

The Way Forward for Ibibio People – A Tale of Two Floods

IPU's 2014 Congress Theme is: Ibibio – The Way Forward. I intend to use the responses to a similar disaster from two societies to highlight a way forward for Ibibio people.

In 2013 heavy rains resulted in severe floods in Uyo (Akwa Ibom State) and Austin (Texas, USA). The floods in both cities were about 2 or 3 months apart with the Austin flood happening at the end of October 2013. Pictures of the devastation of Uyo flood were posted on the Internet. Several members of the public in Akwa Ibom who support the current administration in the state were irate that such pictures were posted for the world to see. Other members of the public who remembered the boasts of this administration about building the best drainage system in Africa (at great expense I might add) wondered why the system did not work and if the monies expended were well spent. In a short while, as is usually the case with events in Nigeria, the Uyo flood was forgotten until it happened again this year.

On October 30 2013, I was in New York City visiting my kid when flash flood occurred in South Austin. So I monitored the event from afar. Many houses were destroyed. People had to be rescued from their rooftops. The scenes were on TV. Not a single person complained that the News Media did wrong in putting the pictures on TV and the Web for the world to see. What happened next has a lesson for Ibibio people as they try to choose a direction for the future.

It is expedient here to give a background that will elucidate why the response of Austin was different from that in Uyo. In the first decade of this century, the USA experienced historic disasters – Hurricanes Katrina and Ike being prime examples. When Ike hit the Texas coast, the population fled inland and thousands made their way to Austin. Austin had never in her history had to deal with such a large influx of refugees. The only organization with disaster relief experience was the Red Cross and they were overwhelmed. The government was totally unprepared. A lesson was learnt. That there would be another disaster in the future was not in doubt. The only question was knowing when it would happen and will the people, City and State Government be better prepared for such and eventuality?

Consider that a community's health is among the factors adversely affected by a disaster. The severity of the health effect is dependent on the type of disaster. If a fire burned down your house and you had been able to get out, your health effects are most likely to be psychological, unless you were breathing the toxic fumes from the fire. You could wear a mask while cleaning up after the fire. A flood is different. If one continues to inhabit the flooded house without a thorough disinfecting and drying of the insides of the building, mold and mildew grow and cause long term havoc to the residents' health. Consequently, a very rapid and thorough response is required after a flood. This fact was not lost on everyone.

Quietly, God put an idea in a private citizen's heart to prepare for the next disaster. After gestating for a few years the idea was actualized in 2009 and what we call the Austin Disaster Relief Network (ADRN) was born. The interesting thing that we must note here is that ADRN IS NOT government sponsored neither was it the idea of the government. It was a private citizen initiative to build an army of volunteers who would be trained and ready to respond in case of a disaster. You can visit them at www.adrntx.org.

ADRN has divided the City of Austin into several sectors. I am in charge of Sector 5. The members in each sector would take the lead if a disaster happened in their sector. The volunteers in ADRN are ALL from the churches in Austin. It is the Body of Christ in action. As soon as the information about the flood was known, ADRN sprang into action. Their volunteers went and helped victims clean their houses, contributed money to pay for temporary housing in hotels, buy food, helped re-build and furnish homes, provided shoulders for distraught people to lean on in their hour of need. In the process, in one family, a husband and a mother of one of the victims converted to Christianity and accepted Christ as their Savior. No government fund was used for this.

One more thing, the time to be prepared is before a disaster happens. So ADRN has developed command structures, manuals and conducts training sessions every month. They conduct disaster simulations twice a year. Other cities are now coming to ADRN to learn how to get their towns prepared for disasters. Even FEMA has sent observers to ADRN simulations.

At this point I note that there is a church in every other block in Akwa Ibom. What did ANY church do for the families and businesses in Uyo who were flooded? If NOTHING was done by ANY church, you are not representing Christ well. You are not winning any souls for Christ. If all you do is having your "prophets" prophesy political office terms for politicians that is not the business of Christ. So what should Ibibio people do now?

It is perfectly OK that it never occurred to anybody in Akwa Ibom to lift his or her finger to assist even one flood victim. Now you have learned what other people did in a similar situation. This example, I submit, is worthy of emulation. The people of Austin did not look for the government to do anything (eventually the government has offered to buy out the land in the area because of repeated floods so the residents can re-locate to a less flood prone area).

Permit me to go back a little in our history. During the Civil War, there was absolutely NO LEADERSHIP in Ibibio villages. One village at a moment's notice ran to the next as the war progressed. There was no grassroots effort at preparedness. Forty years prior, we were very forward looking, properly forecasting what we will need in the future in British ruled Nigeria. We made the right prescription for our future and stunned Nigeria by self-reliantly taxing ourselves and awarding

scholarships to our young men to study abroad. We need to go back to being self-reliant.

This write up targets two constituencies in Akwa Ibom. The first is the Christian community. This is nothing but a call to remembrance of what Apostle James wrote for us, to wit, that faith without works is dead. The Christians in Austin rose up to demonstrate their faith by rising to an occasion and helping those in need. Inherent in this recommendation to become organized to be our brothers' keepers is a benefit of a more peaceful, just and orderly society. Admittedly my bias informs me that this group (the true Christians – not the cash and carry type) are the most likely to heed the recommendation and put it into practice since no one will get paid here on earth, everyone would understand they are simply doing Christ's bidding.

The other target is the generality of secular Ibibio people. My hope is that these past 7 years has taught us unforgettable lessons. Political correctness that led us to entrusting our future to an enemy of our people should be history. The dereliction of duty by our traditional rulers who sold us out for pecuniary benefits must end. The traditional rulers must regain relevancy in our lives by pro-actively being responsible for security of lives in their domains. Crime must be expeditiously solved and justice swiftly administered. In secular terms, one could describe what Austin did as effective neighborhood watch, hence worthy of emulation by any group that desires to live in a peaceful society.

I see Ibibio way forward as follows:

- ✓ **Ibibio corporate wellbeing must always trump the wellbeing of individual Ibibio person.** We must never betray our people no matter the amount of money offered to induce such betrayal. Stomach infrastructure lasts at most for 24 hours.
- ✓ **We must be our brothers' keepers and do unto others as we would they do to us.** We must not cover up any crime.
- ✓ **We must realize that we should be self-reliant** (oil go finish oh!) and that WE are the government, not the occupant of the Hill Top Mansion.
- ✓ **Add your own recommendation for us to follow.**

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(Available for consultation on how to build Akwa Ibom State Disaster Relief Network).