

CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, OUR
COMMON RESPONSIBILITY.

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Your GRACE

Your LORDSHIPS

REV SISTERS

REV FATHERS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

The theme which you have chosen for this Tamale Ecclesiastical Province Pastoral Conference (TEPPCON) could not be more appropriate.

We live in the tropics. The tropics reward us with rich biodiversity and numerous opportunities for livelihoods. The 24 hr, 375 day-heat offers the most conducive environment for live to thrive – flora and fauna alike – especially when the rains fall. These are the resources that our people have harnessed, transformed, and utilized to sustain civilisations for millennia.

Ours in the north encompass the grassland/woodlands eco-systems. These ecosystems are the most propitious for the cultivation of grain, for unique species of tree products such as the shea, the dawadawa, the sinsibi, the ebony(the savannah grapes) and numerous others that offer food and medicinal properties, among others. The grasslands are where ruminants – domesticated and wild – and the domesticated wild bird – the guinea (black) thrive best. The rivers, have for generations been the source of fish and water for household use, and lately for our farms.

However, the ecosystems of the tropics are generally fragile – prone to extremes of rains and dryness, floods and desertification. The soils are shallow, easy to erode and need careful tendering. In our parts of the tropics, the fragilities are even more stark. We hang delicately between being more wooded and slipping into desertification. Grasslands are replaced with farmlands or settlements. Except for

the Northern Region to some extent, the tree cover has declined over the past 3 decades. Many streams have dried up and the wetlands on which animals once roamed and from which we pulled out mudfish when the rains came have disappeared.

In our settlements – villages, towns and cities - we have chopped down the trees, mowed away the grass and replaced them with cement concrete – adding heat to the heat. You only have to look down from the sky to see just how tree-less our settlements are, how we have covered ourselves with all that is hot – metal roofs and cement. Our schools, our hospitals, our places of worship could be more protected, fresher to inhabit with trees and grass but which we don't care to plant or protect. Our rivers are silting and drying up but we don't mind to protect their banks. Our germ plasm – the varieties of seeds and plants that preserve original genes pools – the sources of future technology and adaptation are disappearing.

Somehow we seem to have totally lost a feeling for nature and lost touch with nature. We are losing the very foundations of our existence and of our civilisations. It's from the grassland/woodland ecology that empires rose and fell – Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Mole-Dagbani and others. Our cultures – our food, our festivals, our clothing and family values are founded on our common existence on the Savannah eco-system.

Savannahs are the drivers of agricultural revolutions around the world – Brazil, India, Argentina, Thailand, Australia. Ours in Africa remain to be transformed but we cannot do this sustainably without a preservation culture.

It has not always been the case that as a people we are insensitive to our environment. Growing up, I recall communal efforts to desilt dug-outs, to protect marshlands, to plant trees around our schools, along the emerging roads and walkways. We lived under strict orders not to cut down trees, not to burn the farm waste, to plant elephant grass as boundary markers and many more. Communal labour to preserve the commons was part of our civic education growing up. Communal labour was after all an essential part of our culture already. We farmed in groups in merry-go-round manner; young people organized to farm for older people without children and fetch water for them. These were the foundations of our family values. We need to bring about some elements of this communal spirit.

The loss of sensitivity for nature seems to go hand in hand with the loss of empathy for our neighbor. Sadly, this personal and community level shift in our ethos also appears to mirror the shift in the attitude of the state towards the commons and the welfare of society.

Growing up in the 1960s and 70s our lives were shaped by 3 factors – the remnants of a relatively caring Nkrumaist state; a caring community that enabled children to find food in neighbours homes and a caring church that fed us through food aid and helped those of us who managed to qualify. These began to diminish in the late 70s and took a sharp turn for the worst in the 1980s period of structural adjustment programmes promoted by the international community aimed at ensuring that we would pay our debts. This latter period saw the prioritization of debt-servicing over nature and public service.

The 80s and 90s saw the most accelerated deforestation in our country as hundreds of thousands of hectares of land were stripped of their valuable timbers either to make room for mining or for export of raw wood. In this period, agriculture was neglected, except for the production of cocoa and palm oil, also for export.

The neglect of agriculture accelerated the migration of whole families from the north to the south, this time mostly to the urban slum settlements. This migration left public goods unattended and whatever remained valuable were extracted by hungry unemployed people, in the case of trees in the form of charcoal for the market or the burning of bushes for rodents as meat. This is also the period in which the fragile national consensus to prioritise the development of the north – expressed in the form of school feeding and education scholarships and the rapid construction of social infrastructure also collapsed, further contributing to the widening of inequalities. The attack on boarding schools and decline of school feeding are examples.

The 21st century has been dominated by the “private sector-led development paradigm”. This is fine when conditions permit for all to participate and compete—infrastructure; skills, markets, suitable urban population. Without these, the strategy can only exacerbate inequalities, as is the case. The data shows that over the last 20 years, north-south inequalities have worsened and the quality of life of the northerner is a fraction of the national average. A Northern Ghana Humn Development Report, to be published soon demonstrates this very clearly.

Something has to be done and done urgently not only to preserve life and cultures but to realise the potential for development that the Savannah offers to the country at large. To do so, action needs to be taken at a number of levels, including;

1. National

We have lost what existed as the national consensus, fragile as it was, that priority needs to be given to the development of northern Ghana. This has been the case already for a long time. SADA was meant to be an opportunity to renew this consensus. We know what went wrong. What we don't know is what went right with the SADA initiative. The case for the preferential attention to the north needs to be re-made afresh especially in these times. The case can be made in 4 ways: (i)moral – addressing poverty and suffering as a national objective; (ii) legal – the constitution and the SDGs say so and (iii) developmental: the future of agriculture, industrialization, water resources and energy reside in the north. (iv) Security

In making this case the establishment of the Development Authorities – the NDA to replace SADA – offer both opportunities and challenges. The Bills were passed almost unnoticed. There was hardly any input by important voices from the north. What can we shape the role of these authorities to restore consensus?

2 Policy Platform and Voice

We need an independent non-partisan platform to articulate our issues and build consensus. We need to move beyond the partisan divide. We need to make a case for the development of the north beyond an the NDC-NPP discourse. In the past, the Mole conferences provided the platform for discussing development and peace and security issues in the north. Should we revive the Mole Policy Series?

3. As a church, individuals and communities

We have to learn to value what nature offers us. This begins with preserving what we have. Can we use the power of moral outrage and peaceful protest to stop our rosewood, our shea trees and others from being extracted by powerful economic interests?

Individually and as a church we can plant trees around our schools, churches, houses, health institutions

We can re-ignite communal action to protect the commons – a church day for the desilting of dams, dugouts and the protection of riparian buffers.

4. Building solidarity

With others within the country; with international community: There is much sympathy, support and solidarity among international community in the situation of northern Ghana.

Some driven by the desire for caring world, others for fear of conflict and extremism that increasing poverty and the potential competition for declining natural resources can bring.

Conclusion

Your Lordships our society has changed. In many ways we have made great progress. To sustain it, even speed up what we have gained from sweat, we need to use what remains of our energy to bring along the young people into acting for the common good.

Questions

1. How can the church mobilise individuals and communities to undertake practical actions to preserve, defend and improve our environmental resources?
2. How can the church mobilise effective voice to influence government support for prioritizing development of the north?
3. How can the church mobilise national and international solidarity in support of the development of the north?
4. How can the church bring unity across tribes and communities across Northern Ghana?