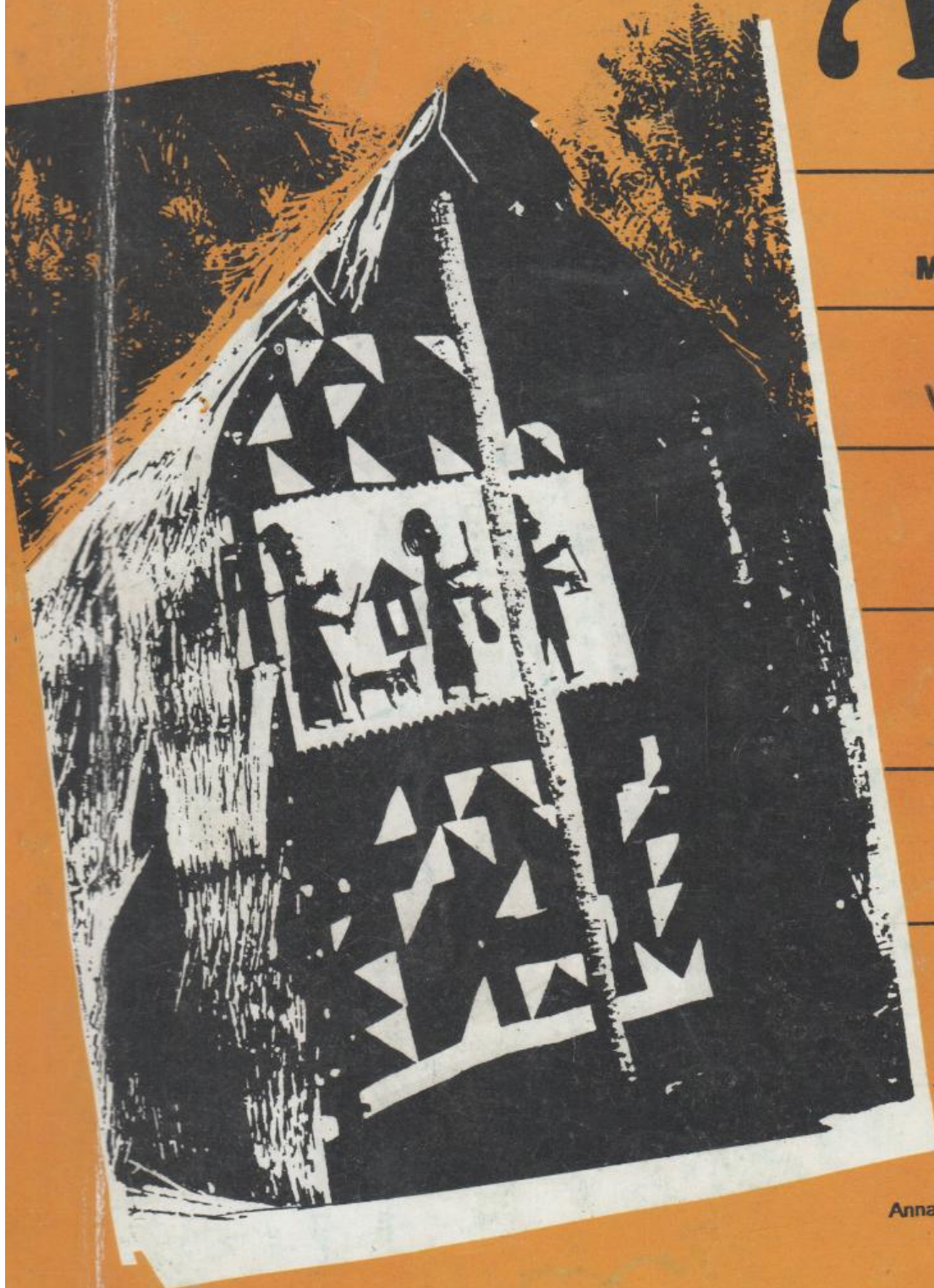


APE

ISSN 1116 - 7149

JOURNAL OF
MINORITIES STUDIES

VOL. 3 1999



Published by
Annang Minorities Studies Association
Ikot Ekpene,
Akwa Ibom State.

THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RELEVANCE OF THE GOODNEWS COMMUNITY IN ANNANG SOCIETY

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1. PREAMBLE

The rapid increase and unprecedented upsurge of New Religious Movements has in the last few decades become a source of academic concern in many parts of the world and had enjoyed great literary attention. The large body of literature in existence is still unable to explain adequately these complicated phenomena as new forms keep arising in many communities. Their social relevance and religious significance is better understood within a specific cultural background at a particular period in history¹.

As far back as 1968, the Annang society focus of this paper registered a very dense concentration of these movements as compared to other parts of the African Continents.² Since then, there have not been signs of abating. Their numerical strength and large followership suggest the positive services they offer their members. However, these movements are sometimes seen as purely economic ventures incapable of addressing adequately the social and religious problems of their adherents. At times, they are dismissed as inconsequential heresies that can only appeal to the religious lunatics in the society. This attitude sometimes jeopardized the socio-religious significance of these movements.

Before proceeding, it is important to explain the background to this study. The English Methodist Missionaries about 1919³ first introduced the Annang people into Christianity. They built the first Christian Church in Ikot Ekpene⁴. From this period, other Christian

bodies followed, establishing their Churches in the area. These Missionaries maintained Churches, Schools and several hospitals that provided the greater part of the formal education and medical care received by the people. The mission Churches gradually gained followers. They maintained a relationship of respect with the people. But they did however, oppose a number of traditional institutions and practices they thought were harmful to Christian ideas of morality, namely: polygyny, ancestral cults, and the practice of magic, divination and sorcery. These institution and practices have continued to exist among the people up to the present time. The success of the mission Churches was relative. While they were trying to consolidate their religious grip on the people, they mistakenly and at times consciously overlooked the people's cultural heritage and relegated their religious worldview to the background. Consequently, an important development occurred and continued till date: the upsurge and rapid increase of independent religious bodies, some in protest to the missionaries ideologies, others as result of varied interpretation of the Christian Bible; misunderstanding with founding Pastors, still others as a result of political and economic motivations. Many founders of the New Religious groups claimed that their movements came as a result of God's direct instructions.

Some of these claims cannot be subjected to empirical research, it is impossible to verify the claims of direct revelation from God. It is important to note that the adherents do accept their movements came as a result of God's direct revelation to the founder.

In the case of the emergence of Pentecostal brands of New Religious movements, Bishop Elijah Akpan Mboho the founder of the Goodnews Community, sees the causative factor for their emergence as the fulfilment of the prophecy in the Book of Joel 3: 1ff.

...I shall pour out my spirit on all humanity. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old people shall dream dreams, your young People shall the slave men and women shall I Pour out my spirit in these days...

For him, Pentecostal churches emerge as a result of the outpouring of God's spirit. The Goodnews community, the founder insists, was founded as a result of God's direct instructions in May 1975.

This paper seeks to illustrate the social and religious relevance of the Goodnews Community in Annang Society. Focus Group discussion, participant observation, semi-structured interview methods were used to arrive at the findings of this paper.

2 BISHOP ELIJAH AKPAN MBOHO AND THE BEGINNING OF THE GOODNEWS COMMUNITY

Bishop Elijah Akpan Mboho, founder and Head of the Goodnews Community, is of Annang parentage. He was born on the 15th of July 1946, in Atai Otoro village, Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Elijah Mboho was born to late Otu Akpan Mboho and Madam Alice Otu Mboho. His father abandoned him almost as soon as he was born. Left in the care of his young mother, Elijah grew up with the help of his uncles and relations. Memories of his childhood days are those of suffering and poverty. He was barely ten years of age when he had to go out in search of his father who was in Calabar. On arrival at Calabar, he discovered that his father had already married a second wife. He had to live with his stepmother whom he says merely tolerated him.

He outgrew the age of primary education and no one cared, according to him, to arrange for the basic primary education for him. Through his own efforts, as he recounts he managed to complete the primary education and went further to register for the ordinary level General Certificate of Education. He passed his examination with good grades.

Meanwhile, his father had founded his own church, Trinity Mission. Elijah said that he was not satisfied with the "spiritual approach" of his father. Eventually he got exposed to other Christian groups and became more involved in spiritual matters. Elijah claims that the turning point in his life came when he picked up and read a magazine by the wayside titled commercial pastors. The magazine became a real guide for him in his search for God. His attitude towards life, people and God changed as he studied the

magazine daily. His father's church could no longer "accommodate" him. Elijah wandered from one Christian church to another until eventually he came into the Assemblies of God church at Mayne Avenue in Calabar. As it was to prove latter, the Assemblies of God church only momentarily satisfied his spiritual yearnings. However, as an Assemblies of God member, he said he became a "born-again" Christian on the 27th July 1964 by 7.00p.m.

Since Elijah could no longer be kept under the subjection of his father as a result of differences in beliefs, he managed to open and run a small chemist shop, and later, a bakery. This petty business did not distract him from pursuing his spiritual goal which, according to him, was to become a full-time minister of God to save humanity through the gospel message. On the 10th May, 1968, he was ordained a minister of the Assemblies of God. However, his dream was only partially fulfilled in the Assemblies of God mission because seven years later Mboho founded his Church independent of the Assemblies of God.

On the second Sunday of May 1975 (4.00 a.m.) Elijah said he was preparing a divine service at the altar of the Assemblies of God, Nung Udoc Ibesikpo, when he had an encounter with the divine presence of God. He claimed he had an order from God to establish a freelance evangelistic ministry. He contemplated over the issue for seven months. On 31st December 1975, after a great deal of dialogue and consultation with his senior ministers of the Assemblies of God in the presbytery meeting, they prayed for him and he gave up his office as a minister in the Assemblies of God Church.

He laid the foundation of the Goodnews Community by beginning the Goodnews Correspondence Crusade Team with his late wife, Angela Mboho at a commercial school at Aka Road, Abak. This freelance ministry grew steadily moving from one location to another until September 7, 1984 when they moved into their newfound and permanent home – The Gospel Village. The Gospel village has since remained the headquarters of the Goodnews community.

The Goodnews community functions under five broad organs:

- (a) The Gospel village
- (b) The Goodnews Evangelical Team
- (c) The Virtuous Women Service foundation
- (d) The Tabernacle of Praise
- (e) The Goodnews Development Foundation.

3 THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RELEVANCE OF THE GOODNEWS COMMUNITY

(a) The Gospel Village

The Gospel Village was founded on September 7, 1984, as the headquarters of Goodnews Community. As an administrative headquarters, the Gospel village accommodates other units of the community – staff houses, Bible college, the Goodnews Hospital, guest houses, livestock farms, recreational Centre, the Miracle Tabernacle, the Control Tower and a Reformatory Unit. The Gospel Village as the founder said was established as a Christian Resource Centre, to provide a conducive atmosphere for spiritual concentration. It serves as a home for the homeless orphans, widows, destitute and the less privileged in the society.

The Gospel village regarded by the members as a city which is ordained by God for all mankind in this generation; a city of refuge for the afflicted, the oppressed, the wounded, for all men who care, regardless of languages, tribe, sex or race⁵.

According to the people's experiences of the place, different names are given to it: "Sunshine City", "Fountain of Life", "Pool of Bethesda" "Centre of Solution", "Healing Fountain" and "Shelter from Storm". According to Bishop Mboho, the Gospel village is a divinely fortified city for the demonstration of the power of God. The motto of the Gospel Village is "We Care". The staff of the village do their best for all who come to the village with various problems.

A weekly Anointing Service is held in the Gospel Village at the Miracle Tabernacle. The Miracle Tabernacle has the capacity for accommodating well over three thousand people at a given time. The Anointing Service is an interdenominational programme which

seeks to provide members with "fresh Anointing" every Sunday to face each week spiritually. The Anointing services have really no fixed format. It could begin with free personal prayers, followed by praise worship and a teaching/question sessions. Testimonies are given a prominent place in order to strengthen the faith of the members. Seasoned members of the Community take turn to preach after testimony time. The Anointing services at times end with light refreshments. The members of the Community testified that through the Anointing service, they have been sincerely transformed spiritually.

On every first Friday of the month, an all-night prayer vigil (Tarry Night) is held in the Miracle Tabernacle in the Gospel village. It is an interdenominational service. Many of the people interviewed during fieldwork testified to having received miraculous cures or solutions to problems at the sessions of the Tarry nights. The Miracle Tabernacle is a multi-purpose building; apart from serving as a worship centre, it is virtually the "Home" of the sick and the distressed who wish to have their problems solved. Most celebrations in the Gospel village are held in the Miracle Tabernacle.

The Reformatory unit in the Gospel village is geared towards the transformation of delinquent children. Some are taught useful trades while others are sent to school under close supervision to break their past history.

In the Gospel village there is a "Control Tower" which is an intercessory prayer place. Prayers are constantly offered there. The staff of this unit take turn to spend a three hour prayer-time daily at the Tower. The Goodnews Community members believe strongly in the power of prayers.

The Goodnews hospital is also located in the Gospel village. It started at the inception of the Gospel village as faith clinic, but now, it had grown into a hospital with five medical doctors and some nurses who are all members of the Goodnews community. A patient on arrival in the Gospel village is examined in order to know what area of the health care unit he/she is to be treated. The hospital department is for the medically ill while the patients department is for the "demon possessed" and spiritually ill. In both cases, prayer is believed to be efficacious in solving the patients'

problems; but in the case of the medically ill, prayers are offered in addition to orthodox medication.

Rev. Mboho's approach to treatment of patients is highly commendable considering the fact that many lives have been lost in some churches in Annang Society where the members are made to believe that every sickness is caused by the demons and can only be cured by "expelling" the demons through the deliverance sessions without resorting to medical treatment. The health care services department in the gospel village does not divert the people's attention from the true causes of some sicknesses: drinking dirty water, living in dirty surrounding and poor eating habits. The Gospel villagers are often instructed to be careful about what they eat, to carefully clean their environments in order to avoid sicknesses. They have long realized that the devil cannot be the cause of every health problem.

The theological College of the Goodnews Community is also in the Gospel Village. It is known as the Goodnews College of Wisdom. It is affiliated to the Triune Biblical University, Paulsbo, Washington, USA. The college is very young but quite promising. The College of Wisdom is an interdenominational institution for the purpose of raising the academic standards of would-be pastors and evangelists in the society. Illiteracy in biblical matters has been very damaging to both pastors and followers in Annang Community. Secular courses are also offered in this College for the opportunity of general awareness in education. The College of Wisdom is designed to award Diplomas and Degrees to the students of theology and Humanities. Alongside the Goodnews College of Wisdom, extra mural classes are run at no cost for students in the secondary schools to better prepare them for the Senior School Certificate Examination.

I had several opportunities to spend quite sometime in the Gospel village. It is patterned after the village setting in the Annang society. Every household has a head who co-ordinates the activities in the "family": The Gospel villagers look up to Rev. Mboho as their father and is fondly addressed as "Daddy" or "Uncle" by the younger and older members respectively. His wife, Rev. Princess Edu is addressed as "Mummy" Rev. Mboho and his wife do actually

play their roles as "parents" to the Gospel villagers, who have very easy access to them.

The Gospel village accommodates very many members who are grouped into five different family units namely:

- (a) Cornerstone Family
- (b) Living-Faith Family
- (c) Living - Fountain Family
- (d) Living-Bread Family
- (e) Living Stone Family

A traditionally designated 'Obong' heads each family, but unlike the traditional society, the headship is unisex. The family head sees to the well being of the members of the household and applies disciplinary measures where necessary. The head of the families constitutes a disciplinary committee in the village. A Director, who is a woman, heads the Gospel village. This has much to say to the traditional Annang society who would see this as a taboo.

In the morning, everyone wakes up to share prayers at the Miracle Tabernacle before dispersing for their works. Apart from the few full-time Staff of the village, many of the Gospel villagers work in different Government ministries and Private establishments. After the Morning Prayer session, they leave for work and return at close of the working hour. Those who have paid jobs take care of their feeding and maintenance and also contribute freely to the upkeep of the Community. The full-time class workers are fed twice a day from a common kitchen. The workers themselves supplement the other meal of the day. The full-time workers are paid only a stipend for their maintenance. Visitors to the Gospel Village are fed free of charge for as long as the visit lasts. The patients who can afford it pay for their feeding, but the management takes care of those who are really poor. There is a food canteen in the village for the convenience of the patients and others who do not have the time to cook. The Gospel villagers are relatively free to go out and come in as they wish.

The members of the Gospel Village are not living in a strict community sense of 'sharing all' in common as was the case in the early Christian Community described in the Acts of the Apostles

Chapter 2. However, fraternal Christian love exists among them. No Gospel villager is in abject poverty. The well-placed members do share their resource with the less privileged. Recreational facilities have been provided in the Gospel village. On some of the evenings, the youth and adults play games, football or engage in track events like 100 meters, 200 meters or 400 meters race. Bishop Mboho occasionally participates in some of the sporting activities to encourage the Gospel villagers to prepare them for encounter with the larger society.

[b] The Goodnews Evangelical Team

The Goodnews Evangelical team has the sole responsibility of evangelism in the Community. It's motto is "That all may know him". The Team aims at preaching the gospel to men in the whole world. The Team functions through various departments: Evangelism, Faithful Men's Services, (youth with vision) Music, Correspondence and information, Prayer, Guidance and Counseling, Education, Health-Care and Welfare, Drama and Films.

The Evangelism Department

The foremost task of the Evangelical team, just as the name implies is Evangelism. The Evangelical body is an interdenominational unit open to everybody in the society for the purpose of encouragement, deliverance and revival. The task of evangelism is approached through open-air meetings, campaigns, and bible classes organized in local communities, villages, towns, and cities.

Faithful Men's Services Department

This is the male wing of the ministry. It was founded to get men together to reflect on the beauty of faithful living based on 2 Timothy 2:2:

And what you have heard from me before Many witnesses entrust to the faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

This unit organizes programs for men to make them realize their responsibilities in the family. Again, there is emphasis on

being "Born Again", which is interpreted as a total rejection of sin and acceptance of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of their lives. The aim of this unit is to make men to be responsible for their families and the society at large.

Youth with Vision

This sub-group is an organization for the young boys. It is a unit of Faithful Men's Services. This organization is meant for youths of non-marriage age. They are groomed through seminars, prayers and biblical teachings to be responsible youths. The youths are encouraged to have a profession for self-support and maintenance. Some of them are engaged in carpentry work within the Gospel Village while others make a living with the help of the well-to-do members of the Community.

Music Department

Music has a prominent place in the worship at the Goodnews community. As a result, a separate department is created for it. Through music, members of the Goodnews Community have been able to preach and evangelize both within and outside the community. The music department has three distinct choir groups;

- (a) God's Inheritance Choir: performs during the monthly Tarry nights
- (b) The voice of Assurance: performs during open-air campaigns and Outreach ministries.
- (c) The Tabernacle Choir provides music during the weekly Anointing services and other ceremonies in the Gospel village.

The music department composes records and produces songs in cassettes, cartridges and video for the general public. They also produce songbooks and own copyright of such songs. On invitation, they feature in public and religious gatherings. They also perform in the electronic media such as radio and television.

Information and Correspondence Department

This unit prints numerous tracts, magazines, books and Christian Literature for public consumption. With the use of

newspaper and the broadcast media, they not only spread the Gospel message to people but at the same time publicize the Goodnews community.

Prayer Department

The prayer wing of the ministry organizes fasting and prayer sessions for the success of the whole ministry. They receive prayer requests from the public and pray accordingly. The members of this department visit homes and hospitals to pray for the sick and the needy.

Guidance and Counseling Department

The Goodnews Community realizes the need for guidance and counseling. The department is made up of professionals who take time to give needed services. They focus on life's crises and strategies towards living above the fear of evil forces. Many of the patients who go to the Gospel village need careful counseling to enable them face life's crises. The Counselors assist clients in choosing careers and setting up of small-scale business for self-support, among other things.

Education Department

The department of education runs the educational programs of the Goodnews community. They take charge of the Goodnews College of Wisdom and the extra-mural classes for the youths. Apart from that, they get the orphans in the Annang community fixed up in schools and monitor their training program. Education is given a prominent place in the Goodnews Community.

Health-Care/Welfare Department

This department is in charge of health programs and welfare services. They examine patients and clients on arrival in the Gospel village, to determine what area of health-care they need attention. Medical cases are clearly distinguished from psychological cases and treated accordingly.

Drama and Films Department

At important gatherings of the community, drama presentations with moral lessons are organized. The objectives of the Community, which are to live in unity, harmony and Biblical holiness, are often depicted in such drama sessions.

[c] The Virtuous Women Services Foundation

The Virtuous Women's Services Foundation was inaugurated on the 17th of May, 1986 as a socio-spiritual philanthropic organization, with the aim of making women realize, understand, accept, embrace and retain the original purpose of God for them at creation. The motto of the Virtuous Women Services Foundation is "Be a Wise builder with God".

The woman, being a bedrock of every family is made in the Goodnews Community to realize that she and the man were equally blessed in the beginning of creation, having the same right, more than that, given a special assignment of child bearing. The Goodnews community considers it necessary and important to give attention to the revival of women's right and privileges.

The Foundation creates opportunities and suitable environment for fellowship and constructive interactions among women, youth and children for the purpose of improving their lives, homes, and society at large. It creates awareness in women about the need for emancipation provided by Christ Jesus. The women are helped to fulfil their God-given roles and potentials through the promotion of positive self-image. Emphasis on leadership roles among women is one of the strongest responsibilities of this Foundation.

This organization inculcates and promotes in women, youth and children the spirit of productivity, enterprise, innovations and home management as a means of stimulating and contributing towards economic growth and stability through the establishment of small or large scale business ventures. They make strenuous efforts to reach out to the sick, the oppressed and the destitutes in the community. The youth in this wing are trained in the fear of God to be better equipped to face the socio-moral and economic challenges of the times. The women have been freed from traditions and

customs, which had hindered their proper development. The Foundation, most often, organizes workshops, rallies, symposia, sermons, bible studies, and prayer meetings for women, youth and children. They provide social and philanthropic services such as visits to hospitals, orphanages, homes, prison and handicapped centres to encourage self-employment and self-help projects. Classes are organized to train women on pre-natal and child-care, home management and economic self-reliance. Most important to the Foundation is the creation of the general awareness that the woman is important, vital and necessary for the smooth running of the society and that she needs to be involved in decision-making in the home.

In the Goodnews community, any woman who is judged worthy of the ministerial priesthood is ordained into the full ministry of preaching. Among the pastors are some women evangelists in-charge of churches in different branches of the Goodnews community. The Foundation provides services for females of all ages.

[d] Tabernacle of Praise

The Tabernacle of Praise is the church or the denominational wing of the Goodnews community.

The motto of the Tabernacle of Praise is "For the Praise of God and satisfaction of man". Since membership of the tabernacle of Praise is exclusive in that it requires permanency and not denominational, the practical commitments of the members of Tabernacle of praise include:

- (i) Total abstinence from all liquor or strong drinks.
- (ii) Abstention from the use of tobacco in any form, opium, etc.
- (iii) Abstention from the use of cosmetics.
- (iv) Members are not to go on swimming with opposite sex other than immediate family members.
- (v) Members are not to belong to lodges of secret societies.
- (vi) Members are not to divorce or remarry while a spouse lives.

[e] The Goodnews Development Foundation: This unit has been developed to maintain strong communal system of self-

sufficiency. With two limited liability companies, GET-TEAM: an agricultural oriented unit with integrated farming of livestock etc; and GET-SHAMMAH a manufacturing company. The proceeds are used for the running of the Community.

4 CONCLUSION

The Goodnews Community's social and religious relevance hinges on the place it occupies in the lives of its members, the functions it performs in the lives of these members as they try daily to make sense of their experiences. In an increasingly anonymous society, plagued by social, economic and political dislocations, the Goodnews Community provides an alternative society, recreating the microstructures of social relations of family and friendship. In the Community, each individual has a face, a name, a voice and a future; each person is a "brother" or "sister" to another person. Warm and filial relationships are generated, enabling the people to push on with their lives because there is someone who cares about what goes on with and in their lives. The Goodnews Community offers people the vision of a hope-filled tomorrow to look forward to. It also offers all the supports needed to realize this vision.

Thus, the Goodnews Community has helped people in the reconstruction of micro-structures of society disrupted by the strains of poverty and urbanization. The Community emphasises the importance of good human relationships and the development of the human person, family, friendships, home, neighbourhood, local community, work-group and fellowship-group. Through these microstructures, people are rehabilitated and are helped to be on their own and determine the shape of their future. For the Annang society, and more especially for the members, the Goodnews Community has effective control of four key agents of socialization. These are, the family the school, the workplace and the fellowship group. Through these various agents of socialization, the Community has carried its message and influence almost inexorably into the inner structures of both the individual and the society.

The Goodnews Community has also created a new political imagination and vision for its members. The members are sufficiently politically conscientised that they now believe that they

can alter the practical circumstances of their lives by the power of the vote or other political framework. The Community has in motion processes of political delineation, which is re-integration, many people who find themselves on the fingers of society, people who were once apathetic to political events because they have been marginalised for a long time are now political enthusiasts.

Besides the political reawakening, the Goodnews Community also offers the theory and practice of economic emancipation of its members. It creates job opportunities for the people. It also offers the needed practical motivations to members to become co-creators and co-generators of new wealth, no matter how meagre this is. By this method the Community restores personal dignity to those who lost it to poverty and material deprivation. Members of the Community are systematically trained to inculcate economically wholesome habits of financial responsibility, frugality and accountability. Many lives have been brought back from the brink of destruction and destitution to the course of economic regeneration, putting a measure of power and confidence in their hands to reshape their destinies as individuals and as a Community.

This study reveals that, unlike some other sub-groups of the New Religious Movement, the Goodnews Community is would-affirming in its teaching and practices. This feature of the Goodnews Community is important, for, the attitude and orientation of the Community's members to the world around them is a strong indicator of the Community's social impact and relevance. This orientation of the Goodnews Community points to the nature of the social impact it has on its total environment. Even with features of dispensationalism and dualism in its nascent theology, the Goodnews Community does not necessarily reject this world with its good things in anticipation for the next world. Though some of its members live in a separate village, it is not a protest against the wider society or against the world, rather, the Goodnews Community is actively committed to full participation in society.

Beyond this, the Goodnews community provides the spirituality that its leaders claim and hope will help people to unlock their full potential. One important area in which the

Goodnews Community has shown great impact is in the issues of gender roles, relationships and equality. Within the Community's organizational and administrative structures, women have come to play roles, which are not gender-specific. They have been encouraged to go beyond the biologically prescribed or determined roles of wives and mothers and assume positions of power, responsibility and authority, even over men. Some women in the Goodnews Community who have shown the aptitude have been trained and ordained ministers.

The Goodnews Community provides legal education and other legal supports and services for women to know their places and right within the frame-work of the nation's justice system and to enforce these rights. One of such education program was organized on August 26, 1995 in the premises of Women Affairs Ministry to enlighten women on their Christian duty and legal right not to accept in silence practices that denigrate on their personhood. Women are also taught how to rally to the help of others to breakout of cultural subjugation and the enslavement to senseless taboos.

The Goodnews Community provides sound education both pastoral and secular. Both adult members of the Community and their children benefit from such education. Education is recognized as a strong asset and leverage for the achievement of improved socio-economic emancipation. The Goodnews Community also functions as an agent of the diffusion of health education. This it does through the provision of good health care and health education. Doherty in his book, *Religion and Psychology*, points out that it must be remembered that the concept of health in a Community is holistic in scope, including spiritual and mental well-being and soundness.⁶

The Goodnews Community is not bureaucratic in its structural organization; the leadership maintains a one-to-one and face-to-face relationship with its members. The leadership helps the people to acquire a greater sense of responsibility and control over their future. The Goodnews Community can, therefore, be said to be a creative Community imbued with a peculiar Christian vision which generates values for the gradual but steady reform and transformation of the structures of society, having as its point the

regeneration of the human person in the light of the Goodnews of Jesus Christ.

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