

Proliferation of Churches and Socioeconomic Development of Nigeria: A Study of Selected Churches in Akwa Ibom State

Mfon Effiong ASUQUO¹
mfonasuquo@aksu.edu.ng

Anthony Francis EDET²
aeyikang@gmail.com

Samuel Emmanuel SOLOMON³
samsolo0602@gmail.com

^{1,2,3}Department Of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus.

ABSTRACT

This study examines the complex relationship between church proliferation and socioeconomic development, investigating whether the multiplication of religious institutions translates into tangible community advancement or merely reflects institutional expansion without developmental impact. Empirical literature was reviewed. Drawing on structural functionalism and missional ecclesial imagination as theoretical frameworks, the study employs a mixed-methods approach across selected churches in Akwa Ibom State. The study was conducted in three local government areas of Akwa Ibom State: Uyo (urban), Ibesikpo Asutan (semi-urban), and Mkpato Enin (rural), adopted 400 respondents. Findings reveal a paradoxical situation where churches demonstrate significant involvement in community development projects while simultaneously exhibiting characteristics that may hinder optimal socioeconomic contribution. The study recommends strengthened development education for Church Leaders, regulatory frameworks, enhanced collaboration between churches and government, economic empowerment programmes and a renewed missional focus on holistic community transformation.

Keywords: *church proliferation, socioeconomic development, church, community development*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global religious landscape has experienced significant transformation over recent decades, with emerging and developing regions demonstrating persistent and, in many regions, increasing levels of religiosity. Scholars have documented a "religious divergence" between high-income countries and developing nations, where traditional belief systems continue to thrive alongside major world religions (Lowe, Marx, & Montero, 2025). This global pattern suggests that modernisation and economic development do not necessarily produce secularisation in developing contexts. Religious organisations worldwide have increasingly positioned themselves as providers of public goods, including education, healthcare, and social services (Anderson, 2018). In many developing regions, religious institutions have filled gaps left by overstretched state apparatuses, functioning as adaptive platforms within pluralistic religious marketplaces. The competitiveness of religious organisations increasingly depends on their capacity to demonstrate tangible benefits to adherents, extending beyond spiritual offerings to encompass material and social provisions (Zakharov & Gorokhov, 2025).

The social mission of religious organisations in Africa has expanded significantly, with churches increasingly functioning as alternatives or complements to state institutions in delivering social services

(Zakharov & Gorokho 2025). This expansion, however, raises important questions about the developmental outcomes of religious activity. While mainline Catholic and Protestant denominations have historically invested in educational and healthcare infrastructure, the newer wave of Pentecostal and independent churches presents a more complex picture, with varying commitments to community development beyond congregational growth.

The historical trajectory of church proliferation in Nigeria spans five distinct periods: the introduction of Latin Christianity in the 15th and 16th centuries; the era of denominationalism and missionary activities from 1842 onward; the evolution of independent churches; the emergence of indigenous African churches; and the contemporary birth of charismatic and Pentecostal movements (SHOK, KYOM & ABBAS, 2024). Each period has contributed to the complex religious landscape that characterizes modern Nigeria. Contemporary church proliferation in Nigeria is driven by multiple factors, including doctrinal disagreements, quest for position and power, and, significantly, "selfish motive for financial prosperity". This motivation has profound implications for the developmental potential of religious institutions, as churches oriented primarily toward revenue generation may prioritise institutional maintenance over community transformation. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has struggled to regulate and monitor the explosion of new churches, leaving the sector largely self-regulating.

Akwa Ibom State presents a distinctive case for examining church proliferation and development. The state ranks among Nigeria's most religiously active regions, with church membership and participation rates significantly above national averages. This religious vibrancy coexists with considerable developmental challenges, including youth unemployment, infrastructure deficits, and rural poverty. Research in Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State has documented specific community development projects undertaken by churches, including educational initiatives, healthcare provision, and infrastructure development (Adelakun, & Ochuko, 2020). However, the same study identified significant challenges constraining churches' developmental contributions, including limited financial resources and the absence of coordinated development strategies. Despite these challenges, individual church-led initiatives demonstrate the potential for meaningful impact. The Uma Ukpai Evangelistic Association, for instance, has trained and empowered entrepreneurs with substantial grants, recognising that poverty eradication requires practical intervention alongside spiritual ministry (Uma Ukpai Evangelistic Association. 2023). Such examples suggest that churches can function as effective development agencies when appropriately oriented.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the unprecedented proliferation of churches in Akwa Ibom State, the relationship between this religious expansion and socioeconomic development remains inadequately understood. While churches occupy significant social space and command substantial human and material resources, evidence of their developmental impact is fragmented and often anecdotal.

Observers note a paradox: communities with high church density often continue to experience poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment. This situation raises fundamental questions about the translational capacity of religious activity whether spiritual engagement automatically generates social transformation, or whether intentional development orientation is required (Adelakun & Ochuko, 2020). The situation is further complicated by the diversity of church types, ranging from established mission-

founded denominations to independent Pentecostal ministries, each with potentially different development orientations and capacities.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the nature and extent of socioeconomic development projects undertaken by selected churches in Akwa Ibom State.
2. To determine the factors influencing churches' involvement in community development initiatives within the study area.
3. To assess community members' perceptions of the developmental impact of churches in their localities.

2. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

SHOK, KYOM & ABBAS, (2024) in their study revealed that the proliferation of churches in Nigeria is caused by selfish motive for financial prosperity, doctrinal disagreements and the quest for position and power. The work recommends that, instead of establishing more churches in the nation without tangible impact on the morality of members, pastors and church leaders should focus on preaching the gospel of Christ for the purpose of building the moral and spiritual lives of her members. OLARINDE, & ADETUNJI, (2024) stated that efforts should be made to control the negative impact both by the government and Christian bodies like CAN and PFN, refocusing ministers to pure teaching and preaching of holiness messages instead of the gospel of prosperity. Oko, & Umanah, (2022) advised Church Leaders and General Overseers to take the lead in bringing together Christians of different denominations to dialogue and better exposure to those Christian virtues that enhance National Unity and Development. Onah, & Agbo, (2021) in their study sees proliferation of churches as a challenge to Christianity. The word of God has been watered down by the priests or pastors, evangelists and founders of these churches in the quest for money and increased membership. It is on this note that this article argued that in order to preach the gospel as directed by Jesus Christ one should live a holy life worthy of emulation. Pastors and priests should see themselves as representatives of Christ on earth; they should avoid engaging in any immoral actions, which may tarnish the image of the church. Christian leaders, priests or pastors, prophets, evangelists, bishops should know that it is important that their lives and preaching should reflect that of Christ from whom Christianity took her name. Unhealthy competition should be minimised. The result of the study by Olusegun, (2020) reveals that the economic downturn being experienced in the nation causing lack of job and hardship is the major cause of church proliferation in Nigeria, and that church proliferation has overall positive impact.

However, the negative side of it is more acute and has covered up the good side of it which makes people to see church proliferation as a menace to the nation. Haruna (2018:175–192) observed that there are over 300 000 early Pentecostal Apostolic Churches in Nigeria with about 4.2 million members, including denominations such as the Christ Apostolic Church, the Apostolic Church, the Celestial Church and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. New Apostolic Christians in Nigeria and the Pentecostal include the Redeemed Church, Deeper Life Church, Overcomer ministries, and other new spring ups. There are also about 380 000 New Apostolic Church parishes constituting about 6.5 million believers. In the view of Fatokun (2016: n.p.), some of these Pentecostal churches started as Christian fellowship centres before metamorphosing into churches, for example, Deeper Life Church, the Redeemed Christian Church, Living Faith (Winners Chapel), Rhema Church, New Testament Church, Church of God Mission, Zoe

Ministries, Christ Embassy Church, Latter Rain Assembly and the Dominion Life Bible Church. All the founders of these churches are trying to fulfil the injunction of Jesus Christ that Gospel should be preached to all nations of the world. Therefore, the constant rise in the cost of imports in such a troubled economy like Nigeria's requires the need for the nation to look inward by prioritising indigenous products in her multi-sectorial developmental drive (Umoh et al., 2024). Similarly, Umoh, (2023) stated that in contemporary global economy, there is advocacy for self-reliance and dependency on local raw material for refining of finished products and hence the focus on innovations with comparative advantage by every nation for services guarantee and efficiency. Edet et al. (2024) added that SWOT Analysis is a strategic planning tool used to identify and analyze the internal and external factors that can impact a startup's success. Utuk et al. (2024) concluded that Agricultural raw materials exports have a positive effect on real gross domestic product while agriculture value added exhibited a negative relationship with real gross domestic product. Okai, (2016). concluded that in spite of the various criticism levelled against the mushrooming of churches and ministries in the Nigerian geo-political scenery, their presence has been quite relevant in maintain stability as Nigeria would have been more awful than the European society of Thomas Hobbes descriptions.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives: structural functionalism and missional ecclesial imagination.

Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism, as applied to the study of religious institutions, conceptualises churches as social systems that perform functions necessary for societal stability and wellbeing. Within this framework, religious organisations are expected to contribute to social integration, value transmission, and community welfare. The theory posits that social institutions, including churches, must demonstrate functional relevance to survive and thrive within their social environments. Applied to this study, structural functionalism provides a lens for examining whether proliferating churches perform identifiable functions related to socioeconomic development. Economists are vastly divided on the desirability and impacts of fiscal deficit on the economy (Ekpo et al., 2024). The theory suggests that churches that contribute meaningfully to community welfare are more likely to achieve social legitimacy and long-term sustainability, while those focused solely on internal ecclesiastical concerns may experience marginalisation.

Notwithstanding, missional ecclesial imagination was adopted to consummenrate the study. This dual lens recognises that churches' developmental contributions are shaped by both sociological dynamics and theological commitments.

Missional Ecclesial Imagination

The concept of missional ecclesial imagination, developed by theologians including Roxburgh and Boren, offers a complementary framework for understanding churches' proper orientation toward societal engagement. This perspective calls for the reorientation of churches toward the mission of God, which extends beyond institutional maintenance to encompass holistic transformation of individuals and communities. Within this framework, "the church is not so much concerned about the traction of numbers, but rather the fulfilment of the mission of God here on earth". Furthermore, the entrepreneur's interest goes beyond only making profits but also targets at reshaping the thinking of the people and the

world at large, through his innovative powers, programmes, concepts and developmental initiatives (Umoh, 2021; Akpan & Uford, 2024). Applied to the study, the theory emphasises that churches should be "outward-focused in participating in the mission of God by bringing about reconciliation and healing instead of church building, increased attendance and amassing wealth".

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey methods (chi square) with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions thematically analysed. The study adopted 400 respondents. The study was conducted in three local government areas of Akwa Ibom State: Uyo (urban), Abak (semi-urban), and Mkpat Enin (rural). These locations were selected to capture variations in church density, development challenges, and socio-economic contexts. This approach enabled triangulation of findings and deeper exploration of the mechanisms linking church proliferation to development outcomes. A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed. Nine (9) Churches were purposively selected from each local government area, stratified by church type (Pentecostal, Orthodox and Independent).

Table 1: Church Typology

Pentecostal Church	Orthodox Church	Independent Church
Full life Christian centre	Presbyterian Church	Insights Bible Church
Christ Embassy	Apostolic Church	United Evangelical Church (Qua Iboe Church)
Redeem Christian Church	Methodist Church	Faith Tabernacle Congregation

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 2: Chi square analysis

Orthodox Church	Pentecost Church	Independent Church	Total
37	23	10	70
56	76	42	174
25	64	67	156
118	163	119	400

Table 3:

Cell	Fo	Fe	Fo - Fe	Fo - Fe²	$\frac{Fo - Fe^2}{Fe}$
A	37	20.65	16.35	267.3	12.94
B	23	28.53	5.53	30.6	1.273
C	10	20.83	10.83	117.3	5.631
D	56	51.33	4.67	21.81	0.425
E	76	70.91	5.1	26.01	0.367
F	42	51.76	9.76	95.3	1.841
G	25	46.02	21.02	441.8	9.600
H	64	63.57	0.43	0.185	0.003
I	67	45.63	21.37	45.67	10.01
					X ² = 41.89

$$Df = (3-1) (3-1)$$

$$= 2 \times 2$$

$$Df = 4$$

Level of significance = 0.05

The critical table value = 9.49

The calculated table value = 41.89

Decision: Since the calculated table value of 41.89 is greater than the table value of 9.49, this leading us to reject H₀ and accept H₁. Thus, there is a significant relationship between proliferation of churches and socioeconomic development in Akwa Ibom State.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Nature and Extent of Church Development Projects

The study revealed significant variation in churches' involvement in socioeconomic development. However, the depth and sustainability of these interventions varied considerably. While some churches maintained ongoing scholarship schemes or healthcare facilities, others engaged in one-time charitable distributions with limited long-term impact. Qualitative interviews revealed that churches' development orientation was significantly influenced by their theological framework.

A Pentecostal pastor explained:

"We believe the gospel must address the whole person spirit, soul, and body. You cannot preach about heaven to someone who is hungry today. That is why we have skills acquisition programmes and business grants for our members and the community."

This perspective resonates with the missional ecclesial imagination framework, which emphasises holistic engagement with human need. However, other church leaders expressed more limited views of the church's social responsibility, focusing primarily on spiritual formation and expecting members to address their material needs individually.

Factors Influencing Church Involvement in Development

Multiple factors influenced churches' involvement in community development. Church size demonstrated a positive correlation with development activity, with larger congregations (membership exceeding 500) significantly more likely to undertake substantial projects. This finding supports the economic logic of religious organisations, where larger membership bases generate greater resources for institutional activities. Church type also emerged as significant. Mainline churches (Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian) demonstrated more consistent involvement in community development, particularly in education and healthcare, reflecting their historical missionary heritage.

As one Catholic priest noted:

"The missionaries who brought the faith to us did not come with only the Bible. They came with schools, with hospitals, with farms. We are continuing that legacy because we believe development and faith go together."

Pentecostal churches showed more varied engagement, with some operating sophisticated development programmes while others focused exclusively on church planting and spiritual activities. This variation reflects the diversity within Nigerian Pentecostalism, which ranges from prosperity-oriented ministries

to socially engaged congregations. This finding echoes Adelokun and Ochuko's identification of financial limitations as a primary challenge to churches' development work. However, resource constraints alone do not explain variations in development involvement, as some resource-limited churches demonstrated creative community engagement through volunteer programmes and partnerships.

Community Perceptions of Church Developmental Impact

Community members' perceptions of churches' developmental contributions were generally positive but nuanced. On a five-point scale, the mean perception score was 3.8, indicating moderately positive assessment. However, significant variations emerged based on church visibility and project relevance.

Focus group discussions revealed that community members distinguished between churches that were "present" in the community and those that were truly "engaged." an Evangelist from one of the churches articulated this distinction:

"There are many churches here, but only few are known for helping the community. Some pastors only care about their offerings and tithes. They build big buildings, but the community around still suffers. But there are others who remember that the community is why they exist."

This perception aligns with concerns raised in the literature about churches motivated primarily by "selfish motive for financial prosperity". Communities appear to evaluate churches not by their size or affluence but by their demonstrated commitment to collective wellbeing. The duration of a church's presence in a community correlated positively with perception scores, supporting the notion that sustained engagement builds trust and demonstrates commitment. Churches established for over twenty years received significantly higher ratings than newer congregations, regardless of their current activity levels.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between church proliferation and socioeconomic development in Akwa Ibom State, revealing a complex picture of potential and limitation. Churches in the state demonstrate significant capacity for community engagement, with many undertaking educational, healthcare, and economic empowerment initiatives. However, this capacity remains unevenly distributed, with considerable variation based on church type, size, and theological orientation. The theoretical frameworks employed in this study illuminate the dynamics observed. Structural functionalism helps explain why churches that engage meaningfully with community needs achieve greater social legitimacy, while missional ecclesial imagination provides theological resources for reorienting churches toward holistic mission. Together, these perspectives suggest that churches' developmental contributions are not automatic but require intentional cultivation.

The proliferation of churches represents both opportunity and challenge for socioeconomic development. The opportunity lies in the extensive social infrastructure represented by thousands of congregations, each potentially functioning as a node for community transformation. The challenge resides in the fragmentation of effort, the predominance of institutional maintenance over community engagement, and the absence of coordinated development strategies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. **Strengthened Regulatory Framework:** The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should develop and enforce minimum standards for church registration, including requirements for community development engagement. This recommendation aligns with calls for CAN to "wake up to their responsibilities of controlling, regulating and punishing churches that contravene the set goals".
2. **Development Education for Church Leaders:** Theological institutions and church networks should integrate community development principles into ministerial training, equipping pastors with skills for needs assessment, project planning, and sustainable development. This would address the capacity gaps identified among church leaders.
3. **Collaborative Development Planning:** Churches within localities should establish platforms for coordinating development efforts, pooling resources, and avoiding duplication. Such collaboration could amplify the impact of individual church initiatives.
4. **Government-Church Partnerships:** Local and state governments should recognise churches as development partners and create frameworks for collaboration in education, healthcare, and poverty reduction. As recommended in previous research, government should "adjust the policy for effective community development" to include religious organisations as recognised stakeholders.
5. **Economic Empowerment Programmes:** Churches should expand their focus from charitable relief to sustainable economic empowerment, including skills training, microfinance, and business development support. The model demonstrated by the Uma Ukpai Evangelistic Association, which combined training with substantial grants, offers a replicable approach.
6. **Missional Reorientation:** Church leaders should embrace the missional ecclesial imagination framework, reorienting their congregations toward active participation in God's mission of holistic transformation. This involves moving beyond "the traction of numbers" toward qualitative engagement with community needs.
7. **Documentation and Sharing of Best Practices:** Churches engaged in exemplary development work should document their approaches and share learning with others. A database of church development initiatives could facilitate learning and replication.

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