

Welcome Address

Opening Ceremony

Rev. Luther Cishak

Vice-President, Christian Council of Nigeria

I welcome you all in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We thank God for granting all of us journey mercies from far and near. May the presence of the almighty God be with us now and throughout the conference. Amen.

May I seize this opportunity to thank the Institute of Church and Society/Northern Area Office for planning this conference and for inviting me to chair the official opening for the External Debt Conference. I humbly accept this great honour, trusting that God will richly bless our togetherness.

The subject of this conference is not only important, but it is also timely, in the sense that the Church in Nigeria will be properly informed or be reminded of her responsibility to the masses, especially the underprivileged people. The External Debt (ED) is a major reason for the failure to render meaningful services to the public. The evidence is clear, as for example hospitals and schools are not well supplied with necessary equipment and drugs due to lack of funds.

The External Debt is the major cause of impoverishment to the masses. As a result of the ED our money is devalued. Prices are high. Transportation becomes a problem to many Nigerians. It also affects the good system of our extended family, as one person cannot handle all the responsibilities.

This conference will stir up the Church to take her responsibility more seriously. The Church as the representative of God on earth is given the Bible as her living constitution to be used as she moves in and out in the society. When Jesus was on earth, he read from the prophet of Isaiah which says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has

sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18). The Lord is not happy with any negative attitude towards the poor. The Bible indicates a "preferential option for the poor" as recorded in Luke 1:51--53, "He (God) has shown strength with His arm, He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away."

Unless the Church clearly shows her love and concern for the poor, before long they will start leaving the Church. In other words, some will faint on the way. This conference can help make our church leaders to be more sensitive to the underlying reasons for poverty and thus put us in a better position to minister to and on behalf of the poor. The worldwide Church of Christ has placed the External Debt on its active agenda. They do not only talk but are doing significant things to uplift the living standard of the poor. It is time the Church in Nigeria caught up in this area.

The Church is in a position to help, teach, counsel and pray for her members who are in influential positions when it comes to government finances. However, she must know the facts and look at them theologically before she can effectively minister to such people. As part of the Church universal, the Church of Nigeria can influence her sister Churches in the West, many of whose members are deeply involved in the creation of the ED, but often without understanding its implications in terms of the Bible and in terms of its effect on the people of debtor nations.

Our Churches can share with the sister churches abroad what the effect of the ED is and then propose to those churches how they can help us by ministering to their members and by addressing their Governments, banks and politicians.

In the light of all the above considerations, the Church is potentially a powerful agency, and can contribute much to a solution of the ED problem. Hence, this conference is basically aimed at Pastors, to equip them for more relevant and effective ministry. It is not out of place to request you individually to make efforts

to share our concern with other Church leaders and politicians you may come in contact with.

In conclusion, may we remind ourselves of what John Wesley, a man of zeal, once said, "Give me a hundred men who love God with all their hearts, and fear nothing but sin, and I will move the world." By faith we believe that with God all things are possible. True faith is always based upon some promise of God. Jesus said to his followers, "For apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). As we pray for a change and meaningful development, we must draw near to God with a true heart.

On behalf of the Christian Council of Nigeria, I thank you once more for coming and wish you all a blessed conference. Amen.