

# ***FEEDING THE VILLAGE POOR AND HUNGRY IN EASTERN NIGERIA THROUGH COLLECTIVE KINDNESS***

***Keynote Address by Obinna Ubani-Ebere, Ph.D.***

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Good evening everyone and thank you very much for inviting me to speak. It is great to be here this evening. I was surprised when I got the invitation to be the keynote speaker for this dinner. Prior to the invitation, my plan was to attend this meeting, shut up my mouth, keep quiet, listen and acquaint myself with the workings, aspirations and projects of NACENA. However, my acceptance of the invitation to speak is way of telling my brothers and sisters that I am interested in NACENA and by God's grace, I shall attend future meetings of the association.

In line with the spirit and theme of this camp meeting "The Purpose Driven Believers: Energizing Advent Message in Eastern Nigeria", the topic of the keynote address is "Feeding the Village Poor and Hungry in Eastern Nigeria through Collective Kindness." Collective kindness does not, in anyway discount or undervalue the importance and significance of individual and personal kindness to people. The premise here is that when we pull our resources together, we can touch many lives.

This topic is critical to me because I have been personally touched by people's kindness and love in times of deepest circumstance and crisis. Therefore, I know that kindness works. I also know that kindness is very powerful in effecting changes and in bringing the great positive sides of humanity. That is why I want to speak on this topic because village poverty and hunger is one of the failings of humanity in the 21st century. Poverty therefore, is indeed, an increasing social and security problem that poses serious threat to human dignity and the environment.

According to the United Nations, about 25,000 people die every day of hunger or hunger-related causes. It is my reasonable estimation that 90% of the Nigerian poor lives in the villages with less than fifty cent a day where poverty is especially rampant, social services and infrastructure are limited or non-existent. While Nigeria is the fifth largest oil producer in the world, it is unthinkable to note the inequality in the distribution of wealth in Nigeria with 66% of the population falling below the poverty line of \$1 a day. That means that majority of Nigerians are prisoners of acute poverty. We should not therefore wonder why the UNDP human development indicators are telling us that life expectancy in Nigeria is 43.4.

It is my belief that our collective kindness towards the poor and hungry is one of the ways to confront the tyranny of village or rural poverty in the Eastern Nigeria. With act of kindness, we can bring food and water to the hungry and thirsty. Therefore, the purpose of this address is to instigate dialogue and conversation that generate ideas on how to confront village poverty and hunger in Eastern Nigeria.

**The question that is actually begging for answer or answers is why are people poor and hungry in Nigeria, the 5th oil producing and exporting Nation in the world?**

People are poor and hungry in Nigeria not because of the generational curse, the evils that their ancestors or parents committed, their sins, laziness or because they are Christians, Muslim, Hindus, Judaism, Seventh-day Adventist, Roman Catholic, idol worshipers nor because of land ownership, war, famine, drought, poor crop yield but because,

Nigerian leaders at the Federal, state and local government are using public funds meant for development and well-being of the society to buy houses, property, private planes and ships for their children, family members, friends and concubines in the western world.

- Government is not sensitive to the common needs of her citizens. They are poor because of corruption and ineffective government. Government leaders have made public funds their private international bank accounts.
- The political and economic gatekeepers (president, governors, ministers, commissioners and legislators--representatives and senators) are not in public service for the interest of the society and well-being of the citizens.
- They cannot afford three-square meals in a day and have no food in pantry to feed the children.
- Leadership failure, greed, corruption and lack of culture of accountability in public service.
- Civility and honesty in public service is dead in Nigeria.
- Nigeria leaders are yet to realize that poverty and hunger is very risky for the society, community, village or family because it creates more insecurity, anger, frustration, envy, jealousy, social isolation, vulnerability and unsafe environment.

Poverty is the result of corruption, which the impact on the impoverished Nigerian villages is highly tragic. We should stop blaming the poor for being poor because poverty and hunger is not the fault of the poor and hungry but it is a product of government inefficiency.

Many countries, organizations, and associations have failed today because of total lack of truth in government, leadership and public service. For example, when people deliberately go into public service to enrich themselves by stealing, looting and sharing public funds that should have been used to improve the wellbeing of citizens, the outcome of such public service hypocrisy is that development will suffer, many citizens will summersault into acute poverty and nothing positive will be accomplished for the nation.

The have-nots- and the powerless-----children, widows, disabled, homeless and unemployed are always the casualties of government recklessness, false promises and nonchalant attitudes.

The fact of the matter is that the socioeconomic, political and legal system of Nigeria has let the poor and weak down because the governments and institutions are not responding to their real concerns and needs. Truly, Nigeria has lost the critical vision of a better and wellbeing society.

### **What is Poverty?**

In my own opinion, poverty is being hungry and without access to food. It is being sick and not being able to see a qualified physician, nurse or midwife. Poverty is losing a child to illness due to unclean water, malnutrition, and malnourishment. Poverty is lack of basic needs of life such as food, health, shelter and education. Poverty is lack of representation and resource degradation.

It is also very true that some people are hungry because their husbands have sold their farmland to marry multiple wives and have more children than they can afford to feed. That is also irresponsibility and foolishness. They are hungry because they have no jobs, money to buy food. In some rural areas, people are hungry because wars, political instability, internal conflicts, natural disaster, unemployment, poor health and inadequate education has displaced and uprooted them.

### **Who are the village poor and hungry?**

Poverty has many faces. The poor and hungry are children, mothers, fathers, elders, youths, homeless, orphans, widows and widowers who live with less than \$0.50 a day.

- The poor and hungry are our neighbors in the village.
- The poor and hungry are those that are thirsty but have no access to a clean drinking water.
- They are villagers who live around our mansions and water boreholes in the village but have no money to buy water from us.
- They are people who are naked but have no money to buy cloths.
- They are the homeless people that need shelter but have no place to call home. They are motherless and fatherless babies who need milk, love, care and comfort from us.
- They are AID and HIV victims in the villages that need care and nobody wants to touch them.

- They are people that used to provide for themselves but are now incapacitated by strokes and other illnesses.
- They are people that used to be on top of the mountain that never cared for anybody but now live under the hills and flyovers, which demonstrate that no condition is permanent in this world. Yet we must lend help to such persons because that is spirit of forgiveness, love, compassion and kindness.

### **What are the implications of village poverty and hunger in Eastern Nigeria?**

Why should we be concerned about the village poor and hungry? What is at stake if nothing is done about village poverty and hunger? What are the implications? Ignoring village poverty and hunger has serious implications and consequences for the society.

There will be negative implications, if no action is taken to reduce village poverty and hunger or improve the conditions of the Nigerian village poor and hungry. Some clear consequences include,

**First**, the 419 people and coin artists will easily recruit the innocent poor, because of their vulnerability and illiteracy, into their criminal enterprises and vicious network.

**Second**, there will be escalation of prostitution, sex employment and sex slavery from villages to urban areas in order to make ends meet and to feed the children, which, of course, will produce more cases of AID, HIV and Hepatitis as well as other unimaginable sexually transmitted disease in the villages.

**Third**, some families will mortgage their children that suppose to be in primary schools or secondary schools to the affluent families as cleaners, cook and baby sitters and street hawkers. That is called child labor or even abuse.

**Fifth**, the hungry and malnourished children cannot pay attention in the classrooms thus extending the circle of illiteracy and poverty.

**Sixth**, poverty and hunger increases the propensity and success rate of dubious religious groups, churches and organizations, founded by coin artists and fraudsters, preying on women, children and have-nots in the name of salvation.

**Seventh**, poverty and hunger begets jealousy, envy, anger, and a consequence of the occultism, real or imagined, that is prevalent in the villages today. A hungry relative is almost certain to blame and denounce you, and your apparent success, as the cause of his/her problems irrespective of your benevolence.

**Eight**, village poverty leads to illiteracy, ignorance, and above all, undervalues and discounts the critical importance of education to development.

**Ninth**, village poverty and hunger lead to teenage pregnancies, child dumping and abandonment, abuse, homelessness and early marriages, particularly into polygamous situation.

**Tenth**, village poverty is also synonymous with lack of access and means to adequate healthcare, which leads to spread of disease, malnutrition, malnourishment, and high infant mortality rate.

As such, the poor take their children to a native doctor who claims to cure every sickness on earth. For many of you here that understand and appreciate the unpleasant consequences of that option, it is simply dreadful to imagine.

**Eleventh**, village poverty and hungry erodes people's confidence and belief in God. They look for other gods and sources of powers for answers to their problems.

**Twelfth**, village poor and hungry will sell their farmland to the rich just to put food on the table for the kids to eat.

**Thirteenth**, village poverty and hunger leads to unsafe environments, social discrimination, crime and violence. For example, the idle youngsters who cannot secure employment will be tempted to form vicious and dangerous arm robbery gangs in the rural areas.

**Fourteenth**, poverty weakens the immune system of a village or community because poverty leads to idleness and idleness brings evil, strife, insecurity, anger, frustration, social unrest and disobedience.

The motto of my alma mater Clark Atlanta University, formerly Atlanta University says, "If I can't find one I will make one" because when doors of opportunities, prosperity, education, politics and health were closed against African Americans, that motto, "if I can't find one I will make one" was the driving spirit that led to the establishment of Atlanta University and other great historical black institutions.

The problem is that "if I cannot find one I will make one" will not be a positive possibility in Nigeria because Nigeria is a society where everyone wants to start on top, or be a chief or king.

If nothing is done to alleviate acute village poverty, if no action is taken to change the values and attitude of the young people about conspicuous lifestyle and expectations when they have nothing to eat, if young people remain idle due to unemployment, they will look for an alternative means of survival that would not make anybody around them very proud and pleasant.

For example, the Utu movement in Ngwaland is very unfortunate event in the 21st century. It portrays the adverse products of poverty, hunger and illiteracy. In my own opinion, the Utu

network is a paranoid movement that places our people back to the dark ages. Poverty, paranoia, ignorance, illiteracy and apathy are threats to a society and these factors are very dangerous. They are capable of bringing a community down.

The fact remains that Utu is a product of acute village poverty, paranoia, ignorance, and illiteracy. Unfortunately, paranoia is a widespread problem in many Nigerian villages and even in many churches where people live in fear and always think that someone is after their lives, stopping their progress, conspiring to harm them, kill their children or make them sick with voodoo or something.

It is a vulnerable situation, which Utu and his paranoid network are exploiting in every village to betray and prey on the ignorant and unaware souls with inflated claims and fixed false belief of witchcraft and voodoo.

The point I am making here is that poverty and hunger is dangerous. I am convinced that there is a relationship or connection between poverty and Utu movement.

### **What is at stake about village poverty and hunger?**

What is at stake about poverty is that there will be more Utus that shall take advantage of vulnerable villagers, people frustration and paranoid environment to create strife, enmity, and discord in the villages in order to extort money from poor villagers by convincing the youths that their parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, kinsmen, in-laws, friends, adversaries and foes are witchcrafts and responsible for all their failures, problems and setbacks since they were born.

It is only poverty, illiteracy and ignorant that would make almost whole villages to believe that their family members are preventing them from finding husbands, having children or made them to have high blood pressure, strokes, become alcoholic, thief or womanizer with voodoo.

I am totally lost. How could we be so vulnerable to believe rubbish, enormous and outrageous claims? The fact remains that when people are confined to inhuman situation, humiliated, beating, starved, burnt, forced to eat human waste and to drink urine instead of water, threaten with acid, forced to sign paper of their banishment under duress, that person can say anything in form of confessions to save his /her life and those do not equate to acceptance of guilt of being a witchcraft.

I would think, however, that the people that forced their fellow human beings to eat human waste and drink urine are the real witchcrafts because human wastes, feces, and urines are poisons that kill or make a person seriously sick.

We are living in a sickening world and It is unfortunate to note that churches that suppose to be the voice of reasoning, voice of forgiveness, voice of reconciliation, emblem of peace, social justice, and human rights became part of Utu movement, to a point that churches were closed on Sabbath and Sunday to give people the opportunity to witness such regressive and inhumane activities.

More shameful is that the leadership and the upper echelon of some churches and denominations approved and believed in Utu.

The fact of the matter is that people are still dying, getting sick with high blood pressure and stroke. Moreover, nothing has changed in terms of economic and financial conditions of the youth and the poor since the alleged witchcrafts in every village were banished, killed and trees were uprooted.

The Utu movement is the worst human, societal, community tragedy and an unimaginable phenomenon in this 21st century. At end of the day, Utu did not cure any sickness or bring any closure to anybody. He did not bring healing, love, peace, grace, reconciliation, joy or happiness to his followers and believers rather he brought division and misery to many villages that created long-term vendetta, revenge, destruction of property, and killing of human being.

Eye for eye, head for head and hand for hand leaves us all fractured, blind and disfigured. You know I loved the song, "I Know Whom I Have Believed" by James McGranahan.

Utu movement is tremendous damage to the society, which will take Ngwaland more than 1000 years to repair or recover. He has destroyed the unity of every village and family, which, of course, is the foundation of every community. The Utu movement has defaced Ngwaland as he has punched deepest hole in every community he visited. Above all, the government and police have failed humanity by ignoring and failing to stop the madness.

Let me say it again, Utu is fake salvation and he is a man of confusion but no matter how long it takes, truth will triumph or prevail. I am confident that history will prove manmade salvation wrong and at last, the unconfused as well as those that denounced and rejected Utu's movement will be exonerated.

The current spirit of apathy and I do not care attitude about the ongoing barbaric movement at home is not serving our villages well. Why should we be concerned? We should be concerned about this situation because people who are jealous of your family, progress and achievement will use this paranoid network to tarnish your image or bring your family down.

There is, of course urgent need to create an awareness and enlightenment as well as re-evangelization of our people to know whom they believed. Because no matter the roughness of the storm, trial and tribulations, good or bad, life and death, we should not put our hope, trust and resting place in any human being because putting, your trust in human beings is nothing but a construction on sinking ground. Therefore, Utu is not Jesus, and Utu cannot save anybody and only Jesus will.

Even in the midst of this confusion and madness, we must realize that love is the central nervous system of peace. There is need for peace at home but there cannot be peace without love because peace without love is empty and reconciliation without forgiveness is a waste of

time. The only antidotes to Utu crisis are love, reconciliation, forgiveness and prayers so that God will bring to an end the tragic situation, human atrocities and barbaric movement.

Another problem confronting many villages, which I think that churches or religious organizations should provide leadership is how to support AID/HIV victims as the AID/HIV epidemic is beginning to unfold in every village and town, church, denomination, social circle and age group in Nigeria. You see, part of the problem is that some Nigerians ignorantly and arrogantly denied, dismissed and downplayed the existence AID/HIV in Nigeria for too long. The problem is that the majority of newly poor Nigerians are children displaced by AIDs/ HIV or abandoned as result of AIDs, and more children that are innocent would be displaced by AID/ HIV in future.

For example, the United Nations classified Nigeria as one of the HIV epidemic nations and 80% of HIV infections in Nigeria are transmitted through sexual activities. The problem is lack of information about sexual health and HIV as well as stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria.

We should look beyond church buildings and denominations to find ways and means to touch many Nigerian children that have been orphaned and displaced by AID/HIV with love, kindness, compassion and generosity.

### **Actionable agenda**

I am convinced that poverty is a correctable economic, environmental, political and social injustice. However, why has poverty stubbornly eluded human effort? What can we do to stop poverty and feed the hungry? What is the alternative action as many governments have failed to provide a rapid response to the suffering and misery of poverty and hunger?

The fact remains that overcoming poverty and hunger requires a range of complex strategies and change of attitudes of the society about the poor and hungry. Whatever strategies we employ to feed the poor and hungry, kindness begin from our heart and I will suggest that we use Deut. 15:7 as a guiding principle and reason for helping the poor and hungry:

- “If there is a poor man among you, one of your brothers, in any of the towns of the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand to your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks”.

That is the thrust of this address. I truly believe that the war and battle against acute village poverty and hunger in Nigeria is winnable in the twenty-first century if there is a true vision for a better and wellbeing society and if we do not harden our hearts to the needy.

It is very important to remind everyone that Seventh Day Adventist Church did not come to Nigeria and other countries with only Bible, pamphlets and tracts but it also came with education and health, such as hospitals, schools, community services and humanitarian centers

as tools of evangelism that touched the heart and souls of people that heard Advent message. This practical approach must be one of the reasons people who heard their messages were very receptive. We do not have to reinvent these evangelical tools but we can repair, improve and strengthen them to work again.

As purpose driven believers, we should energize advent message in the eastern Nigeria by,

- finding creative ways to motivate or inspire and empower the poor, break the cycle and demons of poverty with our generous support to NACENA to carry some activities that aimed at feeding the poor and hungry
- committing ourselves as advocates of peace and soldiers of good hope in order to help the poor, hungry, and underprivileged people have a sense of belonging, meaning and purpose in life
- supporting hospitals and free clinics that treat the poor, homeless people, and organizations that shelters and feed the homeless, AID/HIV patients and motherless babies
- organizing rural food banks and pantry for the hungry children, as well as mini/ macro enterprises for the women and the youths
- supporting cost-effective Adventist primary, technical, secondary and university education in the Eastern Nigeria
- helping foot pastors and evangelists who are in the trenches, and serving village churches where there is no light, electricity water, roads and transportation
- encouraging accountability of whatever we commit to help the poor and hungry
- making sure that the upper echelons of the union and conferences should not impose mistreatment of any pastor when they disagree and question or oppose certain policies at the leadership level
- supporting serving armies of good conscience that take no holidays in condemning injustices, human rights violations in Nigeria
- supporting the deconstruction of unfairness and ill treatments of the poor and weak in our communities
- sharing the little we have to make a difference, rebuild lives, restore hope for the hopeless, lend help to helpless, and give water to the thirsty, cloth the naked, feed the hungry, provide shelter to the homeless and abandon children

- supporting NACENA to collaborate with the governments and organizations, such as ADRA, World Bank, IMF, UNDP, USAID and other humanitarian agencies to improve the quality of life for millions around the eastern Nigeria by creating access for food security, economic development, primary health, emergency management, and basic education, and
- encouraging NACENA to collaborate with health awareness organizations like American stroke Association, American Diabetes Association, and Blood Pressure awareness Association, Cancer awareness associations and foundations to create health awareness and enlightenment in Eastern Nigeria because ignorance of these diseases at home is increasing people's belief that everything that happens to them is witchcraft and voodoo

We must engage in kindness as a critical tool of evangelism because it creates sense of belonging, acceptance, happiness and positive satisfaction, which the blind, the lame, the deaf, the children, the adult, the homeless, the widow, the widower, the weak, the unloved, the demented and psychopath can spiritually and emotionally feel and touch.

Your righteousness, worthiness, and life experience is incomplete and inadequate if you have not gone beyond your comfort and secured zone to rescue someone on the rough ages of life and touch the heart of the weak, the downtrodden, the have-nots and the powerless with genuine love, goodwill, common good, compassion and kindness.

Collectively, our actions and modus of operandi should lift up the widows and children in our villages. Of course, there are millions of widows and children without parent in Eastern Nigeria. Our kindness should instigate and encourage education of the poor and vulnerable because ignorance and illiteracy are diseases of the mind. In addition, we should show love by caring for people with AID and HIV in our villages.

When we comfort individuals that are harshly humiliated by the unjust and unfair systems, pray in good faith and humility for God's intervention in bringing happiness to broken villages, extend hands of friendship to those non Adventist poor in need of physical and spiritual help, especially children, our communities will experience change and will put their trust and faith again in God.

Truly, God is able and we should not underestimate the power of God if we employ our intelligence, skills, talents, resources and capabilities to make a difference and to remove those circumstances, harsh conditions, and obstacles that prevent the poor from maximizing their strengths and highest potentials as well as participating in the productive systems of the society. Because our kindness shall represent a mighty wind that blows away the pains, hardship, burdens and suffering brought about by poverty and hunger

Kindness is love but it requires patience and faith. Above all, kindness brings peace, joy, meekness, goodness, unity, growth and development. But, it begins in our heart and demonstrates the spirit of forgiveness and forward-looking. Poverty leads to hunger and the central key to eradication of village food insecurity is eradication of village poverty. Our villages will become better and awesome places for living if we collectively use kindness to encourage capacity building, institutional and behavioral changes in the 21st Century to alleviate,

- poverty of money,
- poverty of access,
- poverty of power,
- poverty of food security,
- poverty in healthcare and medicine,
- poverty of education and literacy,
- poverty of shelter,
- poverty of village drinking water,
- poverty of village infrastructure,
- poverty of village institutions, and
- poverty of information

I can assure you that there is no greater strength in humans than the act of kindness because kindness to people without expected paybacks or self-seeking is truly a positive character and the simplest means to remove the central divide between the have and have-nots or between the strong and weak.

There is extraordinary strength in the spirit of kindness as it motivates people to support and help the under-privileged members of our society. Therefore, to love, treat and care for the sick, poor, hungry, imprisoned, widows, homeless, orphans, fallen and those shamefully neglected by the government, with dignity, respect and kindness without regard to their race, tribe, sex, age, religion, economic, and/or educational status is an important attribute, value and culture we should all have. Our effort should target the weak and the poorest of the village poor because poverty is a curable disease that destroys human possibilities.

In addition, let me say to conservatives and liberals in attendance that showing kindness to the poor or sharing the little you have to make positive changes that uplift the impoverished villages instead of letting down does not, in anyway, make you less conservative or more liberal but it is just a way of demonstrating your true spirit of humanity.

By assisting villagers who do not possess and cannot acquire the means of supporting life is good for the society. Because by uplifting the poor, the hungry, the vulnerable, the marginalized, the voiceless, the defenseless, the excluded, the weeping, the sick, the oppressed, fallen, and the needy will diminish the anger and resentment of the have-nots or the weak against the strong.

It is true that everybody's goat is nobody's goat, but I have no doubt about what God can do and will do for each and every one of us as well as our villages, if we collectively use our resources, no matter how little it is, to make a difference that makes the brokenhearted, the fallen, the weak and powerless feel like human again.

We can make this happen, with financial, material and moral support from all of you to NACENA to implement and execute its current and future projects that directly benefit the village poor and hungry.

Truly, poverty is a silent killer but collective kindness is strength and unity that can alleviate and ease the suffering, trials and tribulations of poverty. One thing I can say with certainty is that poor Nigerians can be found almost everywhere in Eastern Nigeria from villages in Enugu State to Anambra State, from villages in Imo State, to Abia State, from villages Ebonyi State to Cross River, from villages in Akwa Ibom State to villages in River State and Bayelsa State. There is no doubt that poverty poses tremendous challenge to the church that should not be ignored.

Your kindness gives hope to those who have nowhere to turn. Therefore, if we soften our hearts to show sympathy, love, and compassion to the poor and hungry in our villages; be peace makers; discourage powerlessness of the poor; influences positive changes that empower the poor; cloth the naked; provide shelter to the homeless, care for the AID/HIV casualties; uplift the weak by restoring their human dignity, and bring smile on the faces of poor children by placing food on their table, God will not only bless us, our children, families, communities, but he will also unite us with love, and strength that cannot be broken or tempered.

Thank you and God bless you.