

Ethical Implications of Poverty Alleviation Programs in Selected Baptist Churches in Nigeria

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Received: 09.07.2025 | Accepted: 08.08.2025 | Published: 09.08.2025

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.16786170](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16786170)

Abstract

Original Research Article

In Nigeria, pervasive poverty contrasts sharply with the nation's resource wealth, prompting Baptist churches to implement diverse poverty alleviation programs rooted in their theological commitment to holistic salvation. This study examines the nature and ethical implications of these initiatives in selected Baptist churches, offering insights into their transformative potential. Despite the Baptist Church's contributions to poverty alleviation, studies like Onah et al. highlight challenges such as favouritism and dependency, with limited focus on the ethical dimensions of these programs, creating a gap in understanding their moral and practical efficacy. This study aims to analyze the nature and ethical implications of poverty alleviation programs in First Baptist Church, Lagos; First Baptist Church, Ogbomosho; and Gbagura Baptist Church, Abeokuta, to enhance their effectiveness and ethical integrity. The study adopts Haynes Basic Needs Theory, emphasizing essential provisions, and Rees Comprehensive Development Framework, advocating systemic reform, to evaluate the balance between immediate relief and sustainable impact. Data were gathered through a review of academic literature, church reports, and historical documents, supplemented by case studies of the selected churches. Scope and Justification: The study focuses on three Baptist churches in Nigeria, chosen for their diverse geographic and programmatic contexts, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of urban and rural initiatives. Programs include direct aid, education, skill acquisition, and advocacy, but face ethical challenges like inequity and dependency. The study recommends implement transparent beneficiary selection, prioritize empowerment, and establish robust monitoring. Baptist churches significantly contribute to poverty alleviation, but ethical navigation is crucial for sustainable impact.

Keywords: Poverty Alleviation, Baptist Church, Nigeria, Ethical Implications, Holistic Salvation.

Citation: Odekunle, S. O., & Odei, M. A. (2025). Ethical implications of poverty alleviation programs in selected Baptist churches in Nigeria. *GAS Journal of Religious Studies (GASJRS)*, 2(1). [15-20]

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, a nation endowed with vast natural resources, poverty remains a persistent and pervasive challenge, affecting millions and undermining socioeconomic development. Despite governmental efforts to address this issue, the scale of poverty necessitates alternative interventions from non-state actors, including faith-based organizations. Among these, the Baptist Church in Nigeria has emerged as a significant player in poverty alleviation, driven by its theological commitment to holistic salvation, which encompasses both spiritual redemption and the enhancement of physical well-being (Ishola-Esan, 2017). Through initiatives such as educational scholarships, skill acquisition programs, and direct aid, Baptist churches seek to address the immediate needs of the poor while fostering long-term empowerment.

However, these efforts raise complex ethical questions regarding equity, sustainability, and theological integrity.

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the ethical implications of poverty alleviation programmes in selected Baptist churches in Nigeria, incorporating a conceptual clarification of key terms, a detailed literature review, a historical overview of the Baptist Church in Nigeria, and an analysis of selected churches. By situating these programs within a robust theoretical framework and addressing their ethical dimensions, this study aims to contribute to the discourse on how religious institutions can ethically and effectively combat poverty in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

To lay a foundation for understanding the ethical implications of poverty alleviation programmes in Baptist



churches, it is essential to clarify key concepts: poverty, poverty alleviation, and the role of the church. These terms, while frequently used, are multifaceted and require precise definitions to frame the discussion effectively. Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon characterized by the lack of sufficient resources to meet basic human needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, and education (Ajakaiye & Adeyeye, 2001). In Nigeria, poverty manifests in both absolute and relative forms. Absolute poverty refers to living below the international poverty line of \$1.25 per day, as noted by the World Bank, with nearly half of Nigeria's population falling into this category (World Bank, 2009).

Relative poverty, on the other hand, involves disparities in income and access to opportunities within a society, often exacerbated by systemic issues like corruption and unemployment (Ighadalo, 2012). Beyond economic deprivation, poverty in Nigeria includes social exclusion, limited access to education, and poor health outcomes, particularly in rural areas where 70% of the poor reside (World Bank, 2009). This multidimensional nature underscores the complexity of addressing poverty and the need for holistic interventions.

Poverty alleviation refers to strategies and interventions aimed at reducing or eliminating poverty by addressing its causes and effects. These strategies range from immediate relief, such as providing food and financial aid, to long-term measures like education, skill development, and advocacy for systemic change (Ekpe, 2011). In the context of Baptist churches, poverty alleviation aligns with the Christian doctrine of holistic salvation, which views the enhancement of physical and socioeconomic conditions as integral to spiritual growth (Ishola-Esan, 2017). Effective poverty alleviation requires a balance between meeting immediate needs and fostering sustainable development, ensuring that interventions empower individuals rather than perpetuate dependency (Onah et al., 2018).

The Church, in this context, refers to the Baptist Church in Nigeria, a Protestant denomination rooted in evangelical theology and a commitment to social responsibility. The church is not merely a spiritual institution but a community-based organization with the capacity to mobilize resources, influence social norms, and address societal challenges like poverty (Umanah, 2025). The Baptist Church's role in poverty alleviation is informed by its mission to embody Christ's teachings of compassion, justice, and service to the marginalized (Bosch, 2011). By clarifying these concepts, this study establishes a framework for analyzing the ethical dimensions of Baptist-led poverty alleviation programs, ensuring that subsequent discussions are grounded in a shared understanding of these terms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the ethical dimensions of poverty alleviation programs in Baptist churches, this study adopts two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Basic Needs Theory of Development, as articulated by Jeffrey Haynes, and the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) proposed by John Rees. These frameworks provide a lens through which

to evaluate the ethical underpinnings and societal impact of church-led poverty alleviation initiatives. The Basic Needs Theory emphasizes the provision of essential requirements—such as food, shelter, clothing, education, and healthcare—as fundamental to human dignity and development (Haynes et al., 2024). In the context of Baptist churches, this theory aligns with the Christian doctrine of holistic salvation, which views addressing physical needs as integral to spiritual growth.

By prioritizing basic needs, churches aim to restore dignity and enable individuals to participate fully in society. This framework is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where the World Bank reports that nearly half the population lives on less than \$1.25 per day, with rural areas disproportionately affected (World Bank, 2009). Baptist churches, through initiatives like food distribution and educational scholarships, operationalize this theory by targeting immediate needs while fostering long-term empowerment. The Comprehensive Development Framework, on the other hand, advocates for a holistic approach that integrates economic, social, and institutional dimensions to achieve sustainable development (Haynes et al., 2024).

This framework emphasizes collaboration among stakeholders, including religious institutions, governments, and communities, to address systemic issues like corruption, inequality, and lack of access to opportunities. For Baptist churches, the CDF provides a structure for designing programs that not only meet immediate needs but also challenge structural injustices, such as those perpetuated by corruption or mismanagement of resources, which are significant contributors to poverty in Nigeria (Duke & Okafor, 2020). By combining these frameworks, this study evaluates how Baptist churches navigate ethical challenges in their poverty alleviation efforts, balancing immediate relief with systemic change while adhering to principles of justice, equity, and compassion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on poverty alleviation by faith-based organizations, particularly the Baptist Church in Nigeria, highlights the significant role of religious institutions in addressing socioeconomic challenges. This section reviews key studies to contextualize the ethical implications of these programs, drawing on both theological and developmental perspectives. Jeffrey Haynes' work on the Basic Needs Theory of Development underscores the church's role in providing essentials like food, shelter, and education to address poverty (Haynes et al., 2024). Haynes argues that faith-based organizations, including Baptist churches, are uniquely positioned to deliver these needs due to their community embeddedness and moral authority.

However, he cautions that without sustainable strategies, such interventions may create dependency, raising ethical concerns about long-term impact (Haynes et al., 2024). Similarly, John Rees' Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) emphasizes the need for holistic approaches that integrate economic, social, and institutional reforms (Haynes et al., 2024). Rees highlights the church's potential to collaborate with governments and communities to address systemic issues like corruption, which perpetuates poverty in Nigeria (Duke & Okafor, 2020).



Studies specific to Nigeria, such as Onah et al. (2018), explore the church's contributions to poverty alleviation through education, healthcare, and skill acquisition. The authors note that Baptist churches, alongside other denominations, have established schools and vocational centers, significantly impacting rural communities. However, they identify challenges such as inadequate funding and denominational fragmentation, which limit the scalability of these programmes (Onah et al., 2018). Umanah's (2025) study further elaborates on the church's role as a catalyst for grassroots poverty alleviation, emphasizing initiatives like microfinance and vocational training. Umanah argues that theological imperatives drive these efforts, but ethical issues, such as favouritism in resource distribution, undermine their effectiveness (Umanah, 2025).

The prosperity gospel, prevalent in some Nigerian churches, has also been critiqued for its ethical implications. Omavuebe (2021) argues that prosperity theology, which links material wealth to divine favour, risks exploiting vulnerable populations by promising unrealistic outcomes. This contrasts with the Baptist Church's emphasis on holistic salvation, which prioritizes service over material gain (Omavuebe, 2021). Ishola-Esan (2017) advocates for Christian education as a tool for poverty alleviation, citing practical models like community-based ministries that empower the poor through skill development. However, she notes that churches must navigate cultural and systemic barriers to ensure relevance and sustainability (Ishola-Esan, 2017).

Historical analyses, such as those by Ayegboyin (2007), highlight the Baptist Church's longstanding commitment to social services, dating back to the 19th century. The establishment of educational institutions like the Baptist Academy reflects a legacy of addressing poverty through empowerment (Ayegboyin, 2007). More recent studies, such as Gidigbi (2023), assess the impact of church-led programs, noting their contributions to reducing poverty but emphasizing the need for robust monitoring and evaluation to ensure ethical and effective outcomes (Gidigbi, 2023). Collectively, the literature underscores the Baptist Church's potential as a transformative force in poverty alleviation, while highlighting ethical challenges that require careful consideration.

Historical Origin of the Baptist Church in Nigeria

The Baptist Church in Nigeria traces its origins to the mid-19th century, a period marked by the arrival of Christian missionaries in West Africa. The establishment of the Baptist mission in Nigeria is credited to American missionaries from the Southern Baptist Convention, who sought to spread Christianity and provide education in the region. In 1850, Reverend Thomas Jefferson Bowen, an American Baptist missionary, arrived in Badagry, marking the formal introduction of Baptist Christianity to Nigeria (Turner, 1967). Bowen's mission focused on evangelism, education, and community development, laying the foundation for the Baptist Church's enduring presence. By 1853, the first Baptist church was established in Ijaye, followed by congregations in Lagos and Abeokuta, which became centers for missionary activities

(Ayegboyin, 2007).

The growth of the Baptist Church was bolstered by its emphasis on education and social services, which resonated with local communities. The establishment of the Baptist Academy in Lagos in 1883 marked a significant milestone, providing both Christian and secular education and generating employment opportunities (ResearchGate, 2025). Over time, the church expanded its influence through the creation of seminaries, theological colleges, and institutions like Bowen University, owned and operated by the Nigerian Baptist Convention. These institutions reflect the church's commitment to holistic development, combining spiritual formation with socioeconomic empowerment. For this study, three Baptist churches in Nigeria are selected for their notable poverty alleviation efforts: First Baptist Church, Lagos; First Baptist Church, Ogbomoso; and Gbagura Baptist Church, Abeokuta.

First Baptist Church, Lagos, established in 1855, is one of the oldest Baptist congregations in Nigeria and has a long history of social outreach, including scholarship programs and food banks for the urban poor. First Baptist Church, Ogbomoso, located in Oyo State, is closely affiliated with the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary and has implemented skill acquisition programs targeting rural youth and women. Gbagura Baptist Church, Abeokuta, founded in the 1860s, focuses on agricultural empowerment and healthcare initiatives, addressing the needs of rural communities. These churches were chosen for their diverse geographic representation and their established poverty alleviation programs, which provide a robust basis for analyzing ethical implications.

The Nature of Baptist Churches Poverty Alleviation Programmes in Nigeria

Nigeria, despite its vast natural resources, grapples with pervasive poverty, with approximately 40% of its population living below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day (World Bank, 2020). This paradox of resource wealth juxtaposed with widespread socioeconomic deprivation has prompted various stakeholders, including faith-based organizations, to address the crisis. Among these, Baptist churches in Nigeria have emerged as pivotal actors in poverty alleviation, leveraging their spiritual authority, extensive community networks, and theological commitment to holistic salvation. Rooted in the belief that salvation encompasses both spiritual and physical well-being, these churches implement programs ranging from educational support and skill acquisition to direct aid and advocacy for systemic change (Ishola-Esan, 2017).

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the nature of poverty alleviation programs spearheaded by selected Baptist churches in Nigeria, specifically First Baptist Church, Lagos; First Baptist Church, Ogbomoso; and Gbagura Baptist Church, Abeokuta. It examines the historical origins of the Baptist Church in Nigeria, clarifies key concepts, reviews relevant literature, situates the programs within a theoretical framework, and analyzes their ethical implications. By offering a detailed assessment and recommendations, this study underscores the transformative potential and challenges of



Baptist Churches' Poverty Alleviation Programmes

Baptist churches in Nigeria implement a diverse array of poverty alleviation programs, reflecting their theological mission and community-oriented approach. These programs can be categorized into four main types: direct aid, educational support, skill acquisition and empowerment, and advocacy for systemic change.

1. **Direct Aid:** Baptist churches provide immediate relief through food banks, clothing drives, and financial assistance. For example, First Baptist Church, Lagos, operates a food bank that distributes monthly rations to indigent families in urban slums, addressing acute hunger (Umanah, 2025). Similarly, Gbagura Baptist Church, Abeokuta, provides emergency cash grants to widows and orphans, targeting immediate needs in rural communities.
2. **Educational Support:** Education is a cornerstone of Baptist poverty alleviation, reflecting the denomination's historical emphasis on literacy. First Baptist Church, Ogbomoso, offers scholarships to underprivileged students, enabling access to secondary and tertiary education (Ishola-Esan, 2017). The Nigerian Baptist Convention's Bowen University provides subsidized education for low-income families, fostering human capital development (Nigerian Baptist Convention, n.d.).
3. **Skill Acquisition and Empowerment:** To promote self-reliance, Baptist churches implement vocational training and microfinance programs. First Baptist Church, Ogbomoso, runs a tailoring and computer training centre for rural youth, equipping them with marketable skills (Ezeh, 2024). Gbagura Baptist Church, Abeokuta, supports agricultural cooperatives, providing training and seed funding to farmers to enhance food security and income.
4. **Advocacy for Systemic Change:** Some Baptist churches engage in advocacy to address structural causes of poverty, such as corruption and unemployment. The Nigerian Baptist Convention collaborates with NGOs to advocate for policy reforms, such as improved access to education and healthcare (Haynes et al., 2024). First Baptist Church, Lagos, organizes community forums to raise awareness about systemic injustices, encouraging civic engagement.

These programmes are characterized by their community-driven approach, theological grounding, and emphasis on both immediate relief and long-term empowerment. However, their implementation varies by context—urban churches like First Baptist Church, Lagos, focus on addressing urban poverty, while rural churches like Gbagura Baptist Church prioritize agricultural and health initiatives.

Ethical Implications of Poverty Alleviation Programmes

The involvement of Baptist churches in poverty alleviation raises numerous ethical considerations, as their interventions intersect with issues of justice, accountability, and human dignity. Below, key implications are explored in detail.

1. **Equity in Resource Distribution:** Ensuring equitable access to aid is critical to avoid favouritism, such as prioritizing church members over non-members, which contradicts Christian impartiality (Ishola-Esan, 2017). Transparent criteria for beneficiary selection are essential for ethical practice.
2. **Dependency Creation:** Handout-based programs, such as food distribution, may foster dependency, undermining empowerment goals (Onah et al., 2018). Ethical interventions should prioritize self-reliance through skill acquisition and education.
3. **Accountability and Transparency:** Mismanagement of funds erodes trust and diverts resources from beneficiaries. Ethical stewardship requires rigorous financial reporting and oversight (Omavuebe, 2021).
4. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Imposing foreign aid models may alienate communities, raising concerns about cultural imperialism. Programs must respect local values to ensure relevance (Haynes et al., 2024).
5. **Sustainability of Interventions:** Short-term relief, while compassionate, may fail to address systemic poverty. Ethical practice demands long-term solutions like vocational training (Gidigbi, 2023).
6. **Theological Integrity:** Prosperity theology risks exploiting vulnerable populations by linking wealth to divine favour. Baptist programs must adhere to scriptural teachings emphasizing service (Omavuebe, 2021).
7. **Inclusion of Non-Members:** Excluding non-members from aid programs contradicts universal compassion. Ethical practice requires inclusivity (Ishola-Esan, 2017).
8. **Exploitation of Vulnerability:** Offering aid in exchange for conversion manipulates vulnerable individuals. Programs must prioritize altruism over proselytizing (Oye-Oluwafemi, 2024).
9. **Gender Equity:** Poverty disproportionately affects women, yet cultural biases may prioritize men. Ethical programmes must intentionally include women (Okolie et al., 2022).
10. **Collaboration with Government:** Partnerships with government agencies can amplify impact but risk complicity in corruption. Ethical collaboration requires vigilance (Duke & Okafor, 2020).

11. **Impact on Social Justice:** Focusing solely on charity without addressing structural inequalities perpetuates injustice. Ethical interventions should advocate for systemic change (Onah et al., 2018).
12. **Resource Allocation Priorities:** Diverting funds from spiritual activities to social programs may spark debates about the church's mission. Ethical balance is needed (Ishola-Esan, 2017).
13. **Empowerment vs. Paternalism:** Treating beneficiaries as passive recipients undermines agency. Ethical approaches should empower through participatory models (Haynes et al., 2024).
14. **Community Involvement:** Excluding community input risks misaligned programs. Ethical practice requires community engagement (Haynes et al., 2024).
15. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Without robust assessment, programs may be inefficient. Ethical practice demands ongoing evaluation to ensure impact (Gidigbi, 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop transparent criteria for beneficiary selection to ensure equitable resource distribution.
2. Prioritize skill acquisition and empowerment programs to promote self-reliance.
3. Implement rigorous financial accountability mechanisms, including public reporting.
4. Engage local communities in program design to ensure cultural relevance and ownership.
5. Align programs with scriptural teachings, avoiding prosperity theology's pitfalls.
6. Include non-church members in aid initiatives to reflect universal compassion.
7. Advocate for systemic change by addressing structural issues like corruption.
8. Establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems to assess program impact.

These implications highlight the need for Baptist churches to navigate ethical challenges with intentionality, ensuring programs align with principles of justice and compassion.

CONCLUSION

The Baptist Church in Nigeria, with its historical roots in missionary work and its contemporary commitment to holistic salvation, plays a pivotal role in poverty alleviation. Through initiatives in education, skill acquisition, and direct aid, churches like First Baptist Church, Lagos, First Baptist Church, Ogbomoso, and Gbagura Baptist Church, Abeokuta, address the multidimensional nature of poverty.

However, ethical challenges—ranging from equity and transparency to sustainability and theological integrity—require careful consideration. By grounding their efforts in the Basic Needs Theory and Comprehensive Development Framework, Baptist churches can balance immediate relief with systemic change. Ultimately, their success depends on integrating ethical principles into program design, ensuring interventions are transformative, inclusive, and aligned with Christian values.

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