

Article

Ecumenical Footprints in Nigeria: Pathways and Detours in Search of Christian Unity

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Abstract: The unity of the Persons of the Trinity is the source and highest exemplar of Christian unity which all ecumenical initiatives seek. During his earthly ministry, our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of Christians (John 17:21). This prayer of Jesus furnishes us with the fundamental inspiration for the ecumenical movement in all its dimensions of expression. Right from the beginning, the Christian church has experienced rifts in both the West and the East. The modern ecumenical movement is an attempt to restore Christian unity against the background of 16th century divisions attendant upon the Protestant Reformation. It is also conducted in hindsight of the Protestant Reformation that the 19th and 20th century missionary activities of Christian churches from Europe in Nigeria took place. Several historical factors have shaped the successes and failures of significant missionary endeavors. This article highlights a few of those historical factors in a bid to identify the roots of discord and footprints of ecumenism at the beginning of the establishment of Christian churches in Nigeria. The goal intended to be realized through this historical excursus is to engender a livelier ecumenical hope for Christian unity in Nigeria while maintaining the already-achieved progress made so far, as well as countering further divisions.

Keywords: ecumenism; Nigeria; Padroado; ARCIC; Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN); Islam; Peace of Augsburg



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1. Introduction

In 1995, Pope St. John Paul II taught that “ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not just some sort of ‘appendix’ which is added to the Church’s activity. Rather it is an organic part of her work and consequently must pervade all that she is and does” (see [John Paul II 1995](#), no. 20). The unity which is sought for through ecumenical movements “finds its highest exemplar and source in the unity of the Persons of the Trinity: the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, one God” (see [Vatican II Fathers 1964](#), no. 2). Strikingly, these ecumenical movements are driven by a search for Christian unity as inspired by the prayer of Christ “ut unum sint” (that they all may be one—John 17:21).

There are several pathways through which this search for Christian unity may be undertaken. Amongst these pathways are those outlined in Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism—*Unitatis Redintegratio* as follows: 1. spiritual ecumenism, which, as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, consists of a change of heart and holiness of life along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians ([Vatican II Fathers 1964](#), no. 8); 2. Theological dialogue, which demands historical consciousness and the knowledge and appreciation of the teachings of one’s own doctrinal teachings and those of other Christian churches ([Vatican II Fathers 1964](#), no. 4, 9); 3. church renewal, which is described as the basis of the movement towards unity ([Vatican II Fathers 1964](#), no. 6, 7); and 4. social gospel, otherwise described as a dialogue of life, which demands our cooperation in social matters and the application of gospel principles to social life, the advancement of the arts and sciences in a truly Christian spirit, and the use of various remedies to relieve the afflictions of our times such as famine and natural disasters, illiteracy and poverty, housing shortages and unequal distribution of wealth ([Vatican II Fathers 1964](#), no. 12).

This article does not aim at pursuing all the above-listed pathways of ecumenism. To be sure, its scope is modest as it focuses on one of the ancillary aspects of theological dialogue, namely, historical consciousness. The purpose intended here is to identify a few historical landmarks which have continued to define the dynamics of relationships between Catholics and other Christian churches in Nigeria. It is also my intention to evaluate to what extent the contemporary expression of ecumenical cooperation between Christian churches in Nigeria reflects our ‘inherited prejudgments’ from the European missionaries who brought the gospel to us. This historical quest may reveal some cleavages that are rooted in past divisions or the loss of common understanding of the essence of Christian faith. In a more positive light, it may also engender a livelier ecumenical hope for Christian unity in Nigeria while maintaining the already-achieved progress made so far, as well as countering further divisions. If the latter is the case, I shall consider my reflections here bountifully fruitful.

It is the preliminary hypothesis of this article that some of the seeds of unity and/or disunity which impede or advance the ecumenical movement in Nigeria are sown in the very beginning of Christianity’s presence in our nation. I also argue that the greater instances of these factors are as recent as the most flourishing period of missionary activity in Nigeria, in the 20th century. Consequently, this article draws on historical accounts to expose the earliest ‘seeds’ of communion as well as the earliest ‘signs’ of tension amongst Christian churches in Nigeria. Accordingly, I shall start with a historical note on the beginnings of Christianity in Africa and the subsequent spread of the gospel message to Nigeria. Then, I will draw upon this historical background to expose the seminal ecumenical initiatives which metamorphosed into structures such as the Evangelical Union of Southern Nigeria (EUSN), the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Finally, I shall make some brief conclusive notes on the pathways of ecumenism trodden by our forebears in the Christian faith in Nigeria.

2. The Dawn and Twilight of Christianity in Roman Egypt

Although historical accounts date the earliest presence of Christianity in West Africa’s Nigeria to the 15th century (see [Imokhai 1982](#), p. 1), Christianity is not a tenderfoot in the African continent. It is notable that as early as the first century, Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity, spent part of his childhood in Egypt, when this northern part of the African continent was under the control of the Roman Empire¹. Corroborating this claim of ‘the historical presence of Christ in Egypt during the first century’ is a biblical note on the flight of the Holy Family from Bethlehem to Egypt, which is presented as an event that took place during the period when Augustus Caesar was emperor². Another piece of biblical evidence, perhaps more prophetic, to justify the historical presence of Christ in North Africa during the first century, comes from the nativity narrative of Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 2:13–15)³, that after the visit of the Magi, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, instructing him to take Mary and the child to Egypt (North Africa)⁴ on account of King Herod, who sought to kill the infant Jesus.

Moreover, the Pentecost account in Acts of the Apostles 2:10 records amongst the people in Jerusalem, nationals from Egypt and Libya (both of which are in North Africa), hence accentuating the presence of Africa in early church history. Beyond the biblical notes on Africa and Africans in early Judeo-Christian history, the church historian Eusebius testified that the evangelist St. Mark⁵ “was sent to Egypt and that he proclaimed the Gospel which he had written and first established churches⁶ in Alexanria” (See [Keith 2016](#), p. 92).

It cannot be overemphasized that North African Christianity holds a pride of prominence in any historical account of Christianity in Africa. Roman Egypt’s capital city of Alexandria was the next universal center of Christianity after Jerusalem (in Palestine), Antioch (in Syria) and Rome (in Italy—Europe). North African Christians including Tertulian (150–220 CE), Origen (185–254 CE), Cyprian (200–258 CE), Athanasius (296–375 CE) and later Augustine (350–430) were converted in the first four centuries by gospel preachers from Rome⁷. St. Mark, who is acclaimed the founder of Coptic⁸ Christianity, was sent from

Rome to Egypt and as a companion of both Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:4–13) as well as of Peter, and he was a direct successor of the apostles. All of these go to accentuate the unity of Christian faith as commonly shared by Christians all over the Roman Empire in the first two centuries of Christianity.

Nonetheless, a doctrinal controversy of a very significant ecumenical implication had arisen as early as the fifth century in Egypt as to whether Christ upon whom the shared Christian faith rests is of one nature (monophyticism) or two natures (hypostatic union). This controversy sowed the seminal seed of division between the Coptic (Egyptian) Christians, who are convinced on monophyticism, and Roman Catholic/Greek Orthodox Christians, who are convinced of hypostatic (divine–human) union in Christ. This controversy was settled at the Council of Chalcedon (451) in favor of those who preached hypostatic union and thus against Monophysites. The ecumenical import of this cleavage raises the question as to whether there can be different understandings of the nature of Christ on whom our faith as Christians rests. In other words, does the evident difference of doctrine on the nature of Christ (monophyticism versus hypostatic union) not show different faith expressions? And if so, how can we realize a unity of faith? Perhaps, the ecumenical hope for a reconciliation of parallel faith expressions in the same Christ can be exercised. Such ecumenical hope is sustained on account of what was already achieved by previous ecumenical councils in bridging doctrinal cleavages amongst particular or local churches (e.g., between the Coptic and Roman churches on the hypostatic union).

Beyond the fifth century and post Chalcedon, there arose an even greater challenge which stretched the limits of Christian unity in Alexandria, Egypt, namely, the establishment of Islam in the 7th century. With respect to ecumenical concerns, one could ask whether the rise of Islam was a positive or negative influence on Christian unity in Egypt at the time? Significantly, by the beginning of the 7th century, Alexandria, which had been a flourishing outpost of Christianity in Africa, was already weakened by the many doctrinal disputes and subsequent definitions by the ecumenical councils and synods. It can be surmised that Christian unity was at its low during the early period of Islam. This was a key factor for the Islamic conquest of the region. In any case, it should be underscored that the Christians of North Africa exhibited a heroic sense of hospitality to Muslims fleeing from persecution in Mecca⁹. The migration of Muslims to Egypt, however, factored as a launchpad for the spread of Islam, thus accentuating the non-Christian plausibility of the popular remark of the African theologian, Tertullian, who quipped that “Plures efficimur, quotiens metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis Christianorum [the blood of martyrs is seed of the church]” (Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, L. 13). On the other hand, the expansion of Islam via Muslim migrants from Mecca who were fleeing from persecution (i.e., Hijra) at the Arabian peninsula to North Africa also precipitated the Islamic conquest of the Christian North Africa and the gradual dwindling in the population of the early Christian communities in North Africa, up till the eventual conquest of North Africa by the Ummayyad Caliphate (647–709 AD).

3. Wavefronts of Christianity in Nigeria: Trails of the First Missionary Endeavors by the Portuguese

After the Islamic conquest of the North African Christianity, Islamization continued to spread across the continent in *pari passu* with the spread of Christianity, given the same dynamics of migration of Muslims or Christians, on account of persecutions, into safer regions. To the best of my knowledge, however, there is no historical evidence that North African Christians brought Christianity to Nigeria. It cannot also be said that the Islamization of Nigeria is thanks to Muslims from North Africa. The emergence of both religions in the western part of Africa is characterized by different historical trajectories. What is uncontested, however, is that Islam was introduced in West Africa before Christianity. Accordingly, in the case of Nigeria, the ruler of the Bornu Empire is said to have embraced Islam in the 11th century while Christians from Portugal had won over the rulers of Benin and Warri in the 15th century. At the time, the Kingdom of Portugal

enjoyed the privileges of *Padroado*¹⁰, which is a series of concordats with the Holy See, which was confirmed by Pope Leo X in 1514.

Under the *Padroado* arrangement, the exploration and establishment of Christian churches in the mission territories were controlled by the home government of the explorers. Moreover, during this period, religion in most African kingdoms was regulated by the royal courts and this explains the missionary strategy of the time which consisted in converting the royal household as a launchpad for converting whole communities. This strategy would later play an influential role in the 16th century when it was modified into the standard principle of “*cuius regio, eius religio*” (the religion of the ruler/king is the religion of his people). Thus, during the religious wars in Europe, this mid-sixteenth century principle served as a temporary solution to a series of intractable rivalries between Christian denominations, hence its adaptation in settling the religious struggle between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism via the Peace of Augsburg in 1555¹¹.

Whereas such concordats and treaty arrangements as *Padroado* and the subsequent Peace of Augsburg are brokered between the Holy See and kingdoms or amongst nations for settling rivalries/disagreements by demarcation of jurisdictions and as such differ significantly from an ecumenical cooperation/agreement amongst Christian churches for realizing Christian unity, they did serve, in the meantime, to create a modicum of tolerance amongst Catholics and Protestants by way of defining some territorial jurisdictions in the light of the terms of church–state relations as well as in terms of the principle of ‘*cuius regio, eius religio*’. The manifest effect of the principle was the establishment of national churches, and hence Catholicism became synonymous with the Papal States, Spain and Portugal; Lutheranism with Germany; Calvinism with Switzerland; and Anglicanism with England.

In any case, it is important to underscore that it was within such privileged contexts as ‘*Padroado*’ that the first encounter of Nigerian converts with Portuguese Catholics took place in Benin and Warri kingdoms. The Portuguese missionaries had come into the country alongside merchants and traders from Portugal. As Bab Fafunwa noted, “As early as 1472, Portuguese merchants visited Lagos and Benin and exchanged greetings with the Oba (king) of Benin . . . [and] Spasmodic missionary activities started in Benin in 1515 when some Catholic missionaries set up a school in the Oba’s palace for his sons and the sons of his chiefs who were converted to Christianity” (See Fafunwa 1974, p. 74). It is to be noted that this significant encounter of Catholic missionaries with Nigerians had taken place before the divisive impact of the Protestant Revolution could reach Nigeria. Hence, it could be safely argued that, at the time, Christianity, for those 15th and 16th Nigerian converts, was synonymous with Catholicism. Fafunwa’s testimony that Catholicism was the earliest Christian mission in Nigeria is equally corroborated by Clodagh Gallagher who avers that, “Christianity first came to what we now call Nigeria in the 1400s, through Augustinian and Capuchin monks from Portugal. From the Reformation it would take another 300 years for Protestants to establish their first mission in the country, which was done in 1842 by the Church of England” (see Gallagher n.d.). It is, however, within the later context of the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent fallout of divisions amongst Christian churches that the second missionary ‘expedition’ into Nigeria would be launched.

4. Renewed Missionary Activities in Nigeria in the 19th and 20th Centuries

The Portuguese Catholic missionary experiment of the 15th century did not leave a lasting impression on the people and as such could not thrive beyond the end of the 16th century. This is confirmed by A. Ryder who observed that, “until the Protestant and Catholic missions penetrated Yorubaland in the middle of the nineteenth century, Christianity had secured no permanent footing in Nigeria” (see Ryder 1960, p. 1). As Bab Fafunwa indicates, “the second missionary endeavour in Nigeria was marked by the advent of the first English-speaking Christian mission in Badagry in September 1842” (Fafunwa 1974, p. 77). Later, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Edinburgh Conference (4–23 June 1910), with one of its key agenda being “to consider Missionary Problems in Relation to Non-Christian

World" (see [Stanley 2006](#), pp. 171–76), spurred subsequent initiatives for 'well-planned'¹² evangelization to mission territories as well as the promotion of Christian unity.

It must be underscored that contrary to popular opinion, there were unofficial contacts between the Catholic Church and the participants of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh as testified in the report of the Eight Commission on Co-operation and Promotion of Unity wherein it is indicated that Bishop Geremia Bonomelli of Cremona (1831–1914) sent a personal letter to the conference. Moreover, as Cardinal Kasper noted, "the involvement of the Catholic Church in the modern ecumenical movement was manifest soon after the Edinburgh Conference when on 2 November 1914, Robert Gardner the Secretary of the Commission of the Episcopal Church in USA, wrote to the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Gaspari, asking for an audience with the Pope so as to discuss the proposed Conference of All Christian Communions to deliberate on "Faith and Order" questions. This audience was granted and in 1919, a delegation of five Episcopalians visited Pope Benedict XV (1914–1922)" (see [Kasper 2005](#)).

From all that has been said, it can be rightly said that at the beginning of the 20th century, there were set in motion a series of ecumenical structures for the promotion of Christian unity and for overcoming the ecclesial divisions of the 16th century Christian churches. These ecumenical pathways were precipitated by earlier initiatives, one of which was the revival movements within evangelicals in America and Europe. Magnus Bassey observed that "following the evangelical revival movements in Europe during the late 18th century, missionary fervour, dormant since the 15th century, was rekindled regarding the largely unrewarding endeavour of evangelizing the Nigerian interior. The European evangelical movement was precipitated by John Wesley, who challenged the established Anglican Church, thus inspiring the 'Protestant Awakening' across Europe and America in the nineteenth century. Prominent protagonists of this 'awakening' include William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, and Zachary Macaulay, who embraced the responsibility of the formation of one of the first Protestant missionary societies to venture into Nigeria. This dream of the forming the Church Missionary Society manifested in 1799 as an evangelical arm of the Church of England. Other similar initiatives were acknowledged, several of which worked towards Christian unity and missionary expansion" (see [Bassey 1991](#), p. 36). Subsequent support for missionary activities in Nigeria was renewed in the spirit of this initiative.

Given that the Portuguese Catholic missionary efforts in Nigeria formed the first experiment, we can safely say that the second missionary experiment by European Christians in Nigeria began in the middle of the 19th century with inroads made by the Church of England. Notably, in relation to the missionary activities in Nigeria and West Africa at large, the 19th century was marked by two major events, both of which had great influence on the rapid increase in missionary activities in Nigeria; the first of these two events was the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the second was the Berlin Conference (15 November 1884–26 February 1885).

With the abolition of the slave trade, many African ex-slaves who had converted to Christianity in Europe and America returned to the continent and, having learnt to read the Bible while in slavery, became, as it were, effective purveyors of the gospel message to their people. Freetown in Sierra Leone had been established as a settlement for returning slaves in 1787, and in 1841, one of the freed slaves from Yoruba (southern Nigeria) by the name of Ajayi Crowther¹³ was sponsored by the British government to establish a Christian mission in Nigeria. It can thus be said that 1841 marked the beginning of the re-establishment of Christianity in Nigeria.

Some forty years later in 1885, a major event took place in Berlin, Germany, when Portugal requested that the German Chancellor Otto von Bismark call for a conference where the major Western powers¹⁴ could negotiate and end confusions over the control of Africa. At the end of the conference, Nigeria and Ghana were allocated to Britain (British West Africa), as were Egypt and Sudan (British North Africa), Uganda and Kenya (British

East Africa) and South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana (British South Africa). France, Germany, and Portugal also got some other African countries.

That Nigeria became a colonial holding of Great Britain has implications for missionary activities. As is predictable, the colonial government of Great Britain was quick to accommodate missionaries from Britain or English-speaking countries. Moreover, given that the British government officially adopted Anglicanism, since 1534 when King Henry VIII (1491–1547) separated the Church of England from papal authority, special privileges were given to the British mission society, known as the Church Missionary Society¹⁵. According to Clodagh Gallagher, during the colonial regime in Nigeria, “there are far more Protestants in the country, due in part to privileges afforded the Church of England under British rule between 1851 and 1960. The British-run government favoured granting municipal and local authority to Muslims, who populated the northern part of the country. In the south, which was Christian, they granted higher authorities to Anglican Protestants, over Catholics” (see [Gallagher n.d.](#)).

This lopsided situation in favor of Anglican missionaries reflects the religious and political rivalry in Europe between Britain (which had officially adopted Anglicanism) and France (which was officially Catholic). As Vitus Eke observed, “disunity among Churches and ecclesial communities that existed in Europe at the time translated into rivalries and conflicts in the mission land as missionaries that represented these churches struggled for dominance . . . This struggle led to the replacement of French missionaries with the Irish Missionaries (Holy Ghost Fathers) between 1902 and 1905. Also, the CMS who first arrived in 1857 perceived the Roman Catholic penetration and spreading to Nigeria area as a continuation of the French drive to challenge British interest . . .” (see [Eke 2021](#), pp. 66–68; [Crampton 1979](#), p. 172; [Ekechi 1972](#), pp. 69–72).

Nonetheless, the greater good of the diversity of Christian missionaries from different churches is that the evangelization mission was embarked upon on an even larger scale, thanks to a renewed impetus given to missionary activities at the beginning of the 20th century by the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. There were also instances of harmonious encounters between the Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) missionaries in Nigeria. A. Makozi and A. Ojo’s testimony buttresses this fact when they write reported that “when the Catholic missionaries, in the person of Fr Jules Poirier and his companions arrived in Lokoja for the first time, one of the first inspired acts of ecumenism was demonstrated by the Sainly Bishop Crowther (of the Anglican Communion). It was said that as land for the Catholic Church was difficult to get, bishop Ajayi Crowther offered the use of his Church, so that Catholics and Anglican shared the same building for many years” (see [Makozi and Ojo 1982](#), p. 57). This goes to show that at the beginning of the missionary activities of the Anglican and Catholic missionaries, there were instances of harmonious cooperation as well as instances of division and disunity.

5. The Ecumenical Scaffolds Which Led to the Formation of the Christian Association of Nigeria

At the turn of the 20th century, following the Edinburgh Conference of 1910¹⁶, there was an increasing consciousness amongst the Christian churches to form a united front for effective propagation of the gospel. The World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh thus gave the mainstream protestant churches in Nigeria a new impetus for Christian unity, such that, in the following year, the Presbyterian, the Methodists and the Anglican missionaries met together in a conference held in Calabar, southern Nigeria, to brainstorm ideas on how to “secure uniformity of discipline within the native churches founded by different missionary societies, and to discuss such matters as . . . , the definition of spheres of influence in the untouched mission fields” ([Ekechi 1972](#); [Kalu 1978](#), p. 4). The Wilkie Report on the 1911 Calabar conference also highlighted the concern of the participants about the divisions within the ecclesial communities; hence, it read, in part, as follows: “We are not here primarily to establish in African Presbyterianism, Anglicanism or Methodism

or any other 'ism', but to preach Christ. . . , under the guidance of the Spirit of God" (see [Groves 1955](#), p. 292).

After the Calabar conference, another seminal ecumenical initiative of this nature took place in the commercial town of Aba, Southeastern Nigeria, in 1917 in which conference deliberations were held on the church order and organization, regulations for baptisms and marriage, and some disciplinary measures such as a suspension from church benefits (e.g., burials). Vitus Eke noted that the Aba Conference was also followed by yet another conference in 1919 in Calabar in which proposals were made to all Christian communities in Nigeria (except Catholics) to form a membership of united churches (see [Eke 2021](#), p. 235).

The Calabar conferences of 1911 and 1919 as well as the Aba Conference of 1917 are the earliest ecumenical initiatives in Nigeria. These conferences gave rise to the formation of the Evangelical Union of Southern Nigeria in 1924 and later the Christian Council of Nigeria in 1929. Emmanuel Ekpunobi lists the objectives of the CCN, which include fostering the fellowship and unity of Christian churches in Nigeria; providing a forum for cooperation in educational and health-related projects amongst member churches; and connecting Christian churches in Nigeria with the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches (see [Ekpunobi 2001](#), p. 69).

According to Vitus Eke, the establishment of the Christian Council of Nigeria was motivated by a desire to checkmate the increasing influence of Catholicism. In his words, "the establishment of the CCN was to enable mainstream protestant churches, including Anglicans, to form a united front against Catholic influence and dominance in the mission land, Nigeria" (see [Eke 2021](#), p. 235). To buttress this fact, O. U. Kanu explains that the Christian Council of Nigeria was formed "in order to break the Roman Catholic monopoly of the mission fields in Nigeria" ([Kalu 1978](#), p. 3). This claim goes to corroborate J. Baur, who avers that "for Protestants, the ecumenical movement has been restricted to a search for unity among protestant churches, sometimes as a strengthening bond against the so-called Roman (Catholic) danger" ([Baur 1994](#), p. 500). Cardinal Kasper has argued that in spite of the seeming impression that the Catholic Church was not noticeably engaged in ecumenical discourse with other Christian churches and did not establish a structured relationship with other Christian churches before 1965, it should not be forgotten that "already in the first half of the 20th century, theologians such as Paul Couturier (1881–1953), Yves Conger (1904–1995), Jan Willebrands (1909–2006), Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), Karl Adam (1876–1966) and many others, following in the footsteps of Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), and John Henry Newman (1801–1890) prepared the way for Vatican Council II's Decree on Ecumenism in which the restoration of unity among all Christians is affirmed" ([Kasper 2005](#)).

Thus, even though Catholics in Nigeria did not play any significant role in the foremost initiatives of Christian churches in Nigeria, the participation of the Catholic Church in joint projects for Christian unity in Nigeria after 1965 is conspicuous. As Vitus Eke attests, after the Second Vatican Council, Catholics in Nigeria participated in joint ecumenical activities with other Christians ranging from common prayer and Bible study to meetings, theological conferences and discussions to facilitate Christian unity ([Eke 2021](#), p. 237).

The entry of the Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement in Nigeria brought a real hope for the full realization of the ecumenical prospects, namely, the unity of all Christian churches. The truth of this hope is most resplendent in the eventual formation of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which became the viable platform for all Christians in Nigeria, without exception¹⁷, to address social, political, religious, and cultural questions that affected Christians in a pluralistic and multi-religious nation like Nigeria.

In 1976, at a meeting of various leaders of the Christian churches and ecclesial communities with the then Nigerian President General Olusegun Obasanjo at Lagos, the initial idea for establishing the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was conceived. After the meeting with the President, the Christian leaders also met at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) in Lagos where they took the decision to establish CAN, and their first meeting at the CSN marked the beginning of the association. Thus, right from its beginning,

the Catholic Church has played a remarkable role in its formation and continues to play a significant role in its sustenance, both as its “facilitator and conscience” (Eke 2021, p. 281). For its first 28 years of existence (1976–2004), the administrative head office of CAN was located at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Lagos. In the last 19 years, the headquarters has been at the National Ecumenical Center, Abuja.

The Christian Association of Nigeria has a four-level structure of administration, namely, the National, State, Zonal and Local Government Levels, each of which includes a women’s wing and a youth wing. According to its constitution, the objectives and mission of CAN include the following: 1. To serve as a basis of response to the unity of the Church, especially as contained in the Lord’s prayer: ‘That they may be one’ (John 17:21). 2. To promote understanding, peace and unity among various people and strata of the society in Nigeria, through the propagation of the gospel. 3. To act as a liaison committee, by means of which its member churches can consult together and, when necessary, make common statements and take common actions. And 4. To act as a watchdog for the spiritual, social, political and moral welfare of the nation¹⁸. Since its inception, CAN has made giant strides in realizing its objectives, as can be testified by its condemnation of the adoption of sharia laws in some northern states of Nigeria in the year 2000 and its contribution to the successful participation of Christians in Federal Government-sponsored pilgrimages which hitherto had been a privilege reserved only for Muslims in Nigeria, amongst other achievements.

The realization of the establishment of the Christian Association of Nigeria also facilitated other bilateral ecumenical engagements between the member churches. One such important bilateral ecumenical engagement is the Nigerian Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission which is further bolstered by the establishment of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission some ten years earlier by Pope Paul VI in 1967. To this bilateral ecumenical initiative I shall turn in the following sections.

6. The Joint Ecumenical Prospects of the Catholic Church and the Church of Nigeria (Anglican)

The involvement of the Catholic Church in ecumenical prospects post Vatican II (1965 onwards) was given a new boost with the establishment of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) in 1967, and as of today, a lot of progress has been recorded with the 1981 *Final Report of the ARCIC-I (1971–1981)* on Eucharist, Ministry and Authority. This ecumenical co-operation of theological experts between Anglicans and Catholics (the two foremost Christian churches in Nigeria) has continued its reflection with ARCIC II (1983–2005)¹⁹ and ARCIC III (2011–till date)²⁰. That the ecumenical initiatives of ARCIC are yielding desired results and raise our hope for Christian unity is well reflected in the 2005 *Final Report of the ARCIC II*, which is titled “Looking Towards A Church Fully Reconciled”.

What has been achieved by the ARCIC on the universal level eventually trickles down to particular or local churches. In Nigeria, the church leadership of both Catholic and Anglican churches acknowledge their mutual responsibility, and they are jointly committed to the ecumenical mission for full and visible unity. In a bid to establish the requisite ecumenical structure for the National Bi-lateral Commission, they have also established appropriate organs in their churches according to the principles and norms of ecumenism. For the Anglican Communion (Church of Nigeria), a directorate of ecumenism and inter-faith (department of ecumenical relations) has been established since 2002 by Most Rev Peter Akintola, the then Primate of the Church of Nigeria. For Catholics, there is also a Department of Mission and Dialogue, which co-ordinates and facilitates the activities of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria in areas of missionary animation, ecumenism, and dialogue among Christian churches. This Department of Mission and Dialogue is divided into three units of committee: on Mission, on Ecumenism, and on Dialogue. It is the committee on ecumenism that is responsible for promoting Christian unity; organizing ecumenical meetings with other Christian churches in Nigeria; providing opportunities for all to study and understand each other’s faith and religious worldview; and working

together in identifying areas of agreement and to resolve areas of disagreement (see the official website of the ([Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria n.d.](#))).

Having put in place the requisite ecumenical structures in their different churches, the Nigerian Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission (NARCC) was inaugurated in 2003 by the then Catholic Bishop of Umuahia (now the Metropolitan of Owerri Archdiocese and the President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria since 2022). Since its inception in 2003, NARCC has fostered bilateral relationships between the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria and the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) with the goal of realizing visible unity in the Church.

7. Conclusions

Our Lord Jesus Christ, while on earth, did pray for the unity of Christians (John 17:21), but just like the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24–30), the Church has experienced seeds of disunity right from the beginning. In a similar manner, enormous resources have continued to be expended in the search for Christian unity, even as new challenges which hinder the journey towards ecclesial convergences arise for each epoch. In tracing the footprints of the missionaries from Egypt in the north of Africa to Nigeria in the west of Africa, this article has highlighted significant milestones which dotted the pathways to unity as well as indicated the unintended detours through which the early Christian missionaries veered off the road of Christian unity. A key challenge, identified in this article, is the transference of the consequences of religious and political rivalries in Europe, the home countries of the missionaries, to the mission lands. In effect, the advent of Christianity in Nigeria is also smeared with the seeds of disunity as much as it is characterized by genuine seminal attempts made by missionaries in setting the pace of the ecumenical journey towards Christian unity in Nigeria. Accordingly, historical consciousness is presented in this article as occupying a central place in any genuine effort towards the hope for unity amongst the various Christian churches and ecclesial communities in Nigeria. This is significant for a proper evaluation of the ‘scaffolds’ of the progressive journey towards unity, with respect to the multilateral ecumenical cooperation of all Christian churches under the aegis of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Undoubtedly, the most evident of these milestones is the bilateral ecumenical journey already embarked upon by the Catholic and the Anglican churches in Nigeria.

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Notes

- ¹ The Roman Empire (27 BCE–476 CE) spanned Asia, the entire Mediterranean basin, most of Western Europe and the greater part of Northern Africa.
- ² Luke 2:1 mentions Caesar Augustus, who ordered a census. He was Rome’s first emperor who reigned between 27BCE and 14CE. His reign was marked by stability and peace. This period was characterized by the Pax Romana. Herod who ordered the killing of the innocents was one of the tetrarchs under Pontius Pilate as Luke records in chapter three of his gospel: “In the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee” (Luke 3:1).
- ³ Allusions to Egypt already appears in the Old Testament texts. For instance the allegorical allusion to the prophecy made by Hosea: “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1). Moreso in Isaiah: “Then the Lord will be known to Egypt and the Egyptians will know the Lord” (Isaiah 19:19,21).
- ⁴ Bernard Ukwuegbu observed that biblical motifs in several instances have portrayed Egypt as a ‘land of refuge’. He notes that “the Old Testament abounds in references to individual and families taking refuge in Egypt, in flight either from persecution or revenge, or in the face of economic pressure. When King Solomon sought to put Jeroboam to death, he fled to Egypt (1 Kings

11:40). When King Jehoiakim sought to kill the prophet Uriah, son of Shemaiah, he too fled and escaped to Egypt (Jeremiah 26:21). About 172 BC, the high priest Onias IV fled to Egypt to escape from King Antiochus Epiphanes, who had killed his uncle. There is therefore all the likelihood that this refuge-in-Egypt tradition has influenced Matthew in his infancy narrative. cf. (Ukwuegbu 2006).

- 5 St. Mark was Paul's companion during the first missionary journey, and later a co-traveller with Peter to Rome (Acts 13:5; 1 Peter 5:13). Mark is regarded as the Father of Coptic Christianity.
- 6 The churches established in Alexandria by Mark around 42AD were the earliest Christian churches to be established in Africa.
- 7 It is notable that Egypt had been under Roman control from 30 BC till 641 CE. After Constantine gained control of Egypt in 324 CE, he promoted the Christianization of the Roman Egypt. Cf. (Keenan 2018).
- 8 The word 'Copt' is derived from the Greek word 'Aigypptos' which in turn is derived from 'Hikaptah', one of the names for Memphis, the first capital of Ancient Egypt.
- 9 It is noted that following the persecution of muslims in Mecca, Mohammed encouraged his followers to flee to Abyssina (i.e., Ethiopia in North Africa) the 'land of refuge'. Hence simultaneously for Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Abrahamic religions), North Africa's (Egypt and Ethiopia) significance as a 'place of refuge' for those fleeing from economic crisis (Gen. 42), insecurity (1 Kings 11:40; Matthew 2:13), or persecution (first Hijra in 613 CE from Mecca to Abyssina) is underscored.
- 10 Cf. (Brucker 1911). It is noteworthy that the Portuguese Overseas Patronage (Padroado Ultramarino Portuguese) was granted to the Crown of Portugal when the Portuguese took the initiative to explore the coasts of Africa and East Indies. It lasted for over 400 years and was eventually annulled by the end of the 19th century. Its last vestiges were effectively suppressed by the Second Vatican Council. The negative influences of the Padroado was more felt in Asia than in Africa.
- 11 The 1555 Peace of Augsburg is the (Religious-territorial) Settlement Treaty between Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and the Protestant Schmalkaldic League, brokered in view of settling disputes between Christians (Catholics and Protestant-Lutherans) and to forestall religious tensions. That the Peace of Augsburg did not realize its goal on the long run became obvious in the Thirty Years War of Christian European nations between 1618 and 1648.
- 12 There were eight assigned commissions who had conducted two years of research before the conference. They made presentations on the following topics: Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World; The Church in the Mission Field; Education in Relation to the Christianization of National Life; Missionary Message in Relation to the Non-Christian World; The Preparation of Missionaries; The Home Base of Missions; Missions and Governments; and Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity.
- 13 Bishop Ajayi Crowther was consecrated a bishop in 1864 cf. (Anonymous 1902, p. 712).
- 14 Fourteen countries participated in the negotiations at the Berlin Conference. They include Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway, Turkey and the United States of America. Of these fourteen countries, France, Germany, Great Britain and Portugal were major stakeholders.
- 15 The Church Missionary Society, established in 1799 had missions in West Africa, West Indies, New Zealand, Australia, India, Middle East, and Srilanka cf. (Anonymous 1902).
- 16 The Edinburgh Conference of 1910 is regarded as the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement.
- 17 The five Christian blocks in CAN include –1. Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (Roman Catholic), 2. Christian Council of Nigeria (Church of Nigeria/Anglican Communion, Methodist Church, and Presbyterian Church), 3. Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), 4. Organization of Instituted African Churches (OIAC), and 5. the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA–referred to Evangelical Fellowship of Nigeria–EFN).
- 18 These objectives are contained in the Article VII of the 1991 Revised Constitution of the Christian Association of Nigeria.
- 19 The second phase of ARCIC expended resources on such topics as Salvation and the Church (ARCIC-II 1986); The Gift of Authority (ARCIC-II 1999); and Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (ARCIC-II 2004).
- 20 In 2017 ARCIC-III (2017) produced an Agreed Statement "Walking Together on the Way" at its meeting in Erfurt Germany. Both Churches–Catholic and Anglican–also produced separate commentaries on the Agreed Statement.

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