The Church and National Development in Nigeria: A Historical Survey

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Abstract	This historical survey looks at the many-sided roles of the church in national development in Nigeria, ranging from education and health to politics and social services. The influence of the Church, tracing from the colonial era when missionary activities originally provided the foundation for Western-type education and health infrastructures to the post-colonial period when it played a key role in shaping national leaders and encouraging moral governance, is traced. The methodology employs a qualitative historical analysis, utilising primary and secondary sources such as missionary records, archival documents, and academic literature. Through institutions like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the church speaks out for political justice, peace, and national cohesion. It has equally been at the forefront of alleviating poverty and social inequality, contributing to nation-building through its charitable initiatives and the establishment of hospitals and schools. The challenges of modern times range from the commercialisation of religion to tensions between different religious groups, which most often make it quite hard for the church to effectively take on its role in fostering national unity. It is still growing in its role, with an ever-increasing incorporation of SDGs in the church's ministries contributing to social justice, gender equality, and sustainable development. The survey has, therefore, emphasised the continued relevance of the church's role in resolving biting social problems in Nigeria and offers reflections on its prospects for national development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The church has contributed immensely to national development in Nigeria, especially in education, healthcare, politics, and even social justice (Asadu, 2021; Ukpe & Gbinde, 2022; Nwoko, 2023; Aluko, 2020; Adeleye & Aluko, 2024). Since their final introduction into the country in the 19th century, Christian missionaries have played a major role in the change of societies. Initially, these missionaries introduced formal Western education, establishing some of the first schools in Nigeria (Fafunwa, 1974). These organisations facilitated literacy acquisition and contributed to developing Nigeria's initial leadership, yielding numerous nationalists who advocated for the nation's independence (Ajah, 2015). By creating missionary hospitals, the church's involvement in healthcare tackled major public health issues, especially in rural regions where government engagement was scarce. In addition to these contributions, the church's moral standing has impacted Nigerian political dynamics, as church leaders have championed justice, effective governance, and social fairness (see Onuorah, 2024). The wide-reaching influence of the church testifies to its significant role in shaping development in Nigeria, making the subject necessary for research to understand the country's socio-political evolution.

These are from the colonial era, when the Christian missionaries first brought about Western education and health facilities to the present era when the church is still contributing towards nation-building in its advocacy and social welfare programmes. This present study looks at those points in history where changes may have occurred: the colonial era, the immediate post-independence years, and the current era of democratic rule. Each phase reflects the different roles of the church concerning the challenges facing Nigerian society. The main objectives of this historical examination are to discuss how the church relates to four key domains of public life: education, health, politics, and social justice. Within the education sector, the church created Western-style educational institutions that formed the basis of Nigeria's education system. Prestigious institutions like the CMS Grammar School, Lagos, founded in 1859, became the breeding ground for future leadership in Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Missionary hospitals like the Sacred Heart Hospital in Abeokuta, founded in 1895, introduced modern medical care to many Nigerians, particularly in rural communities (Ayandele, 1966). Politically, the church has shaped the moral discourse of governance, with Christian leaders often calling for transparency and justice. For example, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has been advocating for electoral reforms and human rights (Nmah, 2012). In terms of social justice, the church has played a major role in poverty reduction through various programmes put in place to

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improve conditions among poor and marginalised communities. The purpose of this study is to document and analyse these contributions in a way that highlights the church's continued relevance within Nigerian society. The methodology employs a qualitative historical analysis, utilising primary and secondary sources such as missionary records, archival documents, and academic literature.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. *The Church and Education in the Colonial Era*

Although an attempt at its introduction in the 15th century did not succeed, Christianity was well established in Nigeria through the earnest efforts of European and American missionaries by the 19th century, marking the beginning of a serious transformation in the country's social and educational system. The first wave of missionaries, who were primarily from Britain, had two functions: to spread Christianity and to provide education opportunities (Fajana, 1972; Fafunwa, 1974; Amadi, 1977; Asadu, 2021). According to Taylor (1984), it was a fact that schools were opened in Calabar before churches were built in appreciation of the place of education alongside the Christianisation process. Prominent organisations, including the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS), the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention of the United States of America, and the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM), were pivotal in the establishment of educational institutions that would eventually form the basis for Western education in Nigeria (Ubah, 1988; Bassey, 1991; Ezegwu & Okoye, 2024).

The establishment of primary schools marked the beginning of missionary school establishments, which were important in providing primary education to the people. The CMS, for example, established the first primary school in Nigeria, at Badagry, Lagos, as early as 1843, setting the pace for the rapid expansion of primary education throughout the region. The RCM then followed suit and opened primary schools in all parts of southern Nigeria. The following are some of the famous ones: St. Mary's School, Lagos, and Holy Child College, Ibadan. These early schools provided basic education such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as Christian religious knowledge, thus making sure that literacy and moral training went hand in hand (Amadi, 1977).

These missionary-run educational institutions thus provided the base upon which a literate elite, later to play important roles in the country's political and intellectual

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development, was created. The CMS Grammar School, Lagos, founded in 1859, was the first secondary school in Nigeria and served as a model for other schools that were established later. Other schools at the secondary level, such as St. Gregory's College (1928), St. Finbarr's College (1956), and Methodist Boys' High School (1878), were also established by the church to join in this important work of education. These schools not only taught subjects like English, Mathematics, and History but also imparted Christian values and ethics, shaping their students' social and moral outlook (Ayandele, 1966; Amadi, 1977; Chukwuma, 2022).

Many key nationalist leaders in Nigeria, like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Herbert Macaulay, had their roots in missionary educational institutions. The knowledge and skills they acquired helped them to engage with the colonial powers and advance the cause of Nigeria's independence. Values inherent in the Christian-based education that they received among which were issues of justice, equality, and human dignity-significantly influenced their politics and methods. For example, Azikiwe enrolled in CMS Central School before advancing his studies overseas, subsequently emerging as an essential leader in the movement for Nigeria's independence (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This group of leaders constituted the foundation of the educated elite that advocated for self-governance, utilising the principles acquired from missionary educational establishments.

In addition to cultivating political figures, missionary educational institutions played a significant role in the development of a professional class in Nigeria by generating educators, medical practitioners, legal professionals, and public administrators who would assume crucial positions in the nascent independent state (Ikegbusi, Chigbo-Okeke & Modebelu, 2016). By the early 20th century, a considerable number of alumni from these educational institutions commenced assuming roles within the colonial administration, thereby aiding the modernisation of Nigeria's public sector and the dissemination of governance modelled after Western practices. Consequently, the church, via its educational initiatives, played a crucial role in forming a substantial portion of the intellectual and professional framework that underpinned Nigeria's evolution from a colonial territory to an autonomous nation (Imam, 2012; Asadu, 2021).

This has been the enduring legacy of missionary schools, now modern Nigeria, where many of its most prominent primary and secondary schools still retain a tremendous legacy from their founding through Christian missions. Such schools stimulated personality development, ethical values, and social service that have continued to shape Nigeria's educational philosophy and national development to this

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day. The church played a pivotal role in education throughout the colonial period, facilitating access to Western knowledge while significantly shaping the social and political awareness that propelled Nigeria's independence movement (Imam, 2012; Asuquo, 2018). Consequently, the effects of these initial missionary educational initiatives persist in Nigeria's educational system and social organisation, highlighting the church's lasting importance in the nation's historical narrative.

2.2. Nation-Building and Moral Influence in the Post-Colonial Era

During the post-colonial era, the Church significantly affected Nigeria's political affairs, particularly through its influence on the formative leaders of the country and through its continued involvement in the affairs that contributed to nation-building. Key individuals like Nnamdi Azikiwe, who attended Holy Trinity School and Christ Church School; Obafemi Awolowo, who attended Baptist Boys' High School and Wesley College; and other key leaders after independence were greatly influenced by their Christian background and the education they received at missionary schools. They internalised the Christian principles of justice, service, and compassion into political ideologies and behaviours. The ethical dimension within which their leadership was primarily moulded emanated from the church's teachings and insisted on the concerns of serving others and working for the solidarity of communities. For instance, Obafemi Awolowo, a devout Christian and one of the greatest sons of Nigeria was always quick to refer to his Christian teachings as the basis of his inspiration toward welfare policies and governance (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Ogaleye & Vaaseh, 2024). His programmes related to free education and healthcare in the Western Region reflected his belief in the Christian duty toward those in need.

These Christian doctrines, especially those touching on justice, equity, and moral accountability, shaped the very foundational governance and political principles of post-independence Nigeria. Ukpe & Gbinde, 2022 Drawing from their Christian education, leaders such as Azikiwe and Awolowo sought to institute policies reflecting fairness and collective responsibility – the very spirit of Christianity. For example, Azikiwe preached the message of national unity and peaceful coexistence. This was in agreement with the Christian teaching on forgiveness and reconciliation. The impact of the church was evident in the tone of the political discourse at the early stages of independence, which was dominated by the ethical atmosphere. Indeed, many leaders envisioned a Nigeria where the government would apply the principle of stewardship, upheld by Christianity, to prioritise the good of their people. This is especially evident

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in policies on education, healthcare, and economic development, where the government sought to uplift the masses and give them all equal opportunity.

Throughout the Nigerian Civil War, which occurred from 1967 to 1970, the church assumed a significant position in promoting national cohesion and alleviating the severe consequences of the conflict (Adu, Nwachukwu & Osadola, 2018). As Nigeria plunged into civil strife after the Eastern Region's secession (Biafra), the church became an essential participant in advocating for peace and reconciliation (von Rütte, 2016). The religious leaders from different denominations, most especially those from the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, were able to engage with the embattling sides for the curbing of bloodshed. But even though CAN came into existence as late as 1976, that is, after the war, it is a culmination of an earlier ecumenism on the part of Christian movements which shared this vision that religious communities do have a moral duty to contribute to peacemaking. Churches across the country provided humanitarian assistance to victims of the war, particularly in the Eastern Region, where millions faced starvation and displacement (Ede, 2018). The church alleviates the humanitarian crisis by offering relief through food, medicine, and shelter, and exemplifies Christian teachings on compassion and charity.

After the war, the church has been the key player in Nigeria's post-war healing and national cohesion efforts (von Rütte, 2016). In acknowledging the deep rifts that the war has brought, Christian leaders have called for forgiveness and reconciliation. Indeed, the church initiated different programmes to fix the psychological damage of war for the citizens to begin to see themselves as one despite racial and regional differences and work together for the common good. In the Eastern Region, the peaceful solution was opined to be the course of action by all players involved and the church has firmly expressed itself as an agent of peace for the society at large. It is also worth mentioning how the church, which had been famous for peace, organised the rehabilitation of the ex-combatants as the government, which offered spiritual and social services to the affected areas, provided temporal material relief (Falola, 1999). The influence of the church, which managed to supersede the ethnic and regional no-go areas, was decisive in the early post-war period. It was the only unifying instrument in that shattered environment.

The post-colonial period can be seen as a time when the church took on a profound moral role in Nigeria's nation-building process. Through its influence on the early leaders, its activities during the Nigerian Civil War, and its participation in post-war reconciliation, the church has played a key role in shaping Nigeria's political values and fostering national unity. The Christian teachings of justice, forgiveness, and

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service to others became the moral reference point for many of the nation's policies, and the church's ongoing efforts to ensure peace and reconciliation have permanently impacted Nigerian society. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to ignore the negative roles being played by some of the churches, especially those churches in the East. Oyeweso, who is of a contrary point of view to the one expressed above, writes: "The church boldly supported the Biafran Government and even set up a ready line of communication between the church authorities and the grassroots" (Oyeweso, 1990: 406). This shows that while some churches advocated for a united Nigeria, others supported her division. Not minding this, it will still be good to note that the church in general also comes to aid the people with relief and development assistance. For example, the Christian Africa Relief Agency of Nigeria launched a Government Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, which conducted relief operations in the areas most affected by the war (Oyeweso, 1990).

2.3. The Church's Contribution to Healthcare and Social Services

The church's contribution to healthcare and social services in Nigeria goes beyond establishing institutions; it is a system that has been helming the country's development in key areas, specifically where the government has failed. All through the pre and post-colonial period, the church remains the vehicle of hope in providing essential services, especially in the remote and underprivileged countryside. The far-reaching impact of church-supported healthcare programmes and social services still appears in the Nigerian community, which directly takes on challenges of poverty and inequality, and provides essential services (Onukwuba, 2022; Alozie, 2024).

Organised hospitals like Sacred Heart Hospital in Abeokuta the Catholic Mission founded in 1895 and St. Luke's Hospital in Anua by the Anglican Church are the earliest modern hospitals in Nigeria. In many places throughout the colonial era, especially in rural areas, government healthcare was either non-existent or very limited. This gap was filled by missionary groups, who offered desperately needed medical assistance. These missionary medical centres, which were frequently founded and operated by European missionaries, addressed maternity and child health—a crucial area with high rates of maternal and infant mortality—as well as common and tropical diseases (Ayandele, 1966). These church-run hospitals greatly enhanced the general health of the country by providing many Nigerians with their first introduction to Western medicine.

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Aside from the medical services provided by missionary hospitals, they also piloted health education among the Nigerian population (Adu-Gyamfi, Kuusaana, Darkwa & Tomdi, 2020). The churches took the lead in educating the public about hygiene, sanitation, and preventive medicine, which were essential in the fight against maladies. With endeavours like immunisation drives and public health education, the church not only cut the number of communicable diseases but also boosted the general health of citizens (Muhammad, Abdulkareem & Chowdhury, 2017; Aluko, 2022; 2023). The church is also to be given credit for founding nursing and midwifery schools, for example, those associated with Methodist and Anglican hospitals, which trained the next generation of our local healthcare workers. The very institutions have secured the position of Nigerians as key players in their healthcare system, the result of which is the reduction in foreign medical personnel in their country.

Expansion of the Nigerian health system occurred after independence, but church-run facilities were still operational, many times, in cooperation with government programmes. Government hospitals' establishment may have taken place, even so, the church-run hospitals, particularly in disadvantaged areas where the government is not present, have remained relevant (Stock, 1985). Many of these hospitals have been in operation for some time, and have been forced to keep pace with the changing healthcare landscape by offering specialist services like these types of surgeries, maternal health care, and HIV/AIDS treatment. The good reputation these hospitals have gained together with their practice of offering affordable and sometimes free services to the poor has made them an integral part of the Nigerian healthcare system. Sacred Heart Hospital, to give an example, still acts as one of the most important medical facilities in Ogun State, providing general medical services and specialised care.

One aspect that has been pretty much parallel is the church's dominant spot in the field of social services. The Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Catholic Church has been leading the way in the fields of social justice and poverty reduction. JDPC, using the system of dioceses to run every programme, addresses the issue of poverty by providing microfinance opportunities, technical support to small-scale farmers, and vocational training for women without jobs (Ogunyemi, Adisa & Adenuga, 2020). Throwing light on these projects, JDPC has made people and communities independent from the poverty cycle and therefore, they have become part of the development at the grassroots level. JDPC also stands for the rights of human beings to enjoy justice and equal chances regardless of their origin, just to

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mention a few such as women, children, and people who have different ethnic backgrounds (Ogunyemi et al., 2020).

Aside from the Catholic Church, other Christian denominations have been spotlighted in bringing social services forward. The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) through its charity operation has been a key influencer in numerous efforts in poverty relief and community development through initiatives such as Christian Social Responsibility (CSR). These are food distribution programmes, healthcare outreach in rural and urban areas, and educational scholarships for children from low-income families (Fehintolu, Atuluku & Eleojo, 2018). Taking part in the evangelism alongside the church is the RCCG's "Fish Farmer" initiative, which provides free medical check-ups, food supplies, and other aid to disadvantaged communities across Nigeria. Furthermore, the church's Habitation of Hope cares for street children, offering them shelter, education, and rehabilitation (https://faadeboye.com/ministries/habitation-of-hope/). Thus, by motivating the idea of human dignity, the RCCG is a collection of the integral mission of the church to satisfy the needs of individuals and the community.

Equally, the Rural Health Services (RHS) of Sudan United Mission/Nigeria Reformed Church and the Deeper Christian Life Ministry have taken part in many medical and social activities. These churches and many others are mostly known for their medical and social outreach programmes that offer free medical care and food supplies to the underprivileged (https://www.ccih.org/faith-based-organizations-providing-health-care-in-nigeria/, Tyokua, 2024). These programmes are frequently put in rural areas where services are generally below standard. The provision of healthcare and educational support at no cost has been instrumental in the improvement of the chances for employment among many Nigerians, especially those below the poverty line (Ngwoke, 2018).

Poverty alleviation is another area of the Church's intervention. Moreover, the church has been to the point of being in various disasters. Church organisations have been in a situation to help during national crises such as floods, insurgency-affected communities, and other natural disasters in poorer countries. Not infrequently, with its extensive network, the church has been able to mobilise resources much quicker than the government administrations. Thus, it will be able to send out relief items for food, clothes, medical care, and house construction (Adebote, 2023). This instantaneous response capacity is one of the important things that could reveal the church organisations' efficiency and grassroots significance, often more involved in the community than government institutions.

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Furthermore, the church has been a consistent advocate for marginalised populations, including widows, orphans, and people living with disabilities (Nwabuisi, 2021). Numerous denominations run orphanages, rehabilitation centres, and shelters for the homeless (see Emmanuel, 2017). The Anglican Communion, for instance, has established several homes for the elderly and orphanages that provide not only care but also education and skill training to help these vulnerable groups reintegrate into society (see Adetunmbi et al., 2024). These initiatives have had long-term impacts that offer opportunities for individuals to lead productive and dignified lives.

In addition, many churches have reprogrammed through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within their projects that set goals to which their poverty alleviation activities are to be measured against the global ones. Rather than being confined to charitable causes, this extension has made possible a holistic approach where the priority is to alleviate poverty, then to make sure that rural communities are economically stable and finally, to explore sustainable development methods (Iyayi & Obani, 2021). Additionally, the Anglican Communion has placed its resource allocation towards agricultural development as a remedy for food security and poverty (Alokwu, 2009). Apart from showing newer technologies and the transfer of new agricultural resources to them, the church has also enabled several outlying villages to be self-sustaining.

2.4. The Church's Role in Politics and Governance

The church has throughout its history been both a regulating and a formative element of the political life of Nigeria, with moral and social importance often used by it to criticise the government's violations of human rights and other abuses of power. This way, the church has pursued the goal of being deeply worried about not only the conservative character of the church in society but also moral leadership. The fact is that the church has neutrally conformed itself alongside the upright and has also taken notice not to be hijacked by the wrong issues (Jatau & Maza, 2023; Onuorah, 2024).

The church's moral authority in Nigerian politics is rooted in its ability to address social issues concerning ethics and justice, drawing on Christian teachings that emphasise integrity and accountability (Ukpe & Gbinde, 2022). This moral framework enables church leaders to speak out on various political issues, often urging adherence to democratic principles and human rights. For instance, prominent clerics such as Bishop Matthew Kukah and Pastor Enoch Adeboye, Bishop David Oyedepo and a host

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of others have been pivotal in shaping public discourse on governance. These leaders have consistently called for transparency, good governance, and respect for human rights, holding political leaders accountable for their actions (Omosor, 2019; Oladosu, Aluko & Idowu, 2024). The church's moral authority allows it to challenge governmental decisions and advocate for the marginalised, thereby positioning itself as a voice of conscience in the political arena.

The Christian Association of Nigeria has been crucial in the church's political engagement. Established in 1976, CAN serves as an umbrella organisation for various Christian denominations and has been instrumental in addressing the nation's political issues. CAN has often mobilised Christian communities to advocate for political change, emphasising the importance of participation in democratic processes (Olorunnimbe, 2020). The organisation has taken a firm stance on issues such as electoral integrity, advocating for free and fair elections. By fostering civic responsibility among Christians, CAN reinforces the idea that faith should be integral to public life, encouraging believers to engage in politics actively (Enwerem, 2013). Also, the organisation has always been at the forefront of advocating for the secularity of the country against one religion being favoured against another. According to Keke (cited in Ottuh & Oghenevwede, 2021), the clearest illustration of CAN's political achievement occurred in 1986, when its ultimatum prompted Nigeria's military government to rethink its decision to join the Organisation of Islamic Conference. There is no better confirmation of CAN's recent political audacity and rise to national prominence than when CAN speaks, even the military administration listens (Ottuh & Oghenevwede, 2021).

Church advocacy against corruption and human rights abuses has also been a significant aspect of its political role (Iheaka, Nwankwor & Kalu, 2022). Many church leaders have criticised government policies and actions that perpetuate corruption, social injustice, and human rights violations. The church has conducted campaigns to raise awareness of corruption's detrimental effects on national development. For example, in 2012, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria published a pastoral letter condemning corruption and urging citizens to demand accountability from their leaders (Pates, 2012). This advocacy extends beyond mere condemnation; church organisations have organised seminars and public forums to educate congregants about their rights and the importance of accountability in governance. In 1979, the same Catholic Bishops campaigned for the proper use of one's vote as an exercise of patriotism and piety and as a need for the citizens to vote conscientiously and

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purposefully in choosing the most suitable leaders and support of publicly beneficial policies (Ituma & Asogwa, 2017).

The church's involvement during Nigeria's transition to democracy in the late 1990s was particularly notable. In the lead-up to the 2019 elections, various church leaders played a crucial role in promoting peace and stability amidst political tensions. Recognising the potential for violence during this critical period, the church organised prayer rallies and peace initiatives fostering unity among ethnic and religious groups (Ajiambo, 2019). The church's efforts contributed to a peaceful transition, marking a significant turning point in Nigeria's political history.

In prior and subsequent elections, the church has engaged actively in the political process, encouraging its members to vote and participate in governance (Ituma & Asogwa, 2017). Church leaders often use their platforms to educate congregants about the importance of their civic duties, including the need for integrity and moral judgment when choosing leaders. For instance, during the 2019 elections, many church leaders emphasised the need for Christians to vote based on character and integrity rather than ethnicity or religious affiliation. This emphasis on moral discernment reflects the church's commitment to promoting good governance and ethical leadership (Uwalaka, Nwala & Amadi, 2020).

2.5. *The Church's Role in Politics and Governance*

Like many institutions, the church in Nigeria faces various challenges in its continued engagement with national development. One of the most significant contemporary issues is the increasing commercialisation of religion, particularly within the Pentecostal movement. The rise of Pentecostalism in Nigeria has been marked by a shift in focus toward prosperity gospel teachings, which emphasise material wealth as a sign of divine favour. This trend has raised concerns about the church's moral authority, as it prioritises financial success over spiritual and social values. Critics argue that the commercialisation of religion has contributed to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals, as some churches encourage large financial donations in exchange for promises of personal and economic prosperity (Gifford, 2004; Diara, Onukwufor & Uroko, 2020; Adabembe, 2024). This shift has sparked debates within Christian circles about the church's mission and responsibility to address broader societal challenges, such as poverty and inequality.

In addition to commercialisation, inter-religious tensions between Christians and Muslims continue to pose a challenge to national unity in Nigeria. Religious conflicts,

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particularly in northern Nigeria, have often escalated into violence, contributing to political instability and social fragmentation. These tensions are rooted in historical, political, and economic factors but are mostly framed as religious conflicts, exacerbating division between Nigeria's two major religious groups (Aluko, 2024). The church and other religious institutions have been called upon to foster peace and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. Despite efforts by organisations such as CAN and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) to promote interfaith dialogue, deep-seated mistrust and occasional outbreaks of violence continue to strain relationships between these communities (Omotosho, 2014). The church's advocacy for peace and tolerance remains critical, but it must navigate complex political and cultural dynamics to contribute to national unity (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

The church is also evolving in addressing contemporary social issues such as poverty, gender inequality, and environmental sustainability. Many churches, particularly those affiliated with global networks, have increasingly incorporated poverty alleviation programmes into their ministries. These programmes provide vocational training, education, and microfinance initiatives to empower marginalised communities. For instance, the Catholic Church in Nigeria has long been involved in providing social services; and Pentecostal churches like the RCCG, Living Faith Church, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries and so on, have expanded their charity work to include feeding programmes, healthcare outreach, and housing assistance. This reflects a growing awareness within the church of the need to address the spiritual needs, and economic and social challenges facing their congregants and the wider population.

Gender inequality is another critical issue that the church is beginning to confront more directly. Historically, many Nigerian churches have upheld traditional patriarchal values that limited the roles of women in both religious and social leadership. However, contemporary trends indicate a gradual shift toward greater gender inclusivity within church leadership and programmes. For example, some denominations have started to ordain women and involve them in high-level decision-making processes (Ojo & Ajani, 2024). Additionally, church ministries are increasingly focusing on women's empowerment, addressing issues such as domestic violence, education for girls, and women's economic independence. These developments signify a growing recognition of the church's role in promoting gender equality as part of its social mission, aligning with broader global movements for women's rights (Onyenze & Ebebe, 2024).

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Integrating SDGs into church ministries is another contemporary trend that reflects the church's evolving role in national development. Many Nigerian churches, particularly those with international affiliations, have adopted the SDGs as part of their outreach and social justice missions. Churches are increasingly engaging in programmes that align with specific SDGs, such as eradicating hunger, promoting quality education, ensuring access to clean water and sanitation, and fostering environmental sustainability. For example, some churches have launched initiatives to combat climate change by promoting tree planting and advocating for renewable energy solutions. In this way, the church has begun aligning its social mission with global development agendas, recognising that addressing poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation is integral to national development and fulfilling Christian ethical obligations (Saint, 2023; Benjamin, 2023).

However, challenges remain in fully integrating these goals into the broader church landscape, as many churches, particularly smaller or rural congregations, may lack the resources or capacity to implement large-scale development programmes. Additionally, there is ongoing debate within the church about the extent to which it should involve itself in political and social issues, with some factions advocating for a more traditional focus on spiritual matters. Nonetheless, the increasing involvement of the church in addressing contemporary challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, and sustainability marks a significant shift in its role in Nigerian society.

While the church plays a crucial role in Nigerian national development, it faces numerous challenges, including the commercialisation of religion, inter-religious tensions, and the need to adapt to contemporary social issues such as poverty, gender inequality, and sustainability. The church's evolving engagement with these issues, particularly through integrating SDGs into its ministries, demonstrates its potential to contribute to Nigeria's spiritual and social transformation. However, the church must continue to navigate these challenges with sensitivity and a renewed focus on its ethical and moral responsibilities.

3. CONCLUSION

The church has played a critical role in Nigeria's national development, making substantial contributions to education, healthcare, and politics while also addressing pressing societal concerns including poverty and social justice. Historically, missionary schools and hospitals established the groundwork for Western education and basic medical care, particularly in disadvantaged rural areas. The church has

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affected political discourse through organisations such as CAN, where it advocates for ethical government, democracy, and peace. In recent years, the church has taken up current challenges, including SDGs in its ministries and fostering gender inclusion and interfaith dialogue to create understanding in a diverse community. Despite issues such as the commercialisation of religion and inter-religious disputes, the church remains a fundamental agent of transformation, with enormous potential to promote justice, peace, and equitable development, moulding a more inclusive and cohesive Nigeria.

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