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Friday, March 28, 2008

## Grange's Unhealthy Ministry and Pastor Living Water

By Reuben Abati

"**W**HAT is Professor Adenike Grange saying, the woman formerly known as Minister of Health, and now a guest of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)?"

"She resigned. Or rather, she and her Minister of State, Gabriel Aduku were directed by the President to resign, or be dismissed, for disobeying the President, and secondly, for supervising the misapplication of N300 million of unspent public funds in the Ministry of Health in December 2007".

"I know, I know those details. What I am interested in is what she is now saying. I read her statement, and I thought rather than show contrition, she was somewhat cheeky".

"Be careful. That Madam is 68 years old. A distinguished Professor of Paediatrics and certainly, one person who had a real chance of standing out in the Yar'Adua Government".

"Which, in fact, makes her case, a Greek tragedy. And it is a pity that she does not seem to understand what has happened to her?"

"How?"

"You take a look at her resignation statement which the papers have published. She says she accepts responsibility, but not the blame. Meaning what? She says her resignation is not an admission of guilt but rather a path of honour; Empty play on words if you ask me. What is clear is that a prima facie case of corruption has been established against her. For someone of her status, this is a tragedy already. She is leaving office in disgrace."

"But let's get something straight. She insists that she did not collect the N7 or N10 million she was offered as her share of the loot".

"So, she was aware that money was she being shared?"

"The point is that she did not share out of the loot. And I believe in her statement, she complained about the level of decay and corruption within the Ministry and the whole Nigerian system".

"I see. I didn't know she is also a Pastor. I don't like public officials grunbling and passing the buck. She was made Minister of Health so she could help set standards in the ministry and deliver service. If she went in there, and blew her chance, the only thing she should offer, first and foremost, is an apology. I'm sorry. I failed. I

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disappointed you all. Simple."

"The woman is a professional, she says she is not into the culture of politics and intrigues."

"Let her say that to the EFCC or to the courts."

"I think you are a bit harsh. This is a woman who has distinguished herself as a paediatrician saving the lives of women and children and who has made notable contributions in the field of maternal and child health. President of the International Paediatric Association, and an active member of The Partnership for maternal, newborn and child health."

"Is that what the EFCC is investigating? Who is doubting her credentials as a professional? What is being questioned is her leadership ability and her integrity?"

"I think she is just unfortunate. The truth is that public service is a rather slippery terrain for professionals. This is not so much about Professor Nike Grange but about the Nigerian system. The matter really goes beyond her. You'd recall that she had also made the point that she was misled by the civil servants."

"Every political appointee who makes a mistake is forever quick to blame the civil servants. This is Patricia Etteh all over again. Mrs. Etteh also blamed the civil servants around her. And only recently, Dr. Olusegun Agagu, Governor of Ondo State, while giving account of his stewardship as Minister of Power and Steel before the House Committee on Power which is probing the \$16 billion scam in the power sector said it was not his duty to check if contracts were being awarded to ghost companies or not. He too blamed the civil servants."

"But you know the Nigerian civil service is rotten."

"I agree. And I think it is a good thing that all the Directors, the Chief Accountant and the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health under Adenike Grange are all being questioned."

"It is really a comment on the Nigerian system. There is an established culture of money sharing at all levels of government. And what perfect time to share money than December, the end of the year, under the cover of Christmas bonus".

"Civil servants are not entitled to Christmas bonus. There is no such thing. In this particular case, what we are dealing with is the abuse of privilege, and subversion of due process. Every December 15, Ministries are required to stop all further expenditures. By December 30, they are required, according to existing rules to make returns to the Presidency, to give an outline of budget performance for the year ending. Whatever monies remain unspent are to be returned."

"Yes. In December 2007, President Yar'Adua gave such a directive."

"That rule has always been there. Yar'Adua didn't invent it".

"But it was not observed in the past. Ministers and their civil servants simply found ways of sharing whatever was left."

"In the case of this unhealthy development in the Ministry of Health, the Minister and her people disobeyed the President and flouted the regulations. Two, no Minister can approve money above the limit of N50 million, but Grange and Co. found a way of spreading N300 million on phoney contracts and gifts to themselves and others. Tell me, what has that got to do with being

a professional?"

"The Senate Committee on Health, chaired by Senator Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello, the former First Daughter, also received a gift of N10 million from the Ministry of Health. The House of Reps Committee on Health also got a gift of N10 million."

"Some Senators are saying this is in order."

"Well, I don't think so. How can the legislature perform its oversight functions if it is always collecting gifts or receiving sponsorships for seminars etc from the same government departments it is expected to monitor? Something is not quite right there."

"Baba's daughter keeps showing up in the news for all the wrong reasons. First, the Schneider controversy. Then, VAMED. And now, this unhealthy thing from the Ministry of Health."

"What is really curious is that the Ministry of Health spent N300 million on frivolous things: furniture, security device, generator, smoke detectors, fire extinguisher. If the money had been used to build a hospital, to buy drugs, or to provide some useful service in pursuit of the original functions of government, I would be the first to defend Professor Grange. But to sign away public funds on phoney contracts and to approve the distribution of gifts and now claim that you are blameless, that's pitiable."

"One thing though. The investigation of the abuse of public funds should be system - wide."

"You are quoting the Action Congress."

"No. I am expressing my own view. Because in matters like this, it is easy to turn a few persons into scapegoats. This thing is not just about the Ministry of Health. The Ministry of Health is in the news only because some aggrieved persons blew the whistle. Are there other Ministries where money was shared? Are there other National Assembly committees whose members collected kickbacks from Federal Ministries.? There are questions to which President Yar'Adua should demand answers."

"The worst that would happen is that the whole thing would be swept under the carpet. Very soon, everyone will forget. Including the media."

"And it'd be business as usual, again."

"It is a crazy country. I know. Here, anything and everything is possible."

"Look at the comedy of errors, in the aviation sector, for example, over the disappearance of Beechcraft 1900D belonging to Wings Aviation Limited."

"Which I hear is owned by a certain former Governor."

"The way the authorities have been mealy-mouthing over the disappearance of the Aircraft mid-air, between Lagos and Obudu airstrip makes me feel like having instant hypertension."

"By all means, please do. It's good for you."

"Hypertension good for you. I be I dey craze?"

"Sorry. Try a heart attack then. That'd be better."

"Look. I am serious. First they said they had found the aircraft."

Twenty-four hours later, the Ministry of Aviation and the Civil Aviation Authority then came around to say that they were misled. It is about 13 days now, and there is absolutely no trace of the aircraft."

"Some people are saying may be there is now a Bermuda Triangle around the Obudu Cattle Ranch."

"That is silly talk. The truth is that in this country we cannot manage emergencies or accidents. Our air transportation system belongs to another century in a remote period. The Obudu Cattle Ranch is a major tourist destination and yet the Obudu airstrip does not have a radar system."

"The entire country does not have an efficient radar system. Many of our airports don't even have runway lights, or well-equipped control towers. Why won't a plane vanish into thin air, mid-flight?"

"But I read a story indicating that planes also disappear in other countries.."

"Is that the irresponsible propaganda the Ministry of Aviation is peddling instead of doing something about this mysterious aircraft?"

"No. I think they are doing something to be fair to them. All the villagers around the Obudu Cattle Ranch for example, are being mobilised to scout the area for any crashed aircraft. They say it is the trekking method of search and rescue. People are being asked to trek all the way to Cameroun, if possible."

"Thirteen days after the aircraft disappeared like a needle!"

"Herdsman have also been taken to the area. The government is counting on their skills as nonads."

"I believe they should also involve the local hunters."

"Really everybody is involved in the big search for the missing aircraft. Housewives, artisans, even old men in retirement who can still move their limbs. The Cross River State Government is offering a reward of N47 million."

"Kai. Africans!"

"But you know, it is possible no aircraft is actually missing. This may just be an insurance claim gambit. Or something worse."

"I won't put anything beyond our people. But the bigger issue is the lack of capacity. When the Bellview plane crashed in 2005, five minutes after taking off from the Murtala Muhammed Airport, you'd recall the authorities first went on a wild goose chase to Ilorin. It took ordinary villagers and an AIT television crew to locate the aircraft, not too far away from the airport."

"When I reflect on all of this, I think what we really need is a strong intelligence gathering system. Many of the problems we face can be prevented by a functional national security system like the FBI in the United States."

"But the FBI was there and there was 9/11? We have the SSS. We have the NIA."

"I beg."

"Well, if the SSS had been up and doing, perhaps they would have been able to prevent the killing and maiming of innocent children in that school in Ibadan, where a wall collapsed and a school

compound made up of sheds and iron sheets fell like a pack of cards."

"Living Water Nursery and Primary School, Olomi, Ibadan, owned by Pastor Living Waters."

"Pathetic."

"That is what you get in a country where public officials are busy sharing money instead of providing service. The international price of crude oil is over \$100 per barrel, and yet Nigeria has nothing to show for this."

"At Pastor Living Water's private school, the children pay N1,500 per term. I guess the parents of those children patronise the private school because the public schools are worse."

"The State Police Command first announced that 13 pupils died, then we were later told that only two children died."

"Only two?"

"Yes only two, they said."

"I give up."

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