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Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation in a Context of Divisions, Conflict and Violence in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria

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I. Introduction

Language is a codification of words for the purpose of communication (Tobalase 2017:2). Language is a system of signs and symbols through which a speech community communicates. It is the tool used for sharing information within particular group of persons; 'It is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntary-produced symbols (Tobalase 2017:2). According Allen "language shapes the ways we think, feel, and act in the world. From the basic master story of a culture or community to the tiniest metaphor, our language results in social attitudes, behavior, roles, and structures. Indeed, to use language is to create, or recreate, a world." I concur with Allen assertion that language shapes everything about human life. This is because human beings dream in language, remember in language, anticipate in language, hope in language, despair in language, believe in language, doubt in language, plan in language, revise in language, criticize in language, construct in language, gossip in language, learn in language, hate in language, fight in language, reconcile and love language (Lowry 1985:39).

The point of departure for this study concerning language however, is Tobalase assertion that the use of "language can be the reason of peace or war in a community" (Tobalase 2017:4). Also, Achieng (2016:25) maintains that "language is the route taken to propagate the root causes of conflict, create hate and division." Achieng (2016:8-9) further argues that "The lessons of the genocide in Rwanda and the infamous post-election violence (PEV) in Kenya have pointers to the power that language can use to resort to destruction." This means the use of language was one of the reasons for the divisions, conflict and the genocide that happened in Rwanda. The Hutu people used a language to create a negative impressions about the Tutsi ethnic group. In other words, language became a tool for a propaganda campaign that resulted to alienating the Hutu from the Tutsi before the genocide. Adeyanju (2018:79) points out that "The media, especially the radio (controlled by the Hutu government) poisoned contents of information in order to create mass movement and transform ordinary people into militias. Neighbors turned against each other, friends against each other, even relatives against relatives." The Rwandan newspaper and Radio were used to propagate the 'Hutu Ten Commandments', which instigated Hutu hatred against their Tutsi neighbour. A careful reading of the Hutu's ten commandment will reveal how words were carefully chosen to criminalised the Tutsi, thereby picturing them as something to be exterminated. So in the Hutu ten commandment we read that:

> 1. Every Hutu should know that a Tutsi woman, wherever she is, works for the interest of her ethnic Tutsi group. Consequently, we should consider a traitor every Hutu who: marries a Tutsi woman; befriends a Tutsi woman; employs a Tutsi woman as a secretary or concubine. 2. Every Hutu should know that our Hutu daughters are more suitable and dutiful in their roles as women, wives and mothers of the family. Are they not more wonderful, good secretaries and more honest? 3. Hutu women, be vigilant and try to bring your husbands, brothers and sons back to reason. 4. Every Hutu should know that every Tutsi is dishonest in business. Their only aim is supremacy for their ethnic group. As a consequence, every Hutu is a traitor who does the following: makes a business partnership with a Tutsi; invests his money or that of the government in a Tutsi enterprise; lends money to or from a Tutsi; gives business favors to a Tutsi (obtaining import licenses, bank loans, construction sites, public markets etc.). 5. All strategic posts, political, administrative, economic, military and these in the area of

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> security, should be entrusted to Hutus. 6. The majority of the education sector, i.e. school pupils, students, teachers, must be Hutu. 7. The Rwandan armed forces should be exclusively Hutu. The experience of the October War has taught us a lesson. No member of the military shall marry a Tutsi. 8. Hutus should stop having mercy on the Tutsi. 9. The Hutus must, whoever they are, maintain unity and solidarity and be concerned with the fate of their Hutu brothers; The Hutus in and outside Rwanda must constantly look for friends and allies for the Hutu cause, starting with their own Bantu brothers; They must constantly counteract Tutsi propaganda; The Hutus must be firm and vigilant against their common Tutsi enemy. 10. The Social Revolution of 1959, the Referendum of 1961 and Hutu ideology must be taught at every level to every Hutu. Every Hutu must spread this ideology widely. Every Hutu who persecutes his Hutu brother because he has read, spread and taught this ideology is a traitor (Van Hapere 1994: 105-106).

The used of the above language resulted to convincing the Hutu population that the Tutsi were their archetypal enemies. The language evoked images of war, slavery, oppression, injustice, death and cruelty that claimed the lives of some 800 000 Rwandans, and during which approximately 75 percent of the Tutsi ethnic minority population was killed. In addition, 250 000 women became victims of sexual violence, and many of whom were killed afterward. An estimated 70 percent of the women who survived were infected with HIV. At the end of the 100 days of slaughter, 85 percent of Tutsis – equal to 10 percent of Rwanda's population – were killed and half of the population was either internally displaced or had fled the country (Verwimp 2004:233; Lower & Hauschildt 2014:1).

In the same manner words are carefully chosen by tribes, ethnic groups and religious groups to criminalized some tribes, ethnic groups, and religious groups in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria.[1] Turaki studied the situation of Middle Belt region and explains thus:

> The use of derogatory and demeaning terms such as, *arne, kabila, gambari, nyamiri* reflects ethnic stereotyping. The subordination of one ethnic group to the rule of another generates ill-feelings, resentment and bitterness. Politics of inequality and domination have aroused discrimination, bias and resentment (2012).

The use of derogatory and demeaning terms, especially *_arne'*(an infidel or pagan in Arabic), reveal how the used of language in the Middle Belt region generates an attitude of superiority and inferiority in terms of religion. Furthermore, Gwamna observes that "The superior – inferior complexes are inbuilt in some indigenous ethnic groups in the Middle Belt area who see others as inferior to them. This explains part of problem of Igbirra–Bassa conflict. The Igbirra and Gade believe that the Bassa and Gbagyi are both culturally inferior to them (2010:30). Another derogatory and demeaning terms that are commonly used in the Middle Belt region are foreigners, strangers, non-indigene and settlers. This terms portrays a language of division, conflict and violence because the motive is to exclude and deny some people access to certain opportunities.

The used of the language of divisions, conflict and violence in the Middle Belt region has resulted to character assassination, complexes, fear, suspicion, mistrust, bitterness, anger, and mutual antagonism. As a result of the use of language of divisions, conflict and violence, Alubo (2011:11-12) in his study of Middle Belt region discovered that there is no state in the Middle Belt region that has not experienced a number of violent conflicts. Alubo gathered that the Middle Belt region of Nigeria harbours more battlefront and invariably undeclared civil war more than any region in Nigeria. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that, at all levels of society, language is used in order to marginalise, exclude, segregate and demean others (Alubo 2011: 11-12).

As a result of incessant conflicts and violence in the Middle Belt region and northern Nigeria the northern economy has crashed, business is fizzling, income generated has dwindled. People find it difficult to make ends meet. Most of the times people come to market without selling anything. In the core service sector, schools, hospitals, hotels, parks and recreational outfits are going down. Foreign students are relocating to the south; many doctors have transferred to peaceful states, and hotels and parks now record a low turnout of visitors. All these portend losses for the northern economy. Previously there were more than enough human resources for business and production, including professionals, in the different service sectors. Now some of them have lost their lives, resulting in a mass exodus from the north to the south for safety. As of now there is no direct evidence that those who migrated because of insecurity have returned to the northern states they fled. The health, banking and insurance, and education sector have crumbled. Even vacancy announcements with attractive salaries and benefits are not responded to. Agricultural output is dwindling greatly because farmers in many parts of Middle Belt region no longer go to farm for fear of what will happen to them (Chukwurah

[1] Elsewhere I argued that the Middle Belt region of Nigeria is a collection of diverse ethnic groups, diverse tribes with diverse cultures, diverse languages and diverse religions. These ethnic groups occupy the southern part of Northern Nigeria, an area that includes the Nigerian federal states of Benue, Nassarawa, Taraba, Adamawa, Plateau, Southern Kebbi, Kogi, Niger, Southern Kaduna, Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Southern Gombe and Southern Bauchi (Turaki 2012; Adamu & Ben 2015:10). The high concentration of diverse minorities and the accompanying inequalities between them makes the region a breeding ground for ethnic, tribal and religious violence. It also underscores the need for preaching social cohesion and harmonious life in the region.

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et al. 2015:376). As I write this article the school where I teach has been close because of insecurity. There are reports of people being killed daily in some of the communities close to my community. Violence has become the talk of every day and the meditation of every night. Violence is the language that people speak every day and every night.

II. Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation

Significance to the study however is the fact people go to church every week and every day and everywhere in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. If people go to church in an environment where violence has become a language what kind of preaching do they need? Therefore, this study proposes the use of preaching as a language of reconciliation in an environment where violence has become a language. This is because Language performs various functions in societies and its relevance cannot be ignored. Language is a necessary means of communicating the word of God. This means preaching as a language of reconciliation have the potentials of bringing people together and empower people for social action. Preaching as a language of reconciliation have the capacity to establish and maintain relationships among people of diverse ethnic and religious groups (Achieng 2016:8).

The point of departure for the study regarding preaching as a language of reconciliation is Achieng (2016:20) assertion that "Language is important in creating worlds that communities identify themselves with. It is used as an instrument for creating, normalizing and reinforcing particular worldviews, affixing certain knowledge and institutions in society." And also Kuruvilla argument that:

> The biblical canon as a whole projects a world in front of the text – God's ideal world, individual segments of which are portrayed by individual pericopes. Thus each sermon on a particular pericope is God's gracious invitation to mankind to live in his ideal world by abiding by the thrust of that pericope the requirements of God's ideal world as called for in that pericope's world-segment. And as mankind accepts that divine invitation, week by week and pericope by pericope God's people are progressively and increasingly inhabiting this ideal world and abiding by divine will (Kuruvilla 2016:131).

Therefore, the main emphasis of this study is the use of biblical stories to project an ideal world of reconciliation. In other words, the main emphasis of this article is how the word of God can be used to shape people's imagination of hate, revenge, stocking of arms whereby they will think and talk about peace, social cohesion, harmonious life and ways of sustaining life in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. In this regard the study consider the followings as principles of using preaching as a language of reconciliation.

a) Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation Demands the use of Narratives to Shape Imagination

According to Troeger (2007:60), "imagination is the ability to create and hold before the mind's eye an image of something that is not actually present". Taylor (1993:213) argues further that "Imagination is the ability to form images in the minds of listeners that are not physically present to their senses so that they find themselves in a wider world with new choices about who and how they will be". In addition, Chifungo (2013:139) maintains that "imagination is to work through images, metaphors, and narratives in such a way that it evokes, generates and constructs alternative worlds that lie beyond the fixed tradition". This means imagination is bringing into being in the mind of the listener images that have clarity and force sufficient to effect changes in attitudes, values, beliefs and life directions (Craddock 1971:92). Storytelling, retelling, parables, allegories, similes, metaphors, and proverbs could be used in preaching to create pictures of how listeners could be different.

Therefore, preaching as a language of reconciliation demands the use of narratives to shape imagination because reconciliation is a matter of imaginative discernment of the truth through stories, in addition to logical discernment (Wilson 1993:145). In other words, preaching as a language of reconciliation demands the use of stories to shape imagination because to conquer the minds of people in an environment of division, conflict and violence is very difficult. It is easier to target the heart and the sensibility of people, which can be done through the use of imagery created by narratives. This is because thoughts of the heart provide images, which means the heart is the seat of imagination (Wallace 1995:30). Craddock (1971:78) aptly argues that, "long after a man's head has consented to the preacher's idea, the old images may still hang in the heart. But until that image is replaced is he really a changed man." The human mind operates in images or metaphors, not abstract concepts or arguments, which is why preaching as a language of reconciliation requires the preacher to be like a poet and creative writer, who is interested not in saying things as accurately as possible, but by touching the human heart and letting the human imagination work in creative, analogical ways. In the words of Craddock (1971:59) "images are replaced not by concepts but by other images" in which the listener becomes a changed man, although it requires a lot of time, for "the longest trip a person takes is that from the head to heart".

Also, preaching as language of reconciliation demands the use of narratives to shape imagination because instruction alone can never lead people through the process of reconciliation. As a result, preaching as a language of reconciliation requires the use of imageries to reframe, re-imagine and re-describe

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the world so as to offer a counter-narrative to that rendered by division, conflict and violence (Day, Astley & Francis 2005:152). In other words, preaching as a language of reconciliation requires the use of stories, metaphors and images that are the product of creative imagination to shape the imagination of listeners. Buttrick (1987:32) says that preaching without depiction is apt to be abstract, and oddly enough unconvincing. The preacher has to find a way of picturing what he or she is talking about. This means preaching as a language of reconciliation involves the use of evocative images rather than conceptual structures (Craddock 1971:77). For example, making people change their attitudes toward a perceived enemy requires depiction. In addition, asking people to forgive in a situation of deep wounds created by divisions, conflicts and violence calls for the use of evocative images. What is more, telling the warring parties, be they of different family, tribe, ethnic group or religion, to come together, stay together and grow together in a situation of division, conflict and violence requires the use of pictures.

Furthermore, preaching as a language of reconciliation demands the use of narratives to shape imagination because conflict and violence create images that may block information from penetrating the mind of the listeners. This is why Cilliers (2013:6) advises that preaching, and preaching reconciliation in particular**,** should go beyond communication of mere information about God to others; rather, it should convey the picture of the performance of God's action in the midst of incomprehension and deafness of ears. Preaching as a language of reconciliation should be much more than the transfer of religious information, and also much more than mere words on a written manuscript. Rather, it should include images drawn from the biblical text or from contemporary life – images that appeal to the senses and engage the hearer through sight, sound, touch, taste or smell (Tisdale 2010:71).

b) *Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation Demands Drawing Images from the World of Experience known to the Hearers*

Preaching as a language of reconciliation demands that the selection of images should be from the world of experience known to the hearers. Stated differently, preaching as a language of reconciliation requires that the images should be cast in forms recognisable and real to the listeners. This means the immediate and concrete experiences of the listeners are significant ingredients in the formation and movement of the imagination in preaching as a language of reconciliation (Craddock 1971:59). For example, biblical stories of reconciliation may help to shape people's imagination about reconciliation, because Christian imagination is fundamentally illuminated by the Scriptures. In preaching as a language of reconciliation, the preacher do not turn to the Bible to seek information but look for images that arouse the imagination of the listeners about reconciliation.

In addition, images from African indigenous stories or folk art and cultural practices that portray reconciliation are effective tools for preaching as language of reconciliation in Africa. Indigenous stories and cultural practices may touch the heart and stir many souls to action because they are drawn from African people's experience (Courlander 1975:5, Wilson 1988:18). For example, the *Bassa* ethnic group of Liberia in West Africa has a ceremony for reconciliation that demonstrates how some African cultural practices of reconciliation could be a good resource for preaching as a language of reconciliation in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. The cultural practice of the *Bassa* ethnic group displays an image of confession of the evil done in the past and forgiveness as a necessary ingredient for reconciliation.

During a ceremony of reconciliation, the perpetrator ties a string of palm leaves on the neck, kneels before the victim and hands the end of the string to the victim. Then the perpetrator will say to the victim, "I have wronged you and this community in a shameful way. You deserve to do whatever you wish with me. I am giving you one end of the rope tied around my neck. You can choose to drag me to death or release me of the burden of guilt and shame." After this statement, the place will be silent, waiting for the answer of the victim. When the victim accepts the apology he will accept the string, remove it from the neck of the perpetrator, and help him to stand up on his feet. The entire community shouts with joy when the ceremony ends this way. Immediately, celebrations begin and an animal is killed, cooked, and eaten by all in the community. If the answer is to seek revenge, the victim will refuse to accept the string or remove it from the neck of the victim. When the ceremony fails in this way, both the victim and the perpetrator become a disgrace to the community. However, the elders do not give up. They continue with the dialogue and the ceremony is postponed for another date (Ayindo et al. 2001:69).

c) *Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation Demands the use of Images that are Specific and have Concrete Relationships and Responses*

Preaching as a language of reconciliation demands the use of images that are specific and have concrete relationships and responses. In other words, preaching as a language of reconciliation demands that the image conveyed should be one that can be heard, seen, smelled, touched or tasted by the listeners. To enable the listeners see, hear, taste, touch, smell, understand and interact with the sermon in preaching as a language of reconciliation, the preacher should use images and action that are specific and concrete to the hearers (Schlafer 1992:64). Models of the processes of reconciliation offer listeners help in imagining how they

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might live harmoniously with one another, despite tribal, ethnic and religious difference. For example, in places like South Africa and Rwanda, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions offer a good model of reconciliation. By using this model for preaching, listeners will gain concrete pictures of what reconciliation looks like (Wink 1998:13; Osmer 2008:152).

Also, images from African indigenous stories or folk art and cultural practices that portray reconciliation may touch the heart and stir many souls to action because they will enable the listeners to see and understand what it means to reconcile and life a harmonious life. The African folk story below is a good example of a story that may help shape people's imagination about forgiveness devoid of confession of evil done in the past and forgiveness based on building a common future.

A long time ago at the village of Serki a woman gave birth to twins – both boys. They were very nice children. One of the twins, Eiba by name, had a white spot on his right hand. The other one – they called him Saiba – had two white spots on his left hand. Father and mother were very happy and very sad at the same time. You will ask – why? There was a very bad custom in Serki to kill twins. And the chief of Serki said, "Those twins must die, too." But their father and mother did not want to kill the twins. "What?" said the chief angrily? "You don't want to kill them? Go away from the village and never come back or I shall kill you together with your children." So the poor family went away from the village and for many years they lived in a forest. Life was not easy there. But the children grew up strong. When they grew up, they helped their father and mother with their work. They were good and handsome young men.

But as the story continues, the twins are depicted as focusing not on how the king and the people of Serki treated them and their parent. They did not consider the suffering they and their parent went through as a result of the treatment meted out to them by the people of Serki. Rather, they focused on the immediate need, which was saving the life of the people of Serki from an attacking enemy. That is, the focus of their forgiveness was on the survival of the people of Serki in the midst of a war that was at the point of consuming them.

One day the twins found a man in the forest. He was dying. They tried to help him. But he said, "Don't help me. I shall die soon. I came from Serki. There is a war going on there now. We fought bravely. But the enemy is stronger than we are. Go and help my people if you can." With these words, he died. Eiba and Saiba wanted to go to Serki and help to fight. But their father and mother were against it and said, "The Chief does not want you there. He wanted to kill you when you were small children. That's why we went away from Serki and came to live in the forest." But the twins wanted to go and help Serki. They said, "This is our country. We must help the people of our country." So the boys came to Serki and fought against the enemies. They fought bravely. The people of that country won the fight and made the enemy run. So the war was over.

Their action displays forgiveness without confession of the evil done in the past. Furthermore, the forgiveness displayed by the twins is devoid of recounting the suffering they went through in the past. Therefore their action saved the people of Serki from enemies, provoked the confession of the evil done in the past and put an end to the killing of twins in the land of Serki.

Then a feast at the chief's house began. Saiba and Eiba were at the feast, too. Then one of the men stood up and said, "There are two young men here, two brothers. I think they are very brave soldiers. But we don't know who they are." The twins' uncle was at the feast, too. He said to the chief, "Do you remember two little twins – one with a spot on his right hand and the other with two spots on his left hand? Eighteen years ago you told their father and mother to go away from our village as they did not want to kill the twins. These are the same twins." The chief stood up and asked the twins to forgive him. Then he sent the two young men back to their father and mother with many presents and a letter in which he asked them to come back. From that day on they stopped killing twins in Serki. (English for Students: African Folk Tales).

III. The Implications of Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation in Middle Belt Region of Nigeria

When a language is faithfully engaged, preaching embodies the potential of human beings to use their creativity for holy purposes of justice, compassion, peace and reconciliation (Troeger 2007: 66). The reason for this is that the biblical text beckon hearers into the world of the Bible and stimulate participation, evoke emotion and invite people to live in the world presented by the biblical text.

The main focus of this study is the use of the biblical world in the text in a way that may help in shaping people's imagination, to help people steer away from conflict and be committed to social cohesion in all walks of life (Nussbaum 1995:3). That is, the aim is the use of Christian preaching to help people, and ethnic and religious groups, to acquire the ability to imagine what it is like to be reconciled and stay together (Nussbaum 1995:5). This is because preaching as a language of reconciliation will imaginatively construct in the mind of the people of the Middle Belt region thoughts and actions of a new life, a new community, and a new worldview. In the light of this, the following are some of the implications of preaching as a language of reconciliation in the Middle Belt region.

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a) *Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation should Focus on Change from Proposed Evil to thoughts of Sustaining Life*

Conflict and violence fill people with the imagination of revenge, which almost always can be associated with proposed evil. As such, reconciliation demands a process of transforming the hearers' imagination, helping to substitute feelings of hatred, anger and contemplated evil with compassion, love and thoughts of sustaining life. One tool in such a process of transformation is preaching. So a biblical narrative that portrays reconciliation can fruitfully be employed as a mechanism for preaching as a language of reconciliation in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria a community torn apart by divisions and conflict. It means using the transformation that occurs in the process of reconciliation projected in the biblical text to help foster, in the imagination of the hearers, the importance of sustaining life.

Glenn Paige, in his depiction of the term "non-killing", captures the essence of the notion of "thoughts of sustaining life" that is held up as a central theme in this study. He argues for "a human community, smallest to largest, local to global, characterized by no killing of humans and no threat to kill; no weapons designed to kill humans and no justifications for using them; and no conditions of society dependent upon threat or use of killing force for maintenance or change (cited in Irobi 2013:8). The thoughts of sustaining life proposed by Glenn Paige are the types of mental picture that should occupy the mind of people in the Middle Belt region. That is, through preaching as a language of reconciliation, people may undergo a process of acquiring a vision of commitment to sustaining human life and not killing. This is significant, because the rate at which the value of human life has fallen in the imagination of people is seriously alarming. Human consciousness has become shaped to depersonalise enemies, so that people feel justified in hatred for and destruction of their fellow human beings. Troeger (1988:2080) argues that, "in the beginning people create the enemy. Before the weapon comes the image. People think others to death and then invent the battle-axe or the ballistic missiles with which to actually kill them". This can be seen in the manner in which human lives are wasted on little provocation and within a short period of violence.

The commitment to sustaining human life offers a sharp contrast with how much money is being spent on arms and ammunition in the world, while in the same world millions of people are living in absolute poverty. A case in point is the huge amount of money spent by both the Nigerian government and the Boko Haram Islamic Militants for the purchase of ammunition. Yet the Northern part of Nigeria is the region with the highest rate of poverty in the country. What is more, the activities of Boko Haram and the many ethnic militias in the Middle Belt region characterise human commitment, determination, and high intellectual capacity. One cannot help but imagine that, if Boko Haram's commitment, determination and intellectual capacity was focused on thoughts of life, the Northern part of Nigeria and Nigeria as a whole would be ten times better than what the experience is today. Moreover, actions geared toward sustaining human life have the power to subdue human aggression, hostility, conflict and violence. This denotes that actions geared toward sustaining life facilitate reconciliation. As Gobodo-Madikizela (2014:20) says: "Our humanity is strongest when we are focused on that which sustained human beings: compassion, and an ethos of care for one another, rather than giving to fear and suspicion."

In addition, preaching as a language of reconciliation may help shape the imagination of the congregation by replacing images of revenge that occupy the thoughts of people of different ethnic groups in the Middle Belt. This is because biblical stories have the power to heal hurts, to soften hearts, and to increase our ability to see ourselves, our neighbours, our world, through God's eyes (Sauder 2009:48). Conflict and violence created by divisive ethnicity and religion bring about wounds and pains that nurture thoughts of revenge. This is why revenge attacks are more or less considered as reprisal missions, that is attacks based on vengeance. These have and are creating a non-ending cycle of violence between some ethnic groups. As biblical stories of reconciliation are being preached, it may construct a mental picture of sustaining human life in the mind of the people. That is, people from different ethnic groups may be inspired by thoughts of sustaining the life of their fellow human beings created in the image of God, irrespective of ethnic group or religion. Through preaching as a language of reconciliation, people's attitudes may change from destroying human life in the name of ethnic and religious differences to sustaining life. That is, people will be committed to sustaining the life of fellow humankind at every opportunity.

b) *Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation should Focus on Change from Egocentrism to Human Responsibility*

In addition to introducing images committed to sustaining life in people's minds as a central aspect of a process of reconciliation, preaching as a language of reconciliation in the Middle Belt region demands the use of images of commitment to the well-being of humankind, irrespective of ethnic group or religion. So it is important to help people move from self-centeredness that characterises conflict to self-sacrifice for the well-being of their fellow human beings created in the image of God. That is preaching as a language of reconciliation should foster a process of reconciliation that is rooted in the importance of taking responsibility for one's fellow human beings so that people

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understand that they ought to be their brother's keeper and not their brother's killer.

Divisive ethnicity and religion are to a large extent a depiction of egocentrism. This is because the focus is on the self, even if it means hurting and eliminating human life. The egocentrism or self-centeredness that characterises the engagement of individuals from different ethnic and religious groups with one another in the Middle Belt region is described well in the following quote from Nussbaum (cited in Claassens 2015:1): "Serpents, lions, and bears, inhabit our souls – in the form of our jealous anger, our competitiveness, our retributive harshness. These animals are as they are because they are incapable of receiving another creature's life story into their imagination and responding to that history with gentleness." The animals cited by Nussbaum never pause to ponder the feelings, hurt or even the plight of their prey because of their selfish inclination. All that matters to them is their self-survival, which is heavily at the expense of the survival of another animal. This means divisive ethnicity and religion as depicted in the above-mentioned animals is an imagination that focuses on the self, with little or no space for imagination of the other. As a matter of fact, imagination focused on self-centeredness results in marginalisation, exclusion, segregation, nepotism, discrimination and all forms of polarisation. These attitudes are very common in human interactions among the people of the Middle Belt region of Nigeria.

As such preaching as a language of reconciliation should create an imagination of willingness to sacrifice for fellow humankind in the mind of the people of Middle Belt region. Preaching as a language of reconciliation should empower people to have feeling of concern toward their fellow humans – a feeling that will make them do anything humanly possible to avoid that which will cause pain and anguish to their fellow human beings. Preaching as a language of reconciliation should empower people to acquire the vision to stand for fellow human beings for better or for worse. This is because the imagination of sacrificing for the well-being of humankind will enable people to disengage from activities like the manipulation of religion and ethnicity for selfish gain, and religious fanaticism that brings disunity and division, and focus on activities that enhance social cohesion. Preaching as a language of reconciliation should empower people to have a mental picture of a community where self-centeredness, ethnicity and religion do not count, but what counts is social cohesion.

c) *Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation should Focus on Change from Fixation on the Past to ultimate Forgiveness*

In addition to the imagination of sustaining human life and commitment to the well-being of their fellow humans, another aspect of reconciliation that preaching as a language of reconciliation need to foster is forgiveness. In other words, preaching as a language of reconciliation denotes filling people's mind with the imagination of forgiveness. This is because biblical stories are a great tools for filling people's minds with powerful metaphors and images of healing and reconciling (DuPriest 1986:307). Conflict and violence fill the imagination with thoughts of hatred, anger and resentment that make forgiveness difficult and sometimes impossible. But as biblical stories are preached, they may help dismantle thought processes that focus on hurt, wounds, pain and anguish inflicted in the past to the imagination of acceptance, accommodation, unity and social cohesion.

Therefore, preaching as a language of reconciliation will enable the people of the Middle Belt region of Nigeria hear biblical stories regarding the importance of accepting those who are perceived to be enemies. Elizabeth Achtemeier (cited in Wallace 1995:17) writes that, "if we want to change someone's life from non-Christian to Christian, from dying to living, from despairing to hoping, from anxious to certain, from corruption to whole, from vengeance to forgiveness, we must change the images, the imagination of the heart". Changing the imagination of the heart is important, because it enables forgiveness for the sake of reconciliation. Focusing forgiveness on self may lead to a fixation on wounds, pain and anguish caused by the evil done in the past. The end result is a rigid demand for repentance and even restitution before reconciliation. Fixation on the evil done in the past had and is making people make conditions that are humanly impossible to meet before reconciliation. Therefore, preaching as a language of reconciliation should help people of the Middle Belt region to understand Tutu (Tutu & Tutu 2014:16) assertion that:

> Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness; that person will be our Jailor. When we forgive, we take back control of our own fate and our feelings. We become our own liberators. We don't forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves.

d) *Preaching as a Language of Reconciliation should Focus on Building a Common Future*

A change of attitude, change of action and even forgiveness are central aspects of the process toward reconciliation. However, building a common future should be the key to the coming together of the warring parties. This means reconciliation sometimes does not necessarily lie in loving those around us (it definitely does not lie in hating them either). The spirit of reconciliation lies in the search – not for the things that separate humankind – but for something common among fellow human beings (Gobodo-Madikizela

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2014:1). That is, reconciliation that is help up in this study is the coming together, staying together and growing together of the people of the Middle Belt region of Nigeria for the sake of building a common future. Therefore, preaching as a language of reconciliation in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria entails using biblical stories of reconciliation to introduce into people's imagination the possibility of people, families, communities, ethnic groups and religions in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria coming together, staying together and growing together. Mbachaga (2012:5) beautifully captures this notion: "Building a common sense of purpose, a sense of shared destiny, a collective imagination of belonging. It is about building the tangible and intangible threads that hold a political entity together and gives it a sense of purpose."

Preaching as a language of reconciliation thus means helping people to acquire the vision of embracing one another without religious or ethnic distinction. It also includes embracing the importance of staying together without using religion or ethnic affiliation to exclude, marginalise or segregate. It involves focusing on what unites rather than what divides people. In terms of my Nigerian context, it means developing a strong will by all people in the Middle Belt region to live together in the region and to tolerate one another. This may serve as a vehicle for establishing a united community, which may provide a unique, powerful basis for allegiance instead of disintegration (Lumun 2012:58). Rasak Musbau (2014) aptly argues that:

> The Nigerian people must know that the poverty, ignorance, and disease which oppress the working masses today, do not recognize ethnic, language, religious or regional differences. Hunger does not know whether you are a Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Longuda, Birom, Ogoja, Tiv, Gbagyi, Efik, Kanuri, Chip, Annang, Izon, Nupe, etc. A disease does not find out whether you are a Muslim, a Christian or An African religionist just as hunger, poverty, and ignorance do not care whether you come from North, South, East or West. Poverty, disease, and ignorance attack primarily the masses.

Even though conflict and violence caused by divisive ethnicity and religion might have created wounds and pain in the life of many people, the focus should rather be on how to survive the challenge of unemployment that is rampant among the people of the Middle Belt region (see 2.4.5). Moreover, poverty is causing the youth in the region to become tools in the hands of politicians and some religious leaders during conflict and violence (see 2.4.4). Mbachaga (2012:8) laments that the "political elite recruit young people to do their dirty jobs instead of molding them into responsible leaders of tomorrow".

Another reason for preaching reconciliation as building a common future in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria is because there is need to shape people's imagination in contemplating ways in which they might improve life in the region. For example, hospitals are inefficient and ineffective; electricity is seriously lacking and in some places is totally absent. Education is very inadequate, especially in the rural areas. Lumun (2012:55) aptly captures the decaying situation in the following words:

> Roads still remain as bad as they were. The country is still facing the problem of the electric power supply which is supposed to generate employment for millions of Nigerians. On different occasions, the country had a huge budget to address the issue but trillions of Naira ends into the pockets of few politicians. Employment in the country is strictly who knows who (i.e. connection) not on merit, even in our institutions of higher learning. This may partly account for the falling standard of education in Nigeria.

To add to the list of the decaying situation of Nigeria observed by Lumun, because of insecurity, many people are afraid to get involved in business, something that could create job opportunities for thousands of people. Even farming, which provides employment and the only means of survival for many in the Middle Belt region, is seriously being affected by insecurity. There are no industries to process the farm products, especially ginger, mangoes, oranges and more, thereby discouraging people, especially the youth, from farming. These are some of the issues that preaching as a language of reconciliation should help people, ethnic groups and religions in the Middle Belt region to tackle together.

IV. Conclusion

The occurrences of ethnic violence in the Middle Belt region made me believe that there is no winner in a situation of conflict and violence – all are losers and the damage, whether short or long term, affects all. Conflict and violence do not know who started it, who supports it and who is against it. Conflict and violence do not know ethnic, tribal and religious differences; they consume all. In the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, human beings created in the image of God have been going through perpetual suffering. Some have lost their lives as a result of conflict and violence. Therefore, preaching as a language of reconciliation calls for crossing the tribal, ethnic and cultural frontiers, distinctions and boundaries that dichotomise and polarise people in the Middle Belt region into one body of human beings created in the image of God. The people of the Middle Belt region need to understand that there is a need to move on as people from conflict to reconciliation because we have lost many things and gain nothing in fighting one another. This means there is a need to embark on steps and actions that will promote reconciliation and guarantee a better future for the next generation. That is there is a need to think for the future generation and do that which will save them from going

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through the bitter and harsh experience we are going through.

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