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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN NATION-BUILDING: A CHRISTIAN ETHICAL PER

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Abstract

This article critically examines the role of the Church in nation-building from a Christian ethical perspective within the Nigerian context. It argues that the Church, as a moral and spiritual institution, has historically shaped social values, promoted education, advanced healthcare delivery, influenced governance ethics, and fostered civic responsibility among citizens. From the era of early missionary activities to contemporary times, the Church has contributed significantly to Nigeria's moral and social development. However, present-day realities systemic corruption, political instability, insecurity, economic inequality, and moral decline raise urgent questions about the Church's effectiveness and relevance in fulfilling its nation-building mandate. Drawing on biblical ethics, African Christian theology, and prevailing socio-political realities, this study presents the Church as both a prophetic voice and a transformative agent of change. It critically engages African theologians such as John S. Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Bolaji Idowu, and John B. Kato to underscore the enduring relevance of Christian ethics in public life and governance. The paper further explores the Church's roles in education, political accountability, and social justice advocacy, peace building initiatives, moral formation, and community development. The study concludes that sustainable nation-building in Nigeria requires a morally grounded and ethically responsible citizenry, in which the Church remains indispensable. However, to retain credibility and moral authority, the Church must confront internal challenges, including corruption, political compromise, leadership crises, and spiritual complacency. It therefore recommends renewed prophetic engagement, intentional ethical discipleship, and active civic participation.

Keywords: Church, Nation-building, Christian Ethics, Nigeria, African Theology, Public Theology

INTRODUCTION

Nation-building is a complex process involving political stability, economic viability, social cohesion, and moral integrity. In postcolonial Nigeria, this remains deeply contested. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has faced corruption, ethnic fragmentation, religious tensions, insecurity, economic inequality, and weak institutions. Despite abundant resources, the nation struggles to forge unified identity and accountable governance, raising questions about the moral foundations of sustainable nation-building¹. Within this context, the Church occupies a strategic position. As one of Nigeria's largest religious communities, Christianity shapes public consciousness, moral imagination, and civic behaviour. Historically, the Church contributed substantially through missionary-led education, healthcare, and welfare initiatives, functioning as a moral compass shaping honesty, justice, compassion, and communal responsibility. Yet systemic corruption and moral decline persist despite a large Christian population, inviting critical reflection on the Church's contemporary effectiveness².

Biblically, the Church is a public and ethical body called to influence society. Jesus' description of followers as "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13–16) underscores responsibility to preserve moral order and illuminate social structures. Jeremiah 29:7 exhorts God's people to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city," positioning faith communities as obligated to pursue broader societal welfare³. African Christian theology strengthens this public orientation. Rooted in communal worldview, African theology understands personhood as relational and emphasizes collective responsibility. Mbiti's formulation, "I am because we are," captures this ethos. Christian faith cannot be reduced to private spirituality; it carries unavoidable social and political implications, extending the Church's ethical mission beyond personal salvation to societal transformation.

This study examines the Church's nation-building role from a Christian ethical perspective in Nigeria. It argues that while the Church historically contributed to development, its contemporary impact is constrained by internal inconsistencies and external pressures. Drawing on biblical ethics, African Christian theology, and Nigeria's socio-political realities, it evaluates the Church's prophetic and transformative responsibilities, contending that sustainable nation-building requires a morally grounded citizenry and that the Church when faithful to its theological identity remains indispensable⁴.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Nation-Building

Nation-building refers to deliberately fostering unified national identity, strengthening institutions, and promoting social cohesion⁵. It involves political stability, economic development, social justice, and cultivating shared values transcending ethnic, religious, and regional divisions. In Nigeria, this is significant due to ethnic plurality, colonial legacy, and recurring tensions. Beyond institutional development, nation-building has a moral dimension: it requires citizens embodying integrity, responsibility, and commitment to the common good⁶. Thus, it is not merely governmental but a collective moral enterprise involving civil society, religious institutions, and individuals.

Church

Theologically, the Church is the community of believers in Jesus Christ, called to live according to God's will and bear witness to the

gospel. It is described as Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:27) and a chosen people entrusted with proclaiming God's purposes (1 Peter 2:9)⁷. Sociologically, it refers to organized Christian institutions, denominations, ministries, and congregations. In Nigeria, this includes historic mission-founded denominations, Pentecostal/Charismatic movements, and independent ministries⁸. As a visible, structured presence, the Church functions as both spiritual community and social institution influencing education, healthcare, governance ethics, and public discourse⁹.

Christian Ethics and Public Responsibility

Christian Ethics

Christian ethics refers to moral principles derived from biblical revelation, Christ's teachings, and Christian theological tradition, guiding personal conduct and public responsibility. Central themes include love, justice, mercy, integrity, stewardship, and accountability¹⁰. In Nigeria, Christian ethics must address private morality and public life, demanding Christ-like character in family relationships, economic practices, political participation, and civic engagement¹¹.

Biblical Foundations

The Bible presents a strong ethical framework for societal transformation: Jeremiah 29:7 ("Seek the peace and prosperity of the city"); Matthew 5:13–16 (Church as salt and light); Micah 6:8 (justice, mercy, and humility); Romans 13:1–7 (responsibility toward governing authorities). These texts affirm that believers actively shape moral and civic order, not isolated from societal responsibility⁶.

African Christian Theology

African Christian theology insists faith is profoundly communal and public. Unlike Western individualism, it situates individuals within broader networks of family, community, and society, making moral responsibility extend beyond private piety to public accountability¹². Mbiti's "I am because we are" captures this ethos, suggesting faith must be expressed through active contribution to community well-being, including political, economic, and social dimensions¹³.

Bediako argues Christianity in Africa must be culturally rooted and transformative¹⁴. Yet Nigeria's persistent corruption and civic irresponsibility despite its large Christian populations suggest theological affirmations haven't translated into ethical transformation¹⁵. Many Christians participate in systemic dysfunction, reflecting compartmentalized faith shaped by cultural accommodation rather than biblical discipleship.

Kato cautions that theological shallowness leads to ethical compromise, especially when the Church fails to address societal issues with doctrinal clarity and moral courage¹⁶. Prosperity theology's dominance privatizes faith, producing Christians active in church life but passive or complicit in national moral crises¹⁷.

African Christian theology must move beyond conceptual relevance to transformative praxis. Theological concepts must become ethical habits, doctrinal affirmations must become civic commitments, and communal ontology must translate into concrete practices of accountability, servant leadership, and honest governance¹⁸.

Historical Role and Contemporary Crisis

The tension between numerical growth and moral influence is a theological crisis. Nigeria hosts one of Africa's largest Christian populations, yet this hasn't produced public integrity, institutional accountability, or civic virtue. This paradox reflects structural problems in how the Nigerian Church conceives its mission, counts

success, rewards leaders, and forms members. Kalu observed that Nigeria's explosive Christian growth has been driven by "pneumatic" religiosity experience-centered faith prioritizing spiritual encounter over ethical formation¹⁹. When spiritual experience detaches from discipleship's moral demands, the Church risks producing Bonhoeffer's "cheap grace": forgiveness without repentance, community without accountability, worship without obedience²⁰. Ukah argues many Nigerian churches have become "total institutions," creating self-contained worlds that absorb members' energies without redirecting them toward societal transformation²¹.

Historic mission churches have maintained traditions of institutional engagement, and Nigeria's Catholic Bishops' Conference has issued pastoral letters on corruption, electoral violence, and economic injustice. However, institutional statements don't produce moral transformation, and the gap between official Church positions and members' habitual practices remains damaging²². The deeper problem is catechetical: the Church has failed to develop sustained pedagogy of public ethics shaping believers' moral imagination regarding civic responsibilities. Prosperity teaching frames the gospel as personal advancement, and ethical preaching rarely engages structural injustice, resulting in emotionally rich but ethically thin Christianity extraordinary worship devotion alongside extraordinary accommodation to systemic corruption²³.

Mugambi argues the post-colonial African Church faces a choice between Christianity of consolation and Christianity of reconstruction²⁴. The Nigerian Church has defaulted toward consolation, offering spiritual sustenance amid state failures without mobilizing believers to address those failures. Church leaders seeking prophetic witness have instead accommodated political power, trading public silence on governance failures for institutional protection and financial patronage²⁵. Renewal demands recovery of the theological seriousness about the Church's public calling. Discipleship is inherently civic; following Jesus forms patterns of justice, truthfulness, mercy, and accountability that cannot be confined to the sanctuary. The Sermon on the Mount carries an irreducibly political vision, and Micah 6:8 is a prophetic demand to a community whose public conduct fell short. The Nigerian Church must preach these texts as if they have immediate consequences for how members vote, conduct professional lives, and respond to institutional corruption²⁶.

Concretely, this requires developing intentional formation processes connecting theological conviction to civic conduct as persistent year-round work. It means holding Church institutions to financial transparency standards, refusing corrupt political patronage, and investing seriously in forming young Nigerians for ethical leadership across public life not merely as professionally successful individuals but as morally accountable citizens oriented toward the common good²⁷.

Contemporary Nation-Building Challenges

Nigeria's socio-political challenges corruption, insecurity, inequality are deeply moral and spiritual crises within the Church's ethical domain. The biblical mandate to seek society's welfare (Jeremiah 29:7) underscores this responsibility. However, the Church is not removed from these challenges; it has been weakened by internal inconsistencies and external compromises. Prosperity-centered teachings shift focus from ethical responsibility to personal gain, reflecting Stott's warning about the Church losing balance between spiritual devotion and social responsibility²⁸.

The Church's engagement is often reactive rather than proactive. Statements are made, but sustained involvement is limited. Kato's warning remains relevant: a Church neglecting ethical responsibility risks losing its prophetic voice²⁹. Nation-building requires consistent, intentional engagement with societal realities³⁰.

Ethical Role and Complicity

Nigeria's crises corruption hollowing public institutions, insecurity displacing millions, inequality reproducing across generations are moral catastrophes within the Church's ethical domain. Jeremiah's counsel to exiles to seek the city's welfare was not passive accommodation but active, costly investment in flourishing society³¹. The Church's complicity is not always incidental. The prosperity gospel, reshaping Nigerian Christianity's theological imagination, doesn't merely distract from ethical responsibility; it actively legitimates acquisitive instincts driving corruption. When divine favor is measured in material accumulation, the boundary between faith and greed blurs, and the Church loses moral vocabulary to speak credibly against national destruction³².

The Church's engagement has been structurally reactive issuing statements after electoral violence, mobilizing prayers when insecurity becomes intolerable, declaring fasts in response to economic deterioration that Church members helped engineer. This pattern confuses visibility with engagement and religious sincerity with moral seriousness. Kato's warning retains force because the Church demonstrates that intense public religious presence can coexist with steady loss of prophetic voice. A Church speaking loudly in crisis but falling silent between crises has developed a theology of public relations, not public responsibility³³.

Nation-building is not seasonal but slow, structurally demanding, personally costly work forming citizens whose moral habits make just institutions possible. This requires moving from occasional prophetic declaration to consistent ethical formation, accepting that such formation produces friction within Church walls before societal transformation³⁴.

Challenges Engulfing the Church

The ethical responsibility cannot be discharged through occasional moral pronouncements or passive maintenance of religious respectability. It demands sustained, theologically grounded, institutionally embodied commitment to transforming persons and structures. Jesus' description of followers as salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16) carries irreversible logic: salt that loses savor cannot recover it through intensified religious activity, and light hidden under a bowl illuminates nothing. The Nigerian Church must reckon with having become internally luminous but externally invisible in morally meaningful ways³⁵. Reclaiming prophetic role requires recovering theological integrity that gives prophetic speech authority. The call to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly (Micah 6:8) is addressed to community, with structural as much as personal demands.

Moral formation through discipleship is where this structural demand becomes most concretely ecclesial. Nation-building depends on citizens' character—capacity for truthfulness under pressure, willingness to subordinate personal advantage to communal obligation, and resistance to normalized corruption. Mbiti's communal framework captures something the Church affirms theologically but fails to pursue pedagogically³⁶. The Church cannot form morally serious citizens through weekly worship alone, however theologically rich. It requires intentional, sustained, practically oriented formation connecting doctrinal conviction to daily conduct in marketplace, civil service, classroom, and polling

booth. This formation is slow, producing no immediately visible metrics, which is why it has been neglected for faster, quantifiable programs. This neglect has been costly across Nigerian public life³⁷.

Civic engagement, understood theologically rather than merely politically, is the necessary expression of this formation. Bediako's insistence that faith must remain relevant to public life shaping not only personal spirituality but structures and systems organizing common existence recovery of the gospel's full social vision³⁸. Nigerian Christians occupying institutional positions in government, judiciary, education, security services, and business carry vocational obligations that church membership intensifies. The Church must say this clearly, repeatedly, with theological substance. Encouraging responsible governance participation is insufficient without formation making such participation possible under institutional pressure, personal risk, and systemic temptation. The gap between exhortation and formation is where the Church's nation-building mandate most consistently collapses; closing that gap is its most urgent ethical task³⁹.

The Way Forward

The Church's future role depends less on public statement frequency than on embracing deep theological renewal and institutional reform. Much contemporary teaching is spiritually vibrant but ethically thin. Preaching emphasizes personal breakthrough, private blessing, and individual advancement, while harder demands of justice, truthfulness, public accountability, and neighbourly responsibility receive limited attention. The pulpit must recover moral weight, engaging real Nigerian life texture corruption in public office, business dishonesty, political violence, ethnic suspicion, normalized moral compromise. This is not partisan preaching but preaching that takes the gospel seriously by taking society seriously⁴⁰.

Theological education must change. Seminaries, Bible colleges, and denominational training should treat public theology, Christian ethics, and civic responsibility as central to ministerial formation. A minister who can interpret Scripture but cannot think clearly about justice, power, and governance is ill-prepared for Nigeria⁴¹. Youth formation is equally urgent. Nigeria's youthful population means the Church's future impact depends on how it forms young people today. Youth must be shaped not merely as enthusiastic church participants but as morally grounded public life leaders. Mentorship should cultivate integrity, courage, and moral judgment, preparing young Christians to navigate corruption, patronage systems, and institutional pressure without compromising faith⁴².

Finally, the Church's public credibility depends on internal integrity. A Church demanding state accountability while tolerating opacity or financial impropriety within its structures speaks with a divided voice. Transparency, accountable leadership, and servant authority must become non-negotiable. Without internal reform, the Church's public witness remains weakened⁴³. The Nigerian Church must recover its identity as a transformative community rather than merely a successful religious institution. The gospel addresses the whole of life. If the Church embraces this conviction with humility and courage, it can engage nation-building not naively but faithfully, accepting the cost of moral consistency in public life.

CONCLUSION

Nation-building in Nigeria remains urgent and complex, demanding collective effort from political institutions, civil society, and religious bodies. The Church occupies a uniquely strategic position as a moral, spiritual, and social institution. Rooted in biblical ethics

and African communal values, it is inherently called to function as a transformative agent. This study shows that although the Nigerian Church has made significant historical contributions to education, healthcare, and social development, its contemporary influence is often weakened by internal inconsistencies and external pressures. Corruption, political compromise, theological imbalance, and ethical complacency have limited its effectiveness as a credible moral voice. As Kato cautions, a Church losing theological depth and moral grounding risks losing prophetic relevance.

Yet these limitations don't erase the Church's potential; they highlight the need for intentional renewal and ethical reawakening. Drawing from Mbiti's communal vision and Bediako's insistence on contextually engaged Christianity, African Christianity must remain theologically rooted and publicly responsible. Nation-building is not merely political but moral. Nigeria's crises—corruption, injustice, insecurity, division—are fundamentally ethical. Sustainable solutions require forming morally responsible citizens, placing discipleship at the center of the Church's mandate. A Church pursuing numerical growth without ethical transformation undermines its nation-building vocation.

Recovering prophetic identity is essential, demanding consistent courage to confront injustice even at institutional or personal cost. As Stott argues, the Church must engage society without conforming, maintaining relevance and integrity. In Nigeria, this means resisting political manipulation while actively shaping civic consciousness. Internal reform is indispensable; the credibility of the Church's public witness depends on internal transparency, accountability, and servant leadership. Without these, moral interventions lack persuasive force.

Looking ahead, the Church's contribution will depend significantly on engaging the next generation. With Nigeria's rapidly growing youth population, the Church must move beyond routine programming and intentionally mentor young people for ethical leadership across society. If it embraces this calling with theological seriousness and moral consistency, the Church can still serve as a decisive agent of renewal in Nigeria's ongoing nation-building project.

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