

## THE GROWTH OF CHURCHES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: A SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

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### Abstract

*Church growth in contemporary Nigeria has emerged as one of the most striking features of the nation's socio-political and economic environment. The proliferation of Christian ministries and congregations reflects both spiritual dynamism and societal discontent, yet it coexists with entrenched corruption, political instability, and economic fragility. This study investigates the paradox of expanding religious institutions amid persistent national decline, seeking to understand the historical, social, and economic forces that have shaped this phenomenon. Using a histo-sociological and philosophical approach, the research traces church development across key historical phases from colonial and pre-independence foundations to the post-independence decades and the present era. The analysis draws on socio-political philosophy, particularly Hobbesian concepts of order and authority, to evaluate the stabilizing role of churches in times of crisis. Findings reveal that church growth has been contextually driven, with economic downturns and political upheavals especially during the 1980s fueling the rise of new ministries that offered hope, identity, and social belonging to marginalized populations. The study concludes that while churches have contributed to social cohesion and resilience, their broader impact is constrained by weak accountability and limited civic engagement. Recommendations include fostering stronger ethical leadership, institutional transparency, and collaborative partnerships to enhance the socio-political and economic contributions of church growth in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Church Proliferation, Socio-Political Stability, Corruption, Histo-Sociological Analysis, Religious Expansion, Ethical Governance.

### Introduction

The expansion of churches in Nigeria has become a defining aspect of the nation's modern social landscape. Christianity, in particular, has long been woven into Nigeria's political, cultural, and economic life, shaping identities and providing meaning during uncertain times. From colonial rule through independence and beyond, the church has functioned not only as a spiritual sanctuary but also as a space for resistance, self-expression, and community building. The rise of African Independent Churches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, followed by the explosive growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in recent decades, demonstrates Nigerians' determination to create religious institutions that reflect their lived realities and aspirations.

This surge in church growth has deeply influenced Christianity itself. On one side, it has amplified the church's visibility and authority, cementing its role as a central institution in Nigerian society. Churches now serve as hubs of worship, education, and social support, offering millions of people belonging, moral direction, and hope amid political instability and economic struggles. The proliferation of ministries has also spurred creativity in worship styles, youth outreach, and the use of modern media, making Christianity more accessible and relevant to contemporary life. In this way, the expansion has reinforced Christianity's adaptability to Nigeria's shifting cultural and socio-political environment.

Yet, rapid growth has also introduced challenges that continue to shape the church's mission and identity. The multiplication of denominations and ministries has sometimes led to fragmentation, rivalry, and doctrinal inconsistencies. The prominence of prosperity preaching, which gained traction during the economic crises of the 1980s, has shifted emphasis from spiritual depth to material success, raising concerns about theological integrity and the commercialization of faith. Additionally, the immense influence of mega-churches has sparked questions about accountability, with issues of financial transparency and leadership ethics often criticized. These concerns have fueled perceptions that the church reflects the corruption and inefficiency present in wider Nigerian society.

The rapid expansion of churches has reshaped the internal dynamics of Christianity in Nigeria. Leadership has become increasingly centralized, with charismatic figures often exercising considerable influence, sometimes overshadowing collective decision-making. While this has enhanced organizational strength and mobilization, it has also risked cultivating personality-driven followings and weakening institutional accountability. At the same time, the church faces mounting pressure to reconcile its spiritual mission with socio-political responsibilities. As congregants turn to religious institutions for answers to unemployment, poverty, and governance failures, the church is compelled to redefine its role—moving beyond spiritual care to embrace civic responsibility and advocacy for justice.

Church growth in Nigeria, therefore, cannot be viewed solely as a religious phenomenon; it is a socio-political and economic force that continues to shape national identity. For the Christian church, the implications are complex: expansion has broadened influence and relevance, but it has also heightened the need for accountability, theological depth, and ethical leadership. The challenge lies in balancing spiritual purpose with socio-political engagement, ensuring that growth fosters genuine

transformation rather than superficial prosperity.

Studying church growth in Nigeria is thus not about numbers or denominational variety alone. It is about examining how faith interacts with society, how religious communities respond to crises, and how the church negotiates its dual role as a spiritual body and a socio-political actor. This perspective highlights both the opportunities for social cohesion and the challenges of governance, ethics, and sustainable development. Ultimately, the expansion of churches raises critical questions for the future of Christianity in Africa: will it inspire deeper renewal and social change, or reinforce existing inequalities and instability?

### **Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative approach, drawing primarily on secondary sources to investigate the origins, expansion, and socio-religious significance of African Independent Churches (AICs) in Nigeria. A qualitative design is particularly suitable because it enables a nuanced exploration of beliefs, practices, meanings, and social contexts that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods.

The study's data were gathered from a wide range of materials, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, theses, official church records, newspapers, and credible online resources related to African Christianity, Pentecostalism, and Nigeria's socio-religious landscape. Special consideration was given to the works of scholars such as Ruth Marshall, Matthew Ojo, Afe Adogame, Kingsley Okoro, Paul Gifford, and A. Anderson, whose research has been pivotal in shaping contemporary discourse on African Independent Churches.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The analysis is grounded in a multi-theoretical framework, drawing insights from Max Weber's sociology of religion, Karl Marx's theory of religion and social crisis, and African religious worldview theory.

Weber's perspective is valuable for understanding religion as a response to social disruption and inequality. His view of religion as both protest and meaning-making helps explain how AICs in Nigeria function as alternative systems of discipline, order, and hope amid economic instability, unemployment, and political uncertainty. Marx's interpretation of religion as a reaction to material suffering provides another lens. Although Marx famously described religion as the "opium of the people," modern readings highlight how religious activity often intensifies during times of crisis. In Nigeria, the growth of AICs coincides with economic decline, structural adjustment

policies, and the state's failure to meet basic needs. In this context, religion operates both as a coping mechanism and a form of resistance.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

This study defines several core concepts to ensure analytical clarity. African Independent Churches (AICs) are Christian congregations established, led, and managed by Africans without oversight from Western missionary bodies. In Nigeria, AICs encompass Aladura churches, prophetic-healing movements, and Pentecostal or charismatic groups. They highlight distinctly African forms of worship, theology, and leadership, addressing local cultural, social, and spiritual needs.

**Born-Again Christianity** refers to evangelical and Pentecostal traditions that stress personal conversion, spiritual rebirth, moral discipline, and a direct experiential relationship with Jesus Christ. In Nigeria, it operates both as a theological stance and a social identity, often expressed through visible lifestyle changes and moral conduct.

**Prosperity Theology** connects faith, positive confession, and financial giving with material success, health, and well-being. Widely practiced in Nigerian Pentecostal and independent churches, it inspires believers but also raises concerns about materialism and the commercialization of religion.

**Pentecostalism** emphasizes the active presence of the Holy Spirit, manifested through gifts such as healing, prophecy, and miracles. In Nigeria, Pentecostalism overlaps with AICs, sharing worship styles, theological emphases, and interpretations of spiritual power, making distinctions between the two fluids.

The expansion of AICs is closely linked to socio-economic and political instability. Ojo (1988, 1993) notes that movements like Deeper Life Christian Ministry provided moral discipline, spiritual assurance, and community belonging during periods of urbanization, unemployment, and social upheaval. AICs also deliver psychological and social support, helping members reinterpret misfortune as spiritually conquerable (Okoro, 2011, 2012; Agha, 2013).

Despite these contributions, scholars have critiqued AICs for fostering materialism. Prosperity preaching often equates wealth with divine favor, potentially undermining traditional values of sacrifice and social justice (Gifford, 1993). Ruth (1993) similarly observes that Nigerian Pentecostalism operates within a "religious marketplace," where charisma, miracles, and promises of success attract followers—illustrating both innovation and commercialization in modern African Christianity.

## **The Emergence, Growth, and Diversity of Independent Churches in Africa and Nigeria**

The development of Independent Churches in Africa, particularly Nigeria, was shaped by cultural, historical, and socio-political forces. Scholars such as Peter (1997) and Berrett (1968) argue that the spirit of independence characteristic of the period encouraged African Christians to break away from missionary-founded churches. A major source of tension was the cultural disconnect between Western missionaries and African converts, as missionaries often failed to recognize African worldviews or integrate local traditions compatible with Christianity. These conflicts gave rise to protest movements that laid the groundwork for independent churches.

In South Africa, the first secession occurred in 1872, while Nigeria witnessed its first in 1888. Between 1890 and 1920, independent churches spread rapidly. South African groups often identified as “Ethiopian,” while Nigerian churches adopted the label “African,” signaling aspirations for autonomy and dignity. These movements embraced Henry Venn’s three-self principle—self-propagating, self-supporting, and self-governing—seeking freedom from foreign control. Despite limited resources, churches multiplied quickly; Lagos alone saw the establishment of more than a dozen within a short period. Importantly, separation was driven more by socio-political and racial concerns than by doctrinal disputes.

A second wave of growth, spanning the 1920s to 1960s, emphasized prophetic and healing ministries. Epidemics such as influenza, bubonic plague, and smallpox revealed the inadequacy of missionary responses. Among the Yoruba, prayer groups known as *Aladura* (“people of prayer”) emerged, stressing divine healing and spiritual empowerment. This movement led to the founding of the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim (1925) and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) (1930), which spread across southwestern Nigeria and inspired further church formations. Revival movements led by Joseph Babalola produced the Christ Apostolic Church (1941). Meanwhile, foreign Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God and the Foursquare Gospel Church entered Nigeria, and the Celestial Church of Christ expanded after its introduction from Benin Republic in the 1950s. In 1952, Josiah Akindayomi established the Redeemed Christian Church of God, which later experienced remarkable growth under Enoch Adeboye.

## **The Rise of Charismatic and Neo-Pentecostal Movements**

During the 1970s, charismatic and neo-Pentecostal movements gained

momentum in Nigeria, shaped both by American Pentecostal influences and the

aftermath of the Nigeria–Biafra Civil War. Many Nigerians sought renewal through prayer, healing, and spiritual revival. Prominent leaders such as Benson Idahosa, who founded the Church of God Mission International in 1972, the pioneers of Deeper Life Bible Church in 1975, and David Oyedepo, who established Living Faith Church in 1986, built ministries that grew into nationally and globally recognized institutions. Independent churches in Nigeria flourished in response to political instability, economic hardship, rapid urbanization, unemployment, and widespread spiritual yearning. Some arose from dissatisfaction with established denominations, while others were born out of leadership disputes or personal visions. Despite frequent divisions, these churches embody a vibrant expression of African Christianity, reshaping Nigeria’s religious landscape and exerting influence across sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Core Beliefs and Practices of Independent Churches**

Independent churches in Nigeria cannot be neatly separated from mission-founded churches or even from one another, as they continuously interact, exchange ideas, and influence each other (Schaff, 1910). Many originated in areas heavily impacted by missionary activity and often developed from renewal movements rather than outright doctrinal rebellion (Peter, 2005). They reflect a dynamic understanding of the Holy Spirit’s work that transcends denominational boundaries, though syncretism is common, with elements of African traditional religion incorporated into worship.

African Independent Churches (AICs) exhibit a diverse mix of doctrinal, liturgical, and ritual practices shaped by cultural contexts (Okoro, 2014). While doctrinal differences exist, many secessionist churches retain the theology and liturgy of their parent denominations. Their distinctiveness lies in culturally rooted worship expressions—African-composed hymns, indigenous rhythms, and participatory services (Peter, 2005). These churches emphasize fellowship, community, and shared identity, responding to the lack of warmth often felt in missionary churches. Prayer groups, Bible study, and small fellowship units form the backbone of church life, with preaching and Scripture at the center of worship.

### **Pentecostal-Oriented Independent Churches and Their Socio-Political Role**

A significant category of African Independent Churches falls under Pentecostalism, though scholars caution against viewing it as a monolithic movement due to its doctrinal, liturgical, and social diversity (Ruth, 1993). For clarity, Pentecostal-oriented churches in Nigeria can be broadly grouped into two families: the Holiness

family and the Prosperity family.

### **The Holiness and Prosperity Families**

The Holiness family emphasizes strict moral discipline, personal purity, and unwavering adherence to Scripture. These churches highlight sanctification, evangelism, the imminent return of Christ, and separation from worldly practices deemed sinful. Worship is typically structured and hymn-based rather than emotionally expressive. Members often see themselves as part of a spiritual community that transcends ethnic and tribal boundaries (Ojo, 1988). Holiness churches firmly reject African traditional religious elements and distance themselves from *Aladura* practices, which they regard as spiritually harmful. Their theology and worship styles reflect Western evangelical influences, stressing modernity and doctrinal purity (Ruth, 1993).

By contrast, the Prosperity family, closely linked to contemporary Pentecostalism, emphasizes experiential faith, spiritual gifts, healing, and material success as evidence of divine favor. Central to its teaching is the belief that God desires believers to prosper in health, finances, and social standing. Faith, generous giving, and positive confession are presented as pathways to blessing (Hollenweger, 1972; Agha, 2013). Unlike the Holiness tradition, Prosperity-oriented churches encourage active engagement with society, framing economic achievement as compatible with Christian devotion. Loyalty often centers on charismatic leaders rather than denominational structures, making these churches dynamic but also prone to fragmentation (Clarke, 1986).

### **Socio-Economic Context and Growth**

The expansion of Pentecostal-oriented Independent Churches in Nigeria must be understood against the backdrop of socio-economic crises that intensified from the 1980s onward. Following the oil boom of the 1970s, Nigeria faced declining revenues, rising unemployment, inflation, infrastructural collapse, and widening inequality. The Structural Adjustment Programme of 1986 deepened economic hardship (Ruth, 1993). As corruption spread and public institutions weakened, many Nigerians—especially youth and the middle class—lost confidence in the state.

This climate produced a profound crisis of meaning. Economic insecurity and social instability fuelled fear and uncertainty, and religion became not only a belief system but also a survival strategy. The Born-Again movement and Independent Churches offered spaces of hope, moral certainty, and communal belonging. Conversion provided psychological resilience and a framework for interpreting

suffering. Congregations functioned as tight-knit communities, offering emotional,

moral, and sometimes material support to compensate for weakened state structures and declining extended family networks.

### **Social and Cultural Impact**

These churches often transcend ethnic and regional boundaries, redefining identity in spiritual rather than biological terms. They generate social capital through counseling, welfare programs, and communal solidarity (Okoro & Osunwoke, 2014). Youth involvement is particularly significant, as churches provide leadership opportunities and avenues for social mobility otherwise unavailable in a constrained economy. For women, Pentecostal teachings present both restrictions and empowerment: while emphasizing marital submission, they also promote fidelity, mutual responsibility, and protection against abuse. Church communities frequently mediate marital disputes and reduce interference from extended families.

Pentecostal theology resonates strongly with African cosmologies that interpret misfortune in spiritual terms. Illness, poverty, and unemployment are often addressed through deliverance and spiritual warfare (Okoro, 2011). This worldview offers both explanation and action, empowering believers to confront adversity. Critics argue that prosperity teachings commercialize faith and divert attention from structural reform. Yet dismissing the movement as mere manipulation overlooks the agency of adherents, who often make rational choices within difficult realities.

Finally, Pentecostal-oriented Independent Churches have become influential religious, social, and psychological institutions in Nigeria. While not immune to excesses, they continue to provide identity, resilience, and alternative structures of support in a society marked by persistent economic and political instability.

### **The Impacts of Church Growth on Nigerian Society: Political and Economic Dimensions**

The rapid expansion of churches in Nigeria has become a defining feature of its contemporary social fabric. This growth has deeply influenced both politics and the economy, shaping governance, civic life, and everyday experiences. While churches provide spiritual refuge and social cohesion, their influence also produces complex outcomes that highlight Nigeria's paradox of religious vitality amid ongoing political and economic challenges.

### **Political Impacts**

Churches have emerged as influential socio-political actors. Their growth has

created platforms for civic mobilization, advocacy, and moral instruction. In periods of

instability, churches often serve as stabilizing institutions, offering narratives of hope and order. Religious leaders frequently use their pulpits to denounce corruption, demand accountability, and encourage civic participation, thereby raising political awareness among congregants, especially youth and marginalized groups.

Yet, this political role is not without contradictions. The proliferation of churches has sometimes led to the personalization of authority, with charismatic leaders exerting strong influence over political opinions and voting behavior. In certain cases, churches have been drawn into partisan politics, blurring the line between spiritual leadership and political ambition. This dynamic risks weakening democratic processes by promoting personality-driven politics rather than issue-based engagement. Additionally, prosperity preaching can shift focus away from structural reforms, fostering reliance on divine intervention instead of sustained civic activism.

### **Economic Impacts**

Economically, church growth has generated both opportunities and challenges. On the positive side, churches have become major employers and contributors to local economies. The construction of large auditoriums, schools, hospitals, and media outlets stimulates job creation and economic activity. Churches also provide welfare services—scholarships, healthcare, and food distribution—that help cushion the effects of poverty and unemployment. For many Nigerians, particularly during the economic crises of the 1980s and beyond, churches offered not only spiritual comfort but also material support and a sense of belonging.

On the negative side, concerns about resource use and accountability persist. Heavy reliance on tithes, offerings, and donations has created a parallel economy within religious institutions, often lacking transparency. While some churches reinvest in community development, others prioritize lavish lifestyles for leaders or monumental projects that do not directly address poverty. This dynamic can deepen inequality, as struggling congregants continue to contribute financially in hopes of divine prosperity. Moreover, the proliferation of churches has sometimes redirected entrepreneurial energy into religious enterprises that may not foster sustainable economic growth.

The growth of churches has undeniably reshaped Nigeria's political and economic landscape. They provide stability, welfare, and moral guidance, yet also contribute to political polarization and economic imbalances. Their influence reflects both the resilience of Nigerian society and the challenges of building accountable institutions. For church growth to foster genuine national development, stronger ethical

engagement, financial transparency, and constructive collaboration with civic and

governmental bodies are essential. Only then can Nigeria's vibrant religious life be harnessed to address the enduring political and economic challenges facing the nation.

### **Implications of Church Growth on the Christian Church in Nigeria**

The remarkable expansion of churches in Nigeria has profoundly reshaped the identity, structure, and mission of the Christian church. On the positive side, growth has increased visibility and influence. Churches have become central institutions in Nigerian society, attracting large followings and serving as platforms for evangelism, social services, and moral instruction. This visibility has enabled Christianity to reach diverse communities, offering spiritual refuge and fostering social cohesion during periods of political instability and economic hardship. The proliferation of ministries has also encouraged innovation in worship styles, youth involvement, and the use of media, making the church more accessible and relevant to contemporary life.

At the same time, rapid growth has introduced significant challenges. The multiplication of denominations and ministries has sometimes resulted in fragmentation, competition, and doctrinal inconsistencies. The prominence of prosperity preaching, which rose during the economic crises of the 1980s, has shifted attention from spiritual depth to material success, raising concerns about theological integrity. The sheer size and influence of mega-churches have also created accountability issues, with questions surrounding financial transparency and leadership ethics. These concerns have fuelled criticism that the church reflects the corruption and inefficiency of wider Nigerian society.

Church growth has further altered internal dynamics. Leadership structures have become increasingly hierarchical, with charismatic figures exercising considerable authority, sometimes at the expense of collective governance. While this has strengthened organizational capacity, it has also risked fostering personality cults and weakening institutional checks. Moreover, expansion has placed pressure on the church to balance its spiritual mission with socio-political engagement. As congregants increasingly look to their churches for solutions to unemployment, poverty, and governance failures, the church faces the challenge of redefining its role beyond spiritual care to include civic responsibility.

The growth of churches in Nigeria has empowered the Christian church with unprecedented influence, but it has also exposed it to new vulnerabilities. Expansion has broadened reach and relevance, yet it has simultaneously demanded greater accountability, theological clarity, and ethical leadership.

Having shown the wider Christian world that faith can be authentically expressed through African—and specifically Nigerian—cultural frameworks, the pressing challenge now is to preserve ethical and spiritual integrity. Nigerian AICs must strike a balance between prosperity-centered messages and teachings that emphasize holiness, discipline, honesty, humility, and love for others. As economic conditions worsen and social pressures intensify, the credibility of these churches will hinge not only on their ability to inspire hope but also on their commitment to nurturing responsible Christian living that contributes meaningfully to Nigeria's moral and social renewal.

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