

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA EVANGELISM ON CHURCH GROWTH

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Abstract

This research evaluated the impact of media evangelism on church growth. The work argued that traditional ways of carrying out evangelism by the early missionaries have left much to be desired, no longer fashionable, and is neither result oriented in the 21st century. Media evangelism has enhanced church growth and enabled the church to reach more people at a time. It is however, regrettable to note that many churches are yet to appropriate and cue into this soul winning trend that has proven to be the most effective with its wider coverage capacity. Using descriptive phenomenology and secondary sources of data collection, this work found out that media evangelism is one example of the benefits of modern science and technology to religion for easier communication of the gospel truth in the society. It is a phenomenon in recent missionary efforts where television, radio and internet systems were deployed for the advancement of the gospel. To ensure healthy evangelism and church growth, church leaders at all levels should fully maximize the print, radio, television, internet and other forms of media to reach the unreached. Efforts should be made by Church denominations and leaders to own radio and television stations for easy dissemination of the gospel. This way the church will be on her way to fulfilling the great mandate given to her by Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Media, Evangelism, Church, Growth, Internet.

Introduction

Media evangelism is a phenomenon in recent missionary efforts across the globe whereby the benefit of Television and radio as one of the modern advancements in the ever increasing field of Science and Technology is tapped and appropriated for the spread and advancement of missionary objectives. Hesmondholgh, (2000, p.13), noted that, "it is now a well-established fact that one of the miracles of science and technology in the 21st century is the use of the Radio, Television and Internet communication system for evangelism."

According to Akilomen, (2005, p.23), "radio and internet are thus powerful influence on public perception and opinion. Being an effective medium of mass communication and the dissemination of information, the Television and Radio are today being globally utilized by

Christian missions for the purpose of spreading the gospel in response to the “Great Commission.” This perhaps explains the major revolution of the phenomenal media evangelism in contemporary Christian missionary. In Nigeria, for example, the Television and Radio have emerged the most convenient access for reaching out to a lot of people.

Hunter (1992, p. 62), said that, “Christian church grew at an increasing rate in the 18th and 19th century out-stepping the growth of the world population due to immense mark of evangelism.” This was possible due to the impact of electronic media with particular reference to the Radio and Television; others include computers with internet services.

Media evangelism which today is fast becoming a global trend is one example of the adoption and appropriation of the benefits of the advancement in the field of modern sciences by religion foreasier reach to the unreached. It’s regrettable that many denominations are yet to cue-in into this soul winning trend that has proven to be the most effective and result oriented with its wider coverage capacity. The general objective of this research is to examine how of media evangelism can aid the spread and growth of Christianity in Nigeria.

Media Evangelism

Drek (2001, p.121), described the media “as a process or medium through which information is passed. It can be oral, audio, visual and audio-visual. It includes printed sources of information.” But in this context, it is used to mean electronic means of disseminating and transmission of information. Media evangelism is the proclamation of the Christian message and promotion of the Christian course through the medium of the electronic mass media of Television, Radio and the Net. It consists of the transmission and broadcast of Christian programmes on Radio, Television and other electronic media. This includes televised religious services, evangelistic crusades and promotional adverts (Hunter, 1992).

The term evangelism according to Green (1992, p.77), “comes from the phrase ‘preaching the Gospel.’” The single word evangelism is used rather than the phrase “Preaching the Gospel.” But both have the same meaning. Evangelism is based on the gospel of Jesus Christ. The term is deeply related to Jesus Christ and it means nothing without Him. Therefore, the meaning of the term should be sought in the New Testament, beginning with the coming of Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament, the following Greek words are used to explain evangelism. First, the term evangelism is related to “buuyyba” meaning “I preach good news” (Richard, 1999). The noun form of the word is “buuyyealov” and today it means “Evangelism” or “Gospel Preaching.” Second, it means “I preach or I teach” (Mackson, 2004). The term was frequently used when Jesus spoke of gospel preaching and as a number of testimonies prove, it was the most important work in the public life of Jesus. Jesus went all over the place and never stopped preaching and teaching. What he was teaching was how to win souls (Coleman, 1980).

Church growth

Church growth is the building of the Church primarily through evangelism. It is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God’s commission to “make disciples of all people.” Church growth, is not a modern day

phenomenon. It is not another theological theory. It is a remarkable increase in the numerical strength of the Church. When this happens, the little Church becomes a larger one, having many branches. This growth is associated with that of a palm tree that is not subject to seasonal changes or vagaries of nature, but brings out new branches every day and is durable to withstand any form of adversity (Nwankwo, 2022).

Church growth presupposes liveliness and healthy condition of the body of Christ. A growing Church is a living and active Church. Accordingly, in a healthy Church, at least 50% of the membership must be active in ministry. Here members are encouraged to be like Philip who witnessed to and brought Nathaniel to Christ (John 1:45-46).

Media Usage and 21st Century Evangelism

Media are broadly divided into the print media and electronic media. The slow pace of growth of the church could be attributed to lack of effective use of media and or the use of proper media of communicating the gospel to the people. Some churches have gone into the use of internet services for effective propagating of the gospel and some ministers of God use laptop computer to preach and teach in their church, radio and television are most commonly used now. Other ways having feedback are the use of cell phone to receive text message or e-mail service and print media provides great blessing. In the technology that can be used for the world evangelism; computer, word processing, air travel satellite communication are inclusive. According to Hunter (2009, p. 22), "Church growth and impact should not be limited to local Churches or Church denominations but should be seen in the wider coverage of communication for the great commission to be achieved. Radio, Television and Satellite have a wider coverage that can help in this wise."

In the information technology time, it should be noted that some of the methods employed by the first century Christian are still in use. What is fully associated with the present era is the use of information technology devices or tools. This is the method by which the Gospel is proclaimed by Radio, Television, Internet through Satellites and printed page which include Newspaper, Magazines, Christian text books and tracts. Messages on Radio and Television whether teaching, preaching, drama, Testimonies or songs are meant to make members achieve the Great Commission (Hunter, 2009).

Dimensions and Purposes of Evangelism

Watson (1983, p. 78), in his work Fundamentals of Evangelism provided an in-depth study of types of evangelism open to the church of today and their various purposes. We shall consider only a few in what follows.

Personal Evangelism

As the name implies, it takes place when Christians share their faith with others, entering into dialogue and personal or face to face conversation one-on-one, to make known the evangel. The information shared in personal contacts and encounters evangel in its essentials as the reality of God's salvation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is crucial to see this material as information, for the power of the gospel lies in its very historicity. The lustiness of human kind in sin was at once exposed and remedied in the man of Nazareth, crucified, dead and buried (Watson, 1988).

Prophetic Evangelism

Runyon, on his part, gave what he termed prophetic evangelism. He was more radical and original in his proposals about prophetic evangelism; that is, Christians communicating the message that announces the new age of Jesus Christ. The church declares the presence of the risen Christ over the Holy Spirit of promise of God's coming rule, and calling on all to repent and be reconciled to God. More particularly, to engage in prophetic evangelism is to tell persons at every level of worldly power that God's sovereignty over the whole of creation is to be restored to its fullness (Runyon, 1985).

To do this effectively, one needs certain skills, namely, discernment and interpretation. The prophetic evangelist must be able to seek out the signs of the new age in human history and existence, must be able to interpret them in the light of God's coming rule and must then be able to communicate them as good news to as many as possible. Especially important within this is the need to interpret the signs of God's social grace.

Mass Evangelism

Mass evangelism simply mean the preaching of the message on a large scale, especially in open-air meetings or other very large gatherings. This is a typical example of Christ's meetings with the people. The Sermon on the Mount which covers Matthew 5, 6 and 7, the feeding of both the 5000 and the 4000 people (Matthew, 14:15-21; 15:32-39), are all examples of mass evangelism. In the history of the church, open-air meetings have been used to reach large numbers of people since the time of the Reformation. Whitefield and Wesley also pioneered mass evangelization during the period of the Great Evangelical Awakening (Hanks, 1998). This type of evangelism reaches large numbers of people and it is to be encouraged for the obvious reason that the gospel must be brought as soon as possible to as many as can be reached. Although it requires intensive preparation, it could be planned by churches or interdenominational ministries.

Literature Evangelism

As the name implies it is an evangelism that is book centered. It uses printed matters in passing on the message of the gospel to the people. In this the evangelizers carry along with them Christian tracts that contains powerful messages of the king which after being read is capable of transforming and converting the fellow by accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and savior. Evangelism through the distribution of tracts has contributed to great extent to the growth of the church. The only short coming is that it is only limited to the literate communities.

The greatest purpose of evangelism is to lead people to believe in Christ and to have a Christian life. Its aim is to bring repentance to non-believers, the establishment and expansion of church, and the glorification of God.

Impact of Media Usage in Evangelism on Church Growth

God desires and commands growth in His church. From the scriptures, it is evident that even if the church starts small, she must grow. It is absolutely not a crime to start small, but it is definitely a crime to remain small. Green (1992), has this to say:

The little church can become a larger one, having many wonderful branches here and there. The growth of the church must be like that of the palm tree that is not subject to seasonal changes but brings out new branches every day and is so durable it can withstand any adversity. The Lord has supplied the church with every necessary tool for growth. Therefore no excuse is tenable for stagnancy (p.93).

In the view of the researchers, it can be understood that growth in the church is a deliberate choice. Collaborating the assertion, Wagner and Alexander(1984), pointed out that the successfully growing church must maintain a steady pattern of expansion with a meaningful doubling time of six years or less, while still maintaining a dynamic stability that develops with the changing needs of the congregation. This means that as a church grows it must continuously reappraise its organization and its methods of administration to keep pace with the numerical expansion. He stated further that:

The goal of a congregation must be to grow and maintain organizational stability at the same time. The natural tendency of a moderately growing church is to work in cycles rather than developing a steady program of organized growth. The result is that a church will grow for a while, and then it will slow down to readjust its organization to the new size of the congregation. If it organizes correctly, it will begin to grow again, after which it will once more slow down to allow its structure to readjust to the new conditions. The problem is that each time the church restructures, it hardens the mold a little more and makes future changes more difficult. There are longer and longer gaps between the growth periods as the structure becomes less adaptable, and finally the cycles of growth cease altogether (Wagner and Alexander, 1984).

It is easy to say that the church must grow and adapt its structure at the same time, but the two activities seldom operate simultaneously in such an ideal balance. For a church to grow continuously, the pastor and his leading laymen must be aware of the two tendencies and must give to both of them their equal attention. As the church becomes larger, the congregation can carry on its activities at many different levels and go through its normal cycles of growing and restructuring on a departmental level with only occasional major adjustments. However, media usage is very key to any meaningful growth expected of any church.

The mass media creates impact in the transmission of attitude, perceptions and beliefs. The media especially television may become important socialization agencies in determining the attitudes of young people (Ibiam, 2019, Interviewed). Messages on Radio and Television whether teaching, preaching, drama, testimonies or songs are meant to expand the Kingdom frontiers. They are also meant to build up not only members of a particular domination but the society at large. (Hunter, 1999). One who may not have been willing to go to church or listen to messages can hear one over the Radio or Television and gives attention. This can make an unbeliever to turn to God though such a person may not eventually attend to church that preached the message. Therefore, to see and hear a speaker on television gives the receiver more of the sense of being there than to read the message in a handout or on a poster. Immediate access to information makes it possible for the church to deepen her dialogue with the contemporary world, the church can more readily inform the world of her belief and explain the reasons for her stance on any given issue or event. She can hear more clearly the

voice of public opinion and enter into a continuous discussion with the world around her thus involving herself more immediately in the common search for solutions to many humanity's pressing problems. Media have all played a big part in breaking through national and cultural frontiers. It is no longer exaggeration to say that technology and indeed information has changed the face of modern evangelism.

According to Aluamaka (2019, Interviewed) noted that:

Evangelism on radio is based on people's way of life or culture, gives people sense of belonging as they can use their own language in message transmission. Through participating nature media also create a platform where diverse voices and opinion are heard including minority groups, women, the poor and the marginalized are covered. This is in line with the fundamental human rights to freedom of expression, which helps in the cross ventilation of ideas. This also necessary for people to understand themselves and chart a common course for evangelism development.

Media also provide missing links in most rural areas where telephone (GSN) lines, good roads and other means of communication are lacking. Radio and Television provides links by broadcasting messages, which would be important to some people but lack direct contact of the sender. For instance, the message can be that a village meeting scheduled for a particular date has been postponed. It can also be to inform the church about the meeting in the Headquarters. Radio and Television are providing the rural people with the types of message they would want to hear from the Pastor, the thereby gain consciousness which remind them of their position and responsibilities as the children of God.

Through the use of media in the modern times, people all over the places have the opportunity of being taught the same thing by the same authors and preachers. "Deeper Life Bible Church has her Monday bible study relayed to all the members that attend the bible study in all their centers simultaneously. This is made possible by the use of satellite and projectors". In Methodist Church Nigeria the case is different. Radio, Television, Audio and Video recording and transmission and most of all, the internet make possible the cosmopolitan experience once denied all but global travelers Okpokiri (2020, Interviewed). Communication among people on local levels also serves to build community; many Pastors can provoke a congregation at the press of a laptop key, apprise members of events or call on them for participation.

Christian radio is more popular today than ever before. Armstrong (2001), noted that, "today more than sixty Christian organizations operate international radio stations and hundreds of organizations on every continent produce programs for them." He noted further that radio and television stations have the potential to reach half of the worlds' population. Armstrong writes that with stations scattered all over and the Trans World Radio actually encircles the globe with the gospel. This worldwide network utilizes the combined talents of 400 Radio missionaries and a total of 5 million watts of power to produce or proclaim the Good News in 70 languages. He concludes by saying that missionary radio stations large and small are a 21st century embodiment of the prophecy of Romans 10:18.... "their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world" (Amstrong, 2001).

Sherwood (1999), noted that, "Christian television operations will expand a hundred fold in no distant time. With satellite communication, program packaging, home videotaping, and a dozen other "breakthroughs" the future of the Church will see the growth of electronic evangelism on a scale unimaginable."

Challenges to Evangelism in the 21st Century

The obstacles or hindrances to evangelism are very many and a complete catalogue of them is impossible in this work.

One of the challenges to evangelism is opposition. Today, there are oppositions against the Church in many nations of the world. A typical example is the religious informed crisis in the northern part of Nigeria. Also in certain parts of the world, violence of various magnitudes is perpetrated in the name of religion and mostly against Christianity. Unfortunately, Christians and the church have been one main target of the group and many churches have been attacked. It is no longer safe to worship in churches, not to mention conducting open air evangelistic campaigns or any form of evangelistic endeavor. This is an indication that if the church must continue in evangelism, which is considered its supreme task, it must evolve new ways of doing it (Ogunewu, 2014).

Another factor is the changing nature of the society. Human society is in constant flux. These changes affect both culture and society. Cultures and societies change from time to time. There is the tendency to assume that activities, forms and methods, which were relevant in a past era, are equally relevant everywhere for all times. Therefore, in this regard, there is the need for the church to move with time in the task of evangelization. Hence, methods of evangelism will perpetually witness dynamism. Adiele (1990, pp. 87-101) is of the view that, "although the message of the church is ageless, the audience and methods are subject to change with time and place." The Christian message is constant, but since the society is a variable factor, which changes, there is the need to devise appropriate means of reaching the world with the message from time to time.

Remedying the Situation through Media Evangelism

Media evangelization as already noted involves the application of various forms of media technologies in the furtherance of the Christian message. Today, the media has become a force to be reckoned with in Christian evangelism. This includes the print and the electronic media. The print media: leaflets, tracts, handbills, posters, books and other printed materials in the propagation of the gospel. It is being referred to as the silent missionary in some quarters because of its ability to penetrate any culture where physical presence is hindered. It is of value where there is a lack of trained witnesses or in conjunction with other efforts.

The electronic media has assisted the church in reaching out to those places where physical presence may not be possible. David (1976) states that mass media possesses potentials which if harnessed will help in the even and effective dissemination of the Christian message. He enumerates the advantages of electronic media as the ability to: (i) reach more people within the shortest possible time; (ii) penetrate locations where personal presence may not be possible; (iii) disseminate the Christian message with great financial efficiency; (iv) limit the resistance of the people to the message ((p. 65)).

Conclusion

This work has revealed that media is very effective and impactful in the area of evangelism and Church growth. The 21st century Church can only make meaning impact if it engages maximally the services of all forms of media. Appropriate and effective use of media is necessary. This applies to the internet as well as printed media; church leaders are obliged to use the full potential of the computer age to serve humanity and evangelize the lost souls.

There are various obstacles to media evangelism in this era, such as language barrier, globalization, cultural differences and fund; the Church can still find a way through which these barriers can be ameliorated. However, there is no other short-cut to Church growth than the involvement of media in evangelism.

Recommendations

The church and her leaders at every level must seize every opportunity to ensure that information is disseminated by all possible and available means, starting from the word of mouth, printed materials, radio and television and even internet.

Members of the church should be well informed about programs of the church on Radio, Television and Satellite so that they would listen to them and be blessed.

Messages on media should be will prepared and rich messages in line with Christian standards so that they could be evangelical and lead to conceptual growth of the church. Evangelism on media should cover different areas of Christian living for spiritual growth of listeners and better knowledge of Christ.

There should be online counseling service to follow up those who respond to the message on media services especially through the internet. Churches located in state capitals should endeavor to sponsor a Television or a radio programme on a regular basis, as effective means of evangelism.

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