



The role of the Christian church's mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo regarding socio-political challenges

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Abstract

This article argues that the Christian church's mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) should play a major role in response to socio-political challenges. The church in the DRC should intervene in socio-political issues in a way that is most likely to maximise the impact of healing and reconciliation and to make a real difference to the future of the country to promote peace, development and positive transformation. The church should be an instrument to bring the Congolese people together, and show them how to love one another. The church's mission in the DRC should create an atmosphere of peace and joyful relationship with one another, evangelising people, bringing them to a deeper faith, promoting truth, justice, peace, reconciliation, reconstruction, social cohesion and development and defending the poor and oppressed. Thus, the church should always be central to the social advancement of the Congolese people. This article provides a missiological overview of the role of the Christian church's mission to gain a better understanding of the role of the church in the DRC today.

Keywords: Christian church, mission, Democratic Republic of Congo, crisis, socio-political challenge.

Introduction

For decades the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has faced many socio-political challenges because of conflict. There is a real need for life changes in the country. In this context of change in the country, the church has an important role to play for peace and the transformation of the DRC as a nation. Various sectors of the church in the DRC have had different views on how to engage the despotic powers that are oppressing the Congolese people. Some sectors of the church are part of the autocratic regime, while others are aligned with the opposition. This incoherence cannot bring peace, social cohesion, transformation and development in the country or solve the conflict in the country in a peaceful manner.

The identity of the church in the DRC needs to be clarified. The DRC is a country where the majority of the people are Christians: Catholics represent 50% of the population, Protestants 20% and Kimbanguists 10%. African traditional religions are followed by 10% of the population and the remainder are Muslim or unaffiliated. But for the sake of this article the word church will be used in a broader sense as the union of the body of Christ where all churches are represented. As such the leaders of churches should come together to bring light in the socio-political situation that is challenging the Congolese today.



The church has played a prominent role in socio-political crises throughout recorded history and the existence of the church has historically been associated with times of political crisis (Goldstone, 2001:95). Indeed, the church has sought theological answers to crises around the world. It has frequently taken part in mass action in times of socio-political crisis worldwide. Therefore the Christian church's mission has a role to play in the DRC's conflict. The role is that the church as an institution¹ (Calvin, 1999:198-202) must show a good example which the Congolese people and leaders should follow. The church has to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ which brings love, healing, social cohesion and reconciliation among the Congolese themselves and takes into account the challenges that the Congolese people are facing today. The church must be in the forefront of helping to resolve the conflict in the DRC in a peaceful manner. The church should not always be content to remain only within the narrow limits of the spiritual sphere, but it should have an impact on the governance of society, that is to say, on the social, political and economic life of the Congolese people.

This article aims to show that, today, the church in the DRC should emerge as a location of a new form of sociality, and that its role should not only be spiritual, but also social, capable of influencing public policies for the development and transformation of the DRC. According to Kalemba (2012:196) development and transformation are possible in the DRC only if the church can bring the Congolese people together, encourage them to love one another and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, follow Him and live under Him as King.

According to McKnight (2011:159), 'a Christian is a person who follows the way of Christ'. By following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ the church in the DRC will fulfil its mission and accomplish its role of reconciling and healing the wounds of conflict and revive the moral reconstruction of a new society (DRC). However, to perform this holistic mission, the church in the DRC needs to be fully involved in the situation that the Congolese are passing through by responding to the various hard-hitting issues and by proposing appropriate solutions at all levels of life according to God's word (Kalema, 2012:196) which is to fulfil God's purposes of creation and salvation through Jesus Christ. The Christian church's mission in the DRC should be in total solidarity with the people of Congo, sharing their problems and destiny, and working together towards positive peace and transformation. The church must move from pointless protest to positive reconstruction. Dolamo (2001:295) affirms this when he states that Christians or the church have to offer a critical and prophetic support for the government's agenda; the church must support the government in those projects whose main objectives are to improve the quality of life for all, especially those which give preferential treatment to the poor and the oppressed.

With regard to the argument above, the research questions for this article are: What is the church's mission in the DRC regarding the socio-political challenges of today? What should the church's role be in pursuing social justice and facilitating positive transformation of the DRC as a nation? Is today's church mission a continuation of Jesus Christ's ministry in the DRC? What should the church do in order to make a difference in the DRC during this time of crisis?

This article seeks to answer these questions in the hope that the outcome will contribute to the missiological field and to lasting peace, sustainable development and positive transformation of the DRC as a nation.

¹ The church as an institution is a formal organisation that sets out to accomplish a specific purpose. It is an agent. It can do things; it can say things; it has its own voice. As an institution, it has its own purposes and plans, its own structure and officers, and its own mission.



It is against this backdrop that this article discusses and analyses the church's role in the socio-political challenges facing the Congolese today. In this context, the purpose of this article is to determine if the church, with focus on the church in the DRC, is taking serious cognisance of socio-political challenges facing the Congolese. If the church has become silent, the objective of the researcher is to help the voice of the church to be awakened. If, on the other hand, the church is taking note of these challenges, the objective is to find out what exactly it is saying about the situation in the country. What theological contribution is the church making in addressing the socio-political challenges facing Congolese at this time?

This article would further assist the church in the DRC to openly engage in dialogue, not only with itself, but also with other institutions in addressing and finding solutions to socio-political challenges facing the country.

Methodology

This article is not an empirical study, does not follow a quantitative research method nor is it intended to interview people in the DRC. It will concentrate on a conceptual methodology. Various sources will be researched to identify and evaluate the problem of socio-political challenges in the DRC. Background literature will be looked into to give an indication of the challenges facing the DRC and its responses. The research will lead to a finding that will assist not only the church, but also the people of the DRC and their leaders. It should also be recognised that the challenges facing the DRC are very evident in Africa. Although all the challenges do not manifest themselves in equal proportions or in the same way throughout Africa, there are sufficient similarities in order to refer to these problematic challenges as relating both to the DRC and the rest of the African continent. In order to provide answers to the questions posed in the introduction, and to discover the role of the church in the DRC's socio-political issues, the article will also use the external desk research methodology, which entails online desk research (use of the Internet), data from funding agencies, published government data, books and articles.

Significance of the study

The church in the DRC has experienced an explosive growth over the past decades. The church has grown to such an extent that it is rightly regarded as one of the new centres of gravity where the poor and those who are marginalised belong. It is normally these groups of people that are more intensely affected by the challenges facing the country today. These groups of people do not have the means or voice to speak for themselves. That is why the church must address their pressing issues and be on their side. Kā Mana (2005:17) points out that the more the church pursues its mission in the world the more it will be able to overcome its internal problems. The church should, however, never address only the issues concerning itself for the sake of those who are linked to the church, but should address the challenges that are devastating society for the sake of the total community. Bosch (1995:375) states that the church is the only institution in the world that exists for the sake of those who do not have the voice to speak openly for themselves. So the church as an institution is there to participate effectively in the decision-making processes in the DRC. The article also hopes to contribute towards highlighting the processes, structures and relationships between the government and the church that are currently not functioning well.

Background and development of the DRC

Just over 56 years ago the DRC gained its political independence from Belgium. Independence gave rise to great hopes of political, economic, social and cultural development in the people of the DRC. Today, unfortunately, the reality is quite different, as



the country is still experiencing major socio-political challenges and suffering. These challenges in the DRC have resulted from a lack of social intelligence and spirituality in the country's leaders and people (Kalemba, 2012:87). They have destroyed themselves and their country for personal gain and through lack of love for one another. These challenges have been caused by poor governance, poverty, corruption, state repression, unemployment, political conflicts and personal interests of the leaders. Tshilenga (2005:31) argues that among other problems facing the DRC is constitutional change. The greed for power by the country's leaders, misappropriation of state resources and misuse of state funds, nepotism, the use of state security forces to oppress the people, ethnic divisions and widespread corruption have become a cancer in the political leadership of the DRC, with devastating effects on the society. Another challenge is that the church is currently experiencing divisions and political incoherence among its leaders. There is a new political culture emerging among Congolese leaders which is against the church's and traditional African values. Consequently, as stated by Kalemba (2012:17), Congolese plot against other Congolese, church leaders even plot against other church leaders and Congolese kill other Congolese. Congolese political leaders kill each other, their sisters and brothers in their own interests and they create complex problems with people outside the country. In addition, corruption is considered as an opportunity for Congolese leaders, even among church leaders (Harimenshi, 2011:6). In this case the church has a role to play to transform the challenges of socio-political issues to avoid chaos, and to bring the people together for a positive transformation.

The socio-political challenges in the DRC

The major challenges as described above in the DRC today are the lack of success in economic, social and political development. The country has been at the centre of a number of crises over the years, most notably following independence, during the crisis of the 1960s, when there was a threat of the Cold War spilling over and heating up in Central Africa. Again in the 1990s, the DRC was threatening to become a source of international instability (Bobb, 1990; Jennings, 2001). The DRC's importance is to some extent geopolitical. The DRC is bordered by nine countries (Angola, the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania and Zambia). In defending its borders the DRC has become entangled in political, economic and social rivalries. Since the 1990s, the DRC's borders with Rwanda have been international flash points (Ekwe-Ekwe, 1990). The crisis has emerged in the DRC mainly as a result of the poor living conditions of the Congolese people. A rising population combined with deplorable economic conditions has forced many Congolese into poverty.

This crisis has become dramatic today to the extent that the church has lost its focus as to what its mission should be and has directed its focus only to things that do not build the DRC as a nation. Therefore the church is not doing the work that it supposed to do in this time that the DRC has lost its dignity as a nation. At this particular time the church should take the task of being the moral guardian of the political powers. Organizations like the National Episcopal Conference of Congo (Cenco) and the Ecumenical Council of Congo (COE) today should play a definitive role in the political affairs of the DRC by invoking their moral and political authority and claim the work of participating in the affairs of socio-political challenge facing the Congolese today within the framework of institutions which have a social and political responsibilities. The church should remain an important actor in the nation's socio-political life.

While some scholars argue that unfavourable socio-economic and political conditions such as state repression, poverty, corruption and unemployment are the forces that are challenging the country, others emphasise the influence of foreign forces that are fostering violence (Privat-Biber, 2011:10). According to Mpoyi (2010:38), unfavourable socio-



economic circumstances, state repression, poverty, corruption and unemployment are the forces that create a climate of suspicion and distrust among the Congolese, condemning them to live in fear and insecurity. Those forces are also the root of many political crises in the country.

Indeed, those negative forces (poverty, corruption, state repression and unemployment) lead to the destabilisation of the institutions of the DRC. For example, political leaders use corruption to maintain power, and others buy people off to defeat the existing authorities and win elections. In such cases, these political leaders take state funds hostage and regard them as their own property, and nobody has the right to demand transparency in the management of these possessions (Kalembe 2012:206). Political projects are launched to convince the voters, but actually corruption is used before, during and after election campaigns. This was the case during the 2011 presidential and legislative elections in the DRC, when more socio-political troubles and collapses took place because of certain corrupt political leaders. Consequently, the DRC is in a chaotic state, and as a result, the people suffer through conflicts caused by political corruption and leadership crises. Another challenge is poverty. Currently people in the DRC are living on less than one dollar per day; lack of employment is the major cause of poverty in the DRC. Cases of extreme poverty are increasing because of the conflict. Poverty in the DRC has many causes. In addition to unemployment, there are a number of different factors contributing to the situation, and some of the major causes are corruption as discussed above, low incomes for those who are working, diseases brought by violent conflict, especially in the east of the country, inadequate nutrition, lack of access to education, and political conflicts. Today, 90% of the Congolese people are unemployed, and every year, malnutrition kills more than 10 000 children (Claude 2011:23). The DRC is considered a Third World country, characterised by socio-economic problems, human rights violations, low income and joblessness. According to Kalembe (2012:21), weak economies are the result of a lack of domestic economic capacity and weak social infrastructure.

Economic mismanagement, immorality and social injustice have also sabotaged the national development of the DRC. The suffering of the majority of the Congolese people is characterised by the tragedy of poor people in a rich country full of natural resources. It is also the consequence of the weak behaviour of Congolese political leaders, and unethical laws implemented through government and parliament (Kalembe 2012:22). Without a strong culture of community development, and a spiritual and healthy social conscience serving Congolese society as a whole, the DRC will not develop into a strong democracy in the future and the challenges facing the Congolese are will not stop. However, the church in the DRC can play a major role in transforming this situation as its *missio Dei* is to educate people and their leaders, eradicate ignorance, poverty and corrupt political leaders, and promote discipleship. As Dolamo (2001:296) affirms, reconstruction and development cannot be successfully undertaken and reconciliation effected without adequately addressing the issues of socio-economic justice. Dandala (2001:30) adds that social transformation, fairness and justice must be understood as an intrinsic fabric of reconciliation; reconciliation is not possible where the contending factions do not have a common understanding of the truth.

The role of the Christian church's mission in socio-political challenge in the DRC

Today some social scientists and theologians, including church workers, hold that churches have no role to play in socio-political transformation of communities (Aboum, 1996:99). Throughout history and even now the church has played an important role in the issue of socio-political challenges and the existence of the church has historically been associated with times of political crisis. There is abundant evidence that the church constitutes a



considerable force which can bring about a deep socio-political transformation (Sakala, 1996:117-129; Rakotonirainy, 1996:153-178).

While this study focuses on the role of the church's mission in the DRC, it also underscores the contribution of the church to socio-political development and transformation as a globalising and transnational organisation (Bellagamba 1992:33-34, 91). According to Ramasamy (2004:92) the role of the church is to help governments and peoples who seek to embrace and implement human values. Ramasamy argues further that the church must hold the leaders accountable. It becomes necessary for them to speak out against tyrannical rule and all forms of oppression and exploitation. On the same note Ramasamy shows that many churches could not play their role effectively because their leaders failed to understand that they had also socio-political responsibilities to assume in the larger community. Further, Ramasamy suggests how the church can be successful both within and outside; one of his concerns is that how Ubuntu or Bumuntu² (Nkulu, 2011) and the Gospel can valuably be used to combat antisocial pathologies and develop needed values for socio-political transformation of the DRC (Ramasamy, 2004:93).

In his *Spirituality and Justice* Dorr (1990) describes the harmful behaviour of the elite in general and proposes some remedies and practical actions the church can take to empower the victims of these exploitative people for transformation. Hauerwas and Willimon (1990) suggest that the role of the church consists of practising the politics of the death and resurrection of Christ, living and leading as the church.

Tshilenga (2005) explains that in the DRC the church has an important role to play in helping Christians to combat collective sins in their lives and communities. The fight against collective sins in the country can be successful only if the church leaders have won it in their own lives. Mugambi (1995) argues that the pulpit can be used as central medium for the transmission of new ideas and change of attitudes, a viable instrument for the restoration of people's confidence and social transformation.

Duewel (1995) recognises that the church has a role to play in the larger community. He speaks especially of the power of the prayer to bring about revival in the church and moral regeneration and transformation in the community at large. He then uses a number of revival examples throughout history to make his case more tangible, ranging from little villages and towns to cities, and entire nations.

Mutombo-Mukendi (2011) in his *La Théologie Politique Africaine*, after analysing the alarming socio-political situation of Africa and the exogenous and endogenous causes of the problem, insists that the African church and the leaders have a very important role to play for the socio-political transformation of the continent. According to Mutombo, poor and unethical leadership both in the church and political arenas poses a problem. He observes that developing ethical and God-fearing Christians including church leaders who might make the practice of an effective political theology and the subsequent socio-political transformation can positively transform the continent.

Katongole (2011) argues that the church must primarily play its role of being the politics of God, producing and nurturing God-fearing Christians while being true salt of the earth and light of the world, considering the life of both the African church and its leaders and that of the politicians. The literature above can be analysed and used in this article to propose practical suggestions which can help solve the problem of socio-political challenge in the DRC.

² Bumuntu in the DRC languages is the dignity of the African conception of personhood or being human.



Missiological response and recommendations on the socio-political issues in the DRC

Before answering the research questions posed in the introduction, this article first defines the church's mission in order to understand the church's role in positively transforming DRC society. The mission of the church in general depends, to a large degree, on what is meant by the word 'mission' (Deyoung & Gilbert 2011:17). The word mission comes from the Latin *mittere*, to send out, which corresponds to the Greek *apostellein*, and which occurs 137 times in the New Testament. Therefore mission is intrinsically biblical. The church's mission can be to glorify God and enjoy him forever or to love God and neighbour, as these are the greatest commandments (Matthew 22:36-40). Because mission is the central calling in the Gospel message, trust and obedience is the essence of the church's mission. However, Bosch (1991:1) argues that since the 1950s there has been a remarkable escalation in the use of the word mission among Christians. This went hand-in-hand with a significant broadening of the concept of 'mission'.

Mission previously narrowly referred to Christians sent out cross-culturally to convert non-Christians and establish churches. Today, mission is understood more broadly to include evangelism, environmental stewardship, community development, transformation of society, social justice, liberation of people and reconstruction. As Deyoung and Gilbert (2011:18) argue, mission is here, there and everywhere. Köstenberger (1998:199) argues that mission is the specific task or purpose which a person or group seeks to accomplish. Stott (1975:30) understands mission to be everything the church is sent into the world to do. The church's mission is to do the things God's word commands because it is a continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ between the incarnation and the *Parousia*. This must be done in partnership with God and his will in redeeming the entire world. Deyoung and Gilbert (2011:26) affirm that the mission of the church is summarised in the Great Commission passages. The church's mission today must be a continuation of Jesus Christ's mission for people's salvation and the coming reign of God (John 14:12).

The church should be instrumental in making a difference in non-Christian institutions because Christ commissioned it. Matthew (5:13–16) states that one should be 'the light of the world and salt of the earth'. Another important church mission is to strengthen the body of believers and equip them for Christian responsibilities. Christ's body is called to hear the cries of distress of the oppressed and the poor. The church should function in an atmosphere of spiritual learning, where God's word is taught, and where beliefs are grounded (Robbins, 1995:2). According to God's word, each member of the body of Christ is called to serve in some aspect of service (Romans, 12:6). The church must bear the suffering of the sick, those displaced by war and excluded from society, refugees, prisoners and those in ethnic strife. For this reason, Christians must rise as one man to fight the scourge of corruption, social injustice, poverty, unemployment and bad governance. Christians represent the interests of God's Kingdom on earth, and should influence society with Christ's ideals. According to Robbins (1995:3) the presence of the church in the world is Christ's antidote to sin, and the church is intended to represent God's interests in the affairs of society. It was not intended to be passive, nor to be confined within the four walls of a building, but to be involved as a catalyst of God's high ideals in the world.

As Dolamo (2001:292) states, the church by its nature must remain a beacon of hope for those who are struggling on the margins of society. It is important to rethink the DRC's future in terms of rebuilding socio-political, economic, ethical and spiritual structures. In other words, in view of its decay, real personal transformation must take place in the social, political, economic and cultural lives of the Congolese people. The Congolese people obviously desire to be free, to grow and become truly independent. It is important to understand that real transformation in the DRC requires a tangible change in attitude, a shift in frame of mind regarding social improvement and the adaptation of African traditions to a



changing world. In this connection, Congolese leaders should promote the Christian mission and the church's role in the DRC by encouraging faith in Christ. These combined efforts will lead to the positive transformation of the country. Inspired by the Gospel, such a mission should deal with Congolese people's everyday concerns.

The church in the DRC can do this by motivating those in leadership positions and Christians to identify various key issues. One of these key issues is awareness of national and international exchanges of a global politico-economic nature based on inequality and domination of others. Alemazung (2011:12) argues that justice is based on equal rights and equal dignity, and justice based on these two concepts implies a social balance. This balance relates to the distribution of power, wealth and status. In the current context of the DRC, the church's mission must be to promote social cohesion, peace, justice, reconciliation, good governance, love of God and love of neighbour, and avoidance of conflict, which is in fact the framework and basis of the church's mission. It is important to understand that enduring transformation requires a perceptible change of mentality, awareness and social, political and economic improvement. Robbins (1995:3) states that the church should preach the Gospel of transformation which will liberate the people and heal their inner wounds. It is also important that the church let its light shine in the DRC as a nation (to love, to care for, and to meet the needs of humanity), while upholding the redemptive truths and righteousness of Christ.

Given the continuous violations of human rights in the DRC, the church should, through preaching, highlight the importance of all Congolese people according to the Gospel. The knowledge that they were created in God's image will restore the Congolese people's dignity, and play an active role in the fight against human rights abuses. The church's mission in the DRC must provide biblical answers for worldly ills such as sickness, poverty, oppression, unemployment, loneliness, evil spirits and sorcery (Kalemba 2012:23). The Holy Spirit-led church in the DRC can, in addition, enhance Congolese community life by showing people how to share and live together in love and communal harmony and thus become a true fellowship, a community of peace, justice and shared joy. However, to achieve this, the Congolese need spiritual men and women.

The church must promote spiritual and moral education in all areas of social life. Kiki (2010:70) points out that the church in the DRC is in a constant struggle against the temptation to set itself up as an institution rather than to be dynamic, but it cannot fulfil its mission without getting in touch with its head in total communion with the Holy Spirit. Pongo (2006) states that the hope the Gospel gives is that of a population that sees every human being as useful, with every individual being prepared to abandon every form of selfishness and to promote the wellbeing of all. The role of the church in the DRC should be to follow, with a critical mind, the missionary enterprise in order to examine its motives, goals, behaviour, message and methods for evangelism. Thus, the church's mission, regarding the dynamic relationship between God and humanity, is to consciously continue its work in a context of deeper faith and more holistic activity. Bosch (1995:10) states that the salvation that Christians are meant to celebrate, which they can testify to in word and deed, is manifested in the proclamation of the Gospel as the Gospel is also fighting against all forms of evil, be it personal or social. Therefore the church in the DRC must re-involve itself in education and developmental strategies.

Conclusion

The challenges of the church's mission illustrated above can be a starting point for understanding the socio-political challenges in the DRC and for spiritual reform. Sin, poverty, corruption, social injustice, breach of human rights, lack of democracy, ignorance, bad governance, wars, diseases and gender discrimination are among the many challenges



facing the church in the DRC. These challenges can serve as a spiritual thermometer and analytical tool for a holistic mission. Today's church mission in the DRC can, with regard to the socio-political challenges, be redefined as a people liberation mission. This can be done by leading the Congolese back to the Kingdom of God by preaching the salvation Gospel in Christ and promoting spiritual and moral transformation. Without a strong church mission which can guide and light the way for Congolese salvation, there cannot be transformation and development in the country. The church has to act sensitively with regard to creativity and imagination in the DRC as the Congolese people need to escape from poverty, corruption, unemployment and conflict. The church should be involved in the community's struggle against all forms of challenges. There can be no transformation and development in the country if the church cannot spread the Gospel of peace. The church's role in pursuing social justice and facilitating positive transformation in the DRC should be to initiate a new direction by inculcating strong morality in the Congolese people's lives. The church must promote leadership ethics in order to make a difference during the remaining part of the twenty-first century. The church has to re-involve itself in education and developmental strategies in the country.

The DRC can be spiritually and physically reborn through the Christian faith and so create a healthy society where the spirit of Christ guides the creative genius of the country. This means that the church must use its imagination to place Jesus' message of the Cross against the causes and consequences of disorientation and disorganisation in the country. Obviously, by providing spiritual substance, the church can once again become a powerhouse of faith, moving mountains and cutting paths through rock with God's power. The Congolese people will be able to fight against corruption, violence, self-interest, poverty and poor governance and work together in developing their country. Furthermore, healing and forgiveness should take place before any other change can occur. The Congolese people must make use of God's word and stay in prayer to achieve this. God's word and prayer are still the only 'tools' for bringing about positive transformation in their country. The one-dimensional focus of evangelical missions on personal salvation and the hereafter must change. People's immediate and pressing needs for survival cannot be ignored. A true spiritual relationship with God (in Jesus Christ) will inevitably lead to new social attitudes and a different attitude of mind. By following the selfless example of Christ, transformation and development will come about. The church's mission in general is to proclaim the Gospel and create disciples, because the church's ministry is the continuation of Christ's ministry of the *missio Dei*.

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