



Unmasking Nigeria's leadership conundrum: The role of the church

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The intricacies of Nigeria's leadership challenges present a formidable obstacle to the nation's progress. Corruption, political instability, and ethnic and religious tensions form a complex web that impedes development. While studies often analyse the political mobilisation of religious groups, some failed to recognise their potential to bring about positive changes in governance. This research addresses this gap by examining how the Church, with its network and moral influence, can tackle Nigeria's leadership hurdles and promote sustainable development. Utilising historical and descriptive research methods, the study explores the Church's involvement in shaping Nigerian society and politics. It acknowledges the challenges the Church faces in navigating the socio-political landscape and highlights its role in advocating for ethical leadership and effective governance. By exploring both historical contexts and contemporary realities, the article emphasises the importance of the Church's active engagement in advancing Nigeria's democratic progress and socio-economic growth, offering valuable insights for civil society and religious organisations to enhance their collaboration.

Contribution: This study significantly contributes to tackling leadership challenges in Nigeria by emphasising the crucial role of the Church and promoting collaborative governance approaches as a means to achieve positive societal change and transformation.

Keywords: leadership; Nigerian society; governance; leadership challenges; the Church.

Introduction

Leadership roles across various domains possess fundamental qualities like the ability to connect with people, effectively manage and guide subordinates, mediate in conflicts, make decisions by evaluating different options, allocate resources judiciously, and demonstrate a willingness to take risks and initiate action. Nigeria, a nation endowed with vast resources and a diverse population, has faced persistent challenges in the realm of leadership (Ejimabo 2013). Nigeria has been plagued by rampant corruption, weak governance systems, ethnic and religious tensions, and inadequate infrastructure and social services (Adeola 2015:222; Nwogbo & Ighodalo 2021:88; Osakede et al. 2015:77). The complex nature of these challenges has, over the years, hindered the nation's progress and development. Nigeria stands at a crossroads, desperately in need of effective leadership to address its manifold challenges. From political instability to issues of corruption and ethical concerns, the leadership landscape of Nigeria is marked by complexities that demand a thorough examination.

Current research often focuses on Nigeria's leadership challenges through political, economic, and socio-cultural lenses, neglecting the distinctive role played by religious institutions, particularly the church. Although studies investigating the intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria are many, Kukah (1993), Nmah (2007), and Umeanolue (2020:144) highlighted the clear interaction between religion and politics. Their consensus is that religion plays an ambivalent role in the growth, development, and survival of the Nigerian nation. They emphasised the political involvement of religious groups rather than their potential to foster positive changes in governance and leadership. Consequently, there is a significant gap in understanding how the church, with its extensive network, moral authority, and influence over millions of followers, can contribute to addressing Nigeria's leadership dilemmas and promoting sustainable development. Bridging this gap is crucial for gaining a comprehensive understanding of Nigeria's leadership challenges and devising innovative strategies to effectively address them.

It is imperative to define effective leadership that embodies qualities such as integrity, accountability, transparency, and a commitment to the common good, and assess Nigeria's current state. The Church, with its historical significance and moral authority, has the potential to

influence societal values, advocate for ethical leadership, and contribute to the overall development of the nation (Grzymała-Busse 2015:385). This study, therefore, investigates Nigeria's leadership conundrum and clarifies the role of the Church in driving positive change. It analyses the root causes of Nigeria's leadership crisis and the Church's potential as a catalyst for transformation to inspire collective action towards a brighter future. This study provides valuable insights for civil society and religious organisations to improve their collaboration.

The concept of leadership

The essence of leadership remains consistent in all spheres of life. Leadership is the act of guiding and influencing others to achieve a specific goal while steering the organisation towards greater unity and coherence (Abbott & Bernstein 2015). The essence of leadership remains consistent in all spheres of life. Nielsen and Huse (2010) define leadership as the act of exerting a significant level of influence beyond what is necessary for routine compliance with an organisation's directives. According to Treviño and Brown (2005), leadership involves a person or leader surpassing expected role performance to fully realise the potential of their positions of influence. Haslam, Reicher and Platow (2020) assert that the exertion of influence by an individual or a select few over a large group, leading them collectively towards common compatible goals in a shared direction, is a fundamental aspect of the psychological perceptions of leadership. This concept is best understood within the framework of the reciprocal connection between a leader and their followers.

Good leaders are made, not born. A leader therefore is someone who guides others towards a common goal, engages in ethical behaviour, and focuses on achieving results (Amanchukwu, Stanley & Ololube 2015). Tannenbaum and Schmidt (2017) describe a leader as someone who wields authoritative control or influence over others. For Haslam et al. (2020), all leadership fundamentally involves exerting influence. In family dynamics, one might observe that a sibling commands respect, their opinions carry weight, and they can mobilise others to achieve shared objectives, even if they are not the eldest. Kotter (2012) argues that an exceptional leader guides their team rather than ruling over it. Creating a trustworthy and open environment for team members is identified as a crucial characteristic of effective leadership. Such a leader fosters an atmosphere where team members can learn and develop.

Therefore, at the heart of effective leadership is a commendable character and a dedication to selfless service to society. Leaders utilise their leadership qualities, including their beliefs, values, ethics, character, knowledge, and skills. Thus, leadership encompasses all actions that affect the organisation's goals and welfare. Esteemed leaders emphasise who they are (their beliefs and character), what they know (their expertise in their roles, tasks, and understanding of human nature), and what they do (executing tasks, motivating others, and providing direction).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation that guides this study is Ethical Leadership Theory. This theory was developed by Michael E. Brown and his colleagues. The seminal work on this theory was published by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison in 2005, where they provided a comprehensive definition and conceptualisation of ethical leadership (Foley 2021:4). Ethical leadership involves guiding others based on a foundation of reverence for ethical principles, values, and the dignity and rights of individuals (Brown et al. 2005). It is connected to notions such as trust, integrity, empathy, charisma, and fairness (Oladimeji et al. 2022). This theory forms the foundation for the concept of social information processing, shapes the strategies employed by leaders and underscores the impact of emotions on ethical behaviour and decision-making (Amelia 2023). Trevino, Hartman and Brown (2000) opine that:

As leaders are by nature in a position of social power, ethical leadership focuses on how leaders use their social power in the decisions they make, actions they engage in and ways they influence others. (p. 128)

Scholars of ethical leadership point to five key principles of ethical leadership, which include honesty, justice, respect, community, and integrity (Herrity 2023). Ethical leadership, according to Mendonca and Kanungo (2006), entails leaders consistently behaving and guiding with ethical principles at all times. Ethical leadership theory involves the application of ethical standards and behaviours to promote fairness, justice, and integrity within the leadership framework (Engelbrecht, Heine & Mahembe 2017).

In Nigerian leadership, prioritising moral principles and values is essential. Leaders emphasise honesty and transparency to foster trust and accountability among followers. Effective communication and genuine decision-making are crucial for maintaining this trust and ensuring ethical governance. Leaders serve as role models, accountable for their conduct and responsible for addressing misconduct within their sphere of influence. They are seen as reflections of their organisation's identity, influencing both internal culture and societal perceptions. Ethical leadership is characterised by a focus on justice and integrity.

Leaders are responsible for protecting citizens' rights, promoting respect, and fostering trust with the populace, crucial for sustainable socio-economic development. Engagement with communities and addressing their needs are prioritised, aligning with traditional Nigerian values. Integrity forms the foundation of ethical leadership, guiding leaders to uphold moral principles in decision-making. This theory serves as a framework for evaluating moral dimensions in leadership, addressing challenges such as corruption, transparency, and accountability. It contributes to the nation's ethical advancement and enhances trust in leadership.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research approach and utilises historical research methods to explore the Church's efforts in addressing Nigeria's leadership challenges. The historical research method investigates and interprets data to provide insights into historical factors shaping governance, such as pre-colonial structures and colonial influence, as well as contemporary issues such as political instability and corruption. The study uncovers the roles played by the Church in addressing these challenges, considering its internal dynamics, external pressures, and impact on governance.

Through content analysis, the research examines the contributions of Christian religious leaders and institutions in addressing these issues, portraying the Church as a catalyst of positive change by leveraging its moral authority to promote accountability and address leadership issues. By employing historical research, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the Church's historical involvement in leadership and governance, which holds significance for policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society actors engaged in addressing Nigeria's leadership challenges.

A brief historical overview of Nigeria's leadership

The historical foundations of Nigeria's political background from the pre-colonial era with its indigenous governance structures to the enduring impact of colonialism to the present will help to understand the contemporary leadership conundrum. In the pre-colonial era, Nigeria was characterised by rich indigenous governance structures. Diverse ethnic groups across the region developed unique systems that reflected their cultural values and social organisation (Ihonvbere & Shaw 1998). These indigenous systems often emphasised communal decision-making, with leaders selected based on lineage, merit, or age-grade considerations. The intricate balance of power within these structures laid the foundation for governance and leadership practices that shaped the socio-political setting of the time (Afigbo 2005).

Within the indigenous governance structures, traditional leadership roles are very important in maintaining order and cohesion. The different ethnic groups possessed the capability to resolve any disputes in their leadership, contributing to a unifying influence and primordial development during that particular historical era (Izukanne 2021). Traditional leaders (kings, chiefs and elders) held positions of authority and were entrusted with the responsibility of upholding the community's values. These leaders served as mediators, arbitrators, and custodians of cultural heritage, playing roles in the administration of justice and the resolution of disputes. During the pre-colonial time, as noticed by Awogu (2003), individuals engaged in social interactions without ethnic divisions or sentiments and people maintained friendly connections without engaging in commercial exploitation.

The contemporary political entity known as Nigeria can be traced back to the 1914 amalgamation orchestrated by Lord

Lugard, spanning the period from 1914 to 1960 (Ahmed-Gamgum 2014; Adangor 2017; Falola 2022; Falola & Aderinto 2010; Ihonvbere & Shaw 1998). During the colonial rule of Nigeria, there was a lack of anticipation for leadership development issues, and the nation's level of development aligned with the objectives set by the colonial masters. Nevertheless, the advent of colonialism in Nigeria significantly altered the existing political landscape in the pre-colonial era. European powers, primarily the British, imposed centralised political systems, disrupting the traditional governance structures that had prevailed for centuries (Falola 2009:16). The introduction of colonial administrative units and the imposition of foreign legal and bureaucratic frameworks reshaped the mechanisms of governance (Jarmon 1988), often undermining the indigenous systems that were deeply rooted in local traditions.

The legacy of colonialism continues to influence leadership dynamics in Nigeria. The imposition of artificial boundaries, divisive administrative structures, and a foreign legal framework created challenges that persist to this day (Ette 2021). The disruption of traditional systems and the introduction of Western-style governance left a lasting impact on the conceptualisation and exercise of leadership in the post-colonial era (Onukwuba 2018). The struggle to reconcile traditional values with the remnants of colonial influence has contributed to the complexities observed in Nigeria's contemporary leadership landscape (Ette 2021; Jarmon 1988). Understanding this historical continuum is essential for comprehending the origins of the leadership conundrum faced by the nation.

Contemporary leadership challenges in Nigeria

Corruption in leadership

Corruptions in leadership have been persistent challenges in Nigeria, contributing to a complex socio-political landscape. Corruption manifests in various forms, such as embezzlement of public funds, bribery, diversion of resources meant for development, election malpractices, the exploitation of public office for personal gain and abuse of power, among others (Adagbabiri & Okolie 2018; Nwogbo & Ighodalo 2021; Oko 2001). Corruption creates an environment where unethical behaviour is tolerated or even encouraged. The lack of adherence to ethical principles corrodes the foundations of good governance. The issue of corruption has permeated various levels of government and institutions, hindering the country's progress and undermining public trust. Leaders at different levels of government have been implicated in corrupt practices, contributing to a culture of impunity and eroding public confidence in governance institutions.

Consequences on national development

The prevalence of corruption and ethical concerns within leadership has dire consequences for national development (Awofeso & Odeyemi 2014; Ebegbulem 2012:144). Resources that should be directed towards infrastructure, education,

healthcare, and poverty alleviation are diverted, perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment. The decline in ethical standards among leaders not only weakens the trust between the government and its citizens but also hinders the nation's capacity to attract foreign investment and promote sustainable development (Nwogbo & Ighodalo 2021:92). Addressing corruption and promoting ethical leadership are integral to overcoming the leadership conundrum and steering Nigeria towards a path of sustained progress.

Nigeria faces significant challenges, including ethnic and religious tensions stemming from historical grievances, colonial-era divisions, and post-independence political dynamics. These issues are worsened by political and economic disparities, especially in resource-rich areas such as the Niger Delta, where local ethnic groups feel marginalised. Ethnic and religious identities often overlap with communal tensions, exemplified by conflicts between Fulani herders and farmers in the Middle Belt. Boko Haram exacerbates religious differences, causing widespread violence and displacement in the northeast, further straining government resources (Malefakis 2022).

Economic inequality in Nigeria is marked by a division between the wealthy and the poor. Despite abundant natural resources, many Nigerians live in poverty, lacking access to necessities such as food, clean water, healthcare, and education (Danaan 2018:21). This widespread poverty limits upward mobility and entrenches inequality. Contributing factors include high youth unemployment and wealth concentration among elites linked to political power and corruption, perpetuating the economic divide and marginalising the poor.

Insecurity in Nigeria is another challenge threatening the country's stability and development. Boko Haram has caused widespread violence, displacement, and loss of life, leading to a severe humanitarian crisis (Malefakis 2022). Other groups, like the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and various militant factions, further exacerbate insecurity with violent attacks (Peace 2020). Armed banditry and criminal gangs involved in kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, and cattle rustling have resulted in loss of life, community displacement, and disruption of local economies.

Nigeria's underfunded and inefficient education system limits opportunities for the youth. The underfunded healthcare system barely meets the population's needs. Environmental issues such as oil spills, deforestation, and pollution adversely affect health and livelihoods, especially in the Niger Delta region (Ozondu & Egbunike 2023). Furthermore, the disenfranchisement of eligible voters and other related electoral misconducts affect the outcome of elections. Because of these challenges, disenfranchised youths are likely to engage in protests and criminal activities to express their dissatisfaction and desperation.

Implications of effective governance

The challenges mentioned above hinder development in multiple ways: insecurity deters investment, interrupts

education and healthcare services, and promotes an atmosphere of fear and instability that impedes economic growth and social progress. These negatively affect institutional structures, erode public trust, and impede the establishment of a resilient governance system capable of addressing the needs of the populace. Addressing these challenges requires strong leadership, effective policies, and collaboration between various sectors and stakeholders.

The Church's influence and engagement in Nigerian society

Within the Nigerian leadership issues, the Church emerges as a powerful force with historical, moral, and ethical influence. Christianity's roots run deep in Nigeria and the Church has long served as a pillar of societal values (Mambula 2016). The Church is playing an essential role in shaping community values within the diverse cultural landscape of Nigeria. As an integral part of the social fabric, the Church often served as a custodian of moral and ethical standards. Through its teachings and actions, the Church has the potential to shape the behaviour and mindset of individuals and communities, promoting social justice and equality (Bature 2016; Obiagu 2023). Through religious practices, the Church contributed to the development of communal values that emphasised justice, compassion, and communal harmony (Amadi-Nche & Nwoko 2023). The moral guidance provided by the Church served to establish a foundation for ethical conduct within Nigerian communities.

Beyond its religious practices, the Church plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion. By organising communal gatherings, ceremonies, and shared religious experiences, the Church helps to create a sense of community identity (Adedibu 2018; Agbiboa 2018:7). This cohesion extends beyond religious affiliations, encompassing broader social bonds that are vital for maintaining stability and solidarity within Nigerian society, regardless of religious differences.

The Church's crucial role in Nigeria's leadership

The Church's influence outlined specific strategies for its engagement in addressing Nigeria's leadership crisis. The Church has a transformative impact by actively engaging with political leaders, advocating for good governance, and holding leaders accountable for their actions (Akano 2023; Ijaola & Aderoju 2023:8). Fostering moral and ethical education is another crucial dimension of the Church's role because the Church teaches value-based leadership and nurtures integrity, honesty and justice among future leaders. By promoting these values, the Church advocates higher ethical standards in governance and encourages leaders of all faiths to adopt these principles. In addition, the Church engages in community development projects, provides essential social services, and invests in infrastructure and poverty alleviation. Finally, encouraging political participation and activism among church members create ripple effects of positive change.

The Church's response to Nigeria's leadership challenges

The Church has historically played a vital role in advocating for ethical leadership through its pastoral teachings on governance. The teachings encapsulate a holistic approach, integrating spiritual principles with practical aspects of leadership (Mabey et al. 2017). These teachings offer a moral compass for both leaders and the communities they serve, promoting a vision of governance grounded in justice, service, and ethical responsibility. Pastoral teachings guide the behaviour of individual leaders, not as religious dogma, but as principles for effective leadership and good governance. Drawing from religious principles and moral values, the clergy often delivers messages that emphasise the importance of honesty, integrity, and accountability in the exercise of leadership (Reid & Hogan 2012; Trull & Carter 2004). Christian leaders who exemplify strong ethical behaviour can serve as role models. Their conduct can inspire others, including non-Christians, to adhere to similar standards.

Pastoral teachings also influence societal expectations and norms related to governance. In the face of widespread corruption and ethical concerns within Nigeria's leadership, the Church has taken a proactive stance against these issues (Aiyede et al. 2011). Church leaders frequently speak out against corruption, condemning practices that undermine the welfare of the nation (Smith 2021). The Church's commitment to social justice is reflected in its advocacy for fair distribution of resources, poverty alleviation, and the protection of human rights (Ogbonnaya 2012:9). By consistently addressing these issues, the Church contributes to the moral fabric of society and advocates for a leadership style aligned with ethical principles.

The Church has not been a passive observer but has actively engaged in political activism as a response to Nigeria's leadership challenges. The relationship between the church and political activism has been a dynamic and influential aspect of societal change throughout history. Churches, as influential institutions with moral authority, often find themselves at the forefront of advocating for justice, human rights, and societal transformation (Boff 2012; Thomas Massaro & Massaro 2023). Church leaders, inspired by their commitment to social justice, have been known to participate in public discourse, raise awareness about political issues, and mobilise the public for positive change (Wuthnow 1999). Through sermons, public statements and organised events, the Church has acted as a voice for the marginalised, advocating for policies that promote the common good (Enemali 2022). The church as a significant social institution has the potential to catalyse positive change and contribute to the creation of more just and equitable societies through moral guidance, advocacy for justice, community empowerment, civic education, peacebuilding, and a prophetic stance.

Some segments of the Church recognised the need for collaborative efforts engaged with government institutions to address the leadership conundrum. Partnerships take the

form of advisory roles, participation in governance-related initiatives, or collaboration on social development projects (Carroll 2006). These efforts bridge the gap between the Church and the government, fostering a cooperative approach to addressing the challenges faced by the nation. The Church contributes meaningfully to the resolution of Nigeria's leadership conundrum by participating actively in the discourse on ethical leadership, voicing concerns about corruption, engaging in political activism, and collaborating with government institutions (Agang 2022). Its varied response reflects a commitment to societal well-being and the promotion of values that are fundamental to effective and ethical governance.

Challenges faced by the church

One internal challenge faced by the Church in Nigeria is the presence of denominational differences. The nation is characterised by a rich tapestry of religious diversity, with various Christian denominations coexisting (Anyanwu 2022). Denominational distinctions can sometimes lead to internal competition and divergence in priorities. The challenge lies in fostering unity among the diverse denominations to collectively address the leadership conundrum, as each denomination may have unique perspectives and priorities. Moreover, the theological perspectives on political engagement vary among different segments of the Church. Some theological doctrines emphasise a separation between the sacred and the secular, leading to varying degrees of reluctance or enthusiasm regarding the Church's involvement in political matters (Guth et al. 1997). This poses an internal tension in the church in its involvement in addressing the leadership conundrum. Balancing theological principles is imperative to address societal issues on leadership challenges for ensuring a cohesive and effective approach to the Church's role in shaping ethical governance.

However, the Church in Nigeria faces external pressures of potential political interference. Given its influence and advocacy for ethical leadership, the Church may become a target for political manipulation (Umaru 2020). Government authorities might attempt to influence the Church's stance on specific issues to align with political interests. It is a delicate challenge for the Church to negotiate external pressures while maintaining independence and upholding ethical principles.

On the other hand, the Church is not immune to societal expectations and criticisms. The Church as a prominent social institution faces the challenge of meeting diverse expectations from the public. Some may expect the Church to play a more assertive role in addressing political issues, while others may criticise any perceived overreach into political matters (eds. Heyer, Rozell & Genovese 2008). Striking a balance between meeting societal expectations and adhering to its core mission is a complex external challenge that the Church must navigate. In the face of these challenges, the Church's role in addressing Nigeria's leadership conundrum remains fundamental. Therefore, internal cohesion, theological clarity, resilience against external

pressures, and adept navigation of societal expectations are essential for the Church to contribute effectively to the ethical governance and development of the nation.

The church as a catalyst for change

Given its historical prominence and moral influence, the Church can shape societal values, advocate for ethical leadership, and actively contribute to the nation's development, regardless of the religious affiliations of many top government leaders. Even in a secular and multi-religious context, the Church's moral authority still influences public discourse and societal norms. The research reveals the extent to which the Church has served as a driving force for positive transformations in Nigeria's leadership landscape, based on its historical involvement and current activities. The Church as a catalyst for change is thematically presented, thus:

- **Moral authority and leadership:** The Church, with its moral authority derived from religious principles, stands as a potent force for promoting ethical governance in Nigeria. By emphasising values such as integrity, justice, and compassion, the Church can influence the behaviour of leaders at various levels irrespective of religious affiliations. Leveraging religious teachings, the Church can advocate for ethical decision-making, transparency, and a commitment to the common good, thereby shaping a leadership ethos rooted in moral principles.
- **Inspiring a culture of accountability:** A vital role the Church can play is fostering a culture of accountability within the leadership framework. Through sermons, teachings, and public statements, the Church can encourage leaders, regardless of their religious affiliations, to be accountable for their actions and decisions. Holding leaders to high ethical standards and promoting a sense of responsibility foster an environment where accountability is not only expected but becomes ingrained in the ethos of governance.
- **Proactive measures of social initiatives and community development projects:** The Church can be a catalyst for change by actively engaging in social initiatives and community development projects. Recognising that addressing the leadership conundrum extends beyond rhetoric, the Church can implement tangible programmes that directly impact communities. This may include initiatives focused on education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and empowerment, contributing to the overall well-being of society and addressing root causes of leadership challenges.

Recommendations

The recommendations for this study are directed towards the Church and other stakeholders invested in Nigeria's development. The Church is urged to strengthen internal cohesion, navigate theological tensions, and withstand external pressures to ensure a unified and impactful response to leadership challenges. The Church is also encouraged to continue leveraging its moral authority by actively

participating in political activism, advocating for ethical governance, and implementing tangible social initiatives.

Other stakeholders, including civil society organisations, government institutions, and the general public, are called upon to collaborate with the Church in fostering positive change. A collective commitment to ethical leadership and a shared vision for Nigeria's future can pave the way for a transformed governance landscape that prioritises the well-being and progress of the nation and its people.

Conclusion

This study investigates the roles undertaken by the Church in tackling the leadership predicaments facing Nigeria. It explores historical influences on governance, including pre-colonial systems and colonialism, and analyses contemporary issues such as political instability and corruption. The Church's responses throughout history and today are also discussed, alongside internal challenges and external pressures. Despite obstacles, the Church is portrayed as a force for positive change, utilising its moral authority to inspire accountability and address leadership issues. Although its direct influence on non-Christian leaders may be limited, the Church still plays a crucial role in shaping the broader societal context in which these leaders operate.

This study emphasises the need for a strong, ethical, and accountable leadership framework, advocating for innovative and collaborative approaches. It sees the Church as crucial in shaping ethical governance and fostering accountability, requiring cooperation among stakeholders. By engaging with political leaders and promoting moral education, the Church can drive significant change. However, lasting progress depends on collective action involving the Church, government, civil society, and citizens, aiming to confront Nigeria's leadership challenges and create a brighter future.

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Author's contributions

C.P.O. declares that they are the sole author of this article.

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