgated a framework through which the church could contribute towards alleviating the extreme poverty within a generation and boost shared prosperity throughout the country. Implementing the framework means sharpening the focus on the causes of fragility and conflict within one of the world's poorest and most war-ravaged countries. The church has a major task of curing the resonant scars of the war that permeate every facet of Liberian life. The findings of the research portray that the country is highly divided based on many factors such as ethnicity, economic disparities and social status in the society.

To quell and curtail the animosity in the country, the church has to seek and promote the protection of citizens, respect for different religious customs and practices, recognition of human rights and promotion of accountability. Citizenship should be the basis of rights and responsibilities and promote a society or place that repudiates any discrimination because of religion, race or culture. To implement this framework in real life, every member of the community must play an effective part. The church must create an awareness of what is happening in the society. It must also spread the culture of peace. The war has left all Liberian citizens with strong feelings. There is not one family that was untouched. Some have lost brothers, parents, other relatives or friends. Some still carry envy, hatred, bitterness or a spirit of revenge. Gruchy and Philips (1995:34) argue that 'there is no future without forgiveness'. Hatred and bitterness result from unresolved anger. The church must promote a spirit of forgiveness for wrongs and teach on the management of anger and freedom from any hatred and bitterness.

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