



NAVIGATING INSECURITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH GROWTH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The current level of insecurity in Nigeria is such that it has become a matter of international concern, particularly with reference to its effect on the Church and the growth of the Church in Nigeria. This paper examines how pervasive insecurity in Nigeria has affected the growth of the Christian church, using secondary data from international monitoring organisations, humanitarian agencies, and news reporting. It documents recent trends in killings, kidnappings, attacks on church property, and internal displacement and links those trends to measurable and qualitative impacts on church life and growth (attendance, planting, leadership capacity, evangelism, and institutional development). Particular attention is paid to the United States government's redesignation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for severe violations of religious freedom by President Donald Trump and the national and international reactions to that decision. Findings show that high levels of violence, displacement, and church/clergy-targeted attacks have curtailed church planting, reduced congregational attendance, disrupted pastoral leadership and social ministries, and shifted church priorities toward survival and relief work rather than evangelistic expansion. The paper concludes with policy and church-level recommendations to mitigate the adverse effects and to sustain healthy church growth under insecurity.

Keywords: Nigeria, insecurity, church growth, Christian persecution, Country of Particular Concern,

Introduction

The declaration of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) by President Donald Trump of the USA on 31 October 2025 has generated a lot of issues globally, and this declaration has to do with the current insecurity situation in Nigeria, with particular reference to Christian Genocide. While the Nigerian government is trying to deny and defend this, the fact remains that the reality speaks for itself. Going back to memory lane, Nigeria used to be a peaceful nation where one could travel even at night without any fear except that of armed robbers in some cases. Nigeria, which happens to be a multiethnic and multicultural nation, stands as the heartbeat of the African continent and is usually referred to as the giant of Africa. One of the strengths of Nigeria as a nation before now is peace and unity; this was what made the amalgamation of 1st January, 1914 by Sir Fredric Lugard possible (Falola, T & Heaton, M. 2008) because of the



peaceful co-existence among the people of the most populous nation on the African continent called Nigeria. A nation so blessed by God with many natural and mineral resources for self-sustenance. A nation with the best brains and hardworking citizens who are highly patriotic.

Historically, Nigeria is a religious nation where each citizen is an adherent of one religion or the other, and religious beliefs never cause any division among the people of Nigeria. The early Christian missionaries brought the gospel to this peaceful nation and were able to spread it trekking miles in the forest between one community and the other without any fear except that of malaria. Church planting and growth in Nigeria was faster with many converts, and with time, apart from the missionary church, there came up numerous indigenous Churches not only in the cities but also in the rural areas. However, the once most peaceful nation suddenly becomes a dreadful nation as a result of the insecurity of lives and properties. The work of missions became seriously challenged, and the insecure situation became a challenge to Church growth in the nation. In recent times, attacks on Churches across the nation have become a thing of particular concern, leading to the closure of Churches or the reduction of hours of worship, as the case may be, in most parts of Nigeria. Many churches have to cancel their scheduled programme, and many have become highly skeptical about the work of mission and evangelism. Many people have been kidnapped right from the Church, and many have lost their lives in the process. The insecure situation in Nigeria has therefore had serious implications on the Church, drastically affecting Church growth, and it is important that attention is given to this with the intention to recommend the possible way out towards the growth and development of the Church in Nigeria.

The Church and Church Growth

The Church

The word Church is ordinarily used to refer to the assembly or congregation of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Theologically, the word is used for both the Universal Church and the local Assembly. "Church" is an English word derived from the Greek word ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*), which primarily means "the called out ones." It is a combination of *ek* (out of) and *klessia* (call out). It has a German translation, which is *kirech* and the Dutch *kerk*. The Greek word used in the early church history soon became used for a congregation of people who believe in Christ's birth, life, ministry, death, burial, and resurrection. It also means belonging to the Lord and was applied originally to a Church building (Cross and Livingstone, 1998). Technically, it is "a group of called out believers in Jesus Christ." (Enns, 1989) ἐκκλησία (*Ekklesia*) appears about one hundred and twelve (112) times in the New Testament, and it was used primarily to designate a particular communal reality, not to describe its qualitative aspects (Buttrick, 1962).

In the development of the world and the early Church in the Roman Empire, and as the Christian beliefs spread through other Gentile nations, the word "Church" became used as local assembly of people congregated in a particular place such as the church in Ephesus (Acts 19:29), Thessalonica (I and II Thessalonians 1:1) and Colossae (Colossians 1:1-2). From the period of Protestantism in the Reformation era, the word became used as a denomination referring to Lutherans, Catholics, Anglicans, ECWA, CAC, Baptists, UMCA and the like. As a building, it refers to the physical structures and materials therein, such as the pulpit, pews, musical



instruments and devoted materials. Non-technical usage of the word as being “a town council”, a gathering, and building, and the technical usage is the universal congregation of believers in Christ, a spiritual organism composed of God’s people, a spiritual ministry to be carried out by spiritual people. As a universal body of believers, it refers to all who have become born again by the confession of their lips and faith of their hearts (Romans 10:9, 10) (Aremu& Emmanuel O. Malomo, 2016).

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *gahal* (גָּהַל) is used to denote the assembly or congregation of the Israelites (Buttrick, 1962). The Hebrew *gahal* (גָּהַל) was used especially for those within the covenant of Yahweh via circumcision as opposed to the strangers in the midst of the Israel nation (Deuteronomy 23:3, Nehemiah 13:1).

In the New Testament, the word refers to sinners who have come to the saving knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ and have been washed clean by His blood. These people are gathered in different cities such as Colossae, Ephesus, Macedonia, Achaia etcetera. The church is a divine-human relationship and institution where the light of salvation, pardon, and grace for the praise of God’s glory are found (Cross and E.A. Livingstone, 1989). Jesus used the word twice in Mathew’s account; once in saying of the church He will build (Matthew 16:18) and the other in the context of reconciliation of erring parties (Matthew 18:17).

Church Growth

Church growth, understood here as increases in membership, active participation, new congregations, and ministry capacity, is highly sensitive to social stability and security (Smith, 2018). Over the past decade, Nigeria has experienced multiple, overlapping insecurity crises (Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, banditry and herder–farmer violence, communal clashes, and kidnappings for ransom). These dynamics have coincided with sharply rising attacks on Christian communities in several regions, producing significant humanitarian consequences and undermining the operational environment for local churches (Open Doors, 2025). On 31st October 2025, the United States government, under President Donald Trump, redesignated Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom abuses, a high-profile diplomatic action that drew international media attention and sparked domestic debate in Nigeria about the causes, scale, and portrayal of religious violence. This designation and the underlying violence invite urgent analysis of how insecurity affects church growth in Nigeria. Apart from national insecurity, there is a level of insecurity within the Church that has become a threat to Church growth

National Insecurity as a Challenge to Church Growth in Nigeria

Studies on church growth stress the role of social capital, freedom of religion, and safe environments for worship and evangelism (Anderson, 2016; Dean, 2019). In contexts of chronic violence, churches face three linked challenges to growth: (1) physical threats to congregants and clergy (killings, kidnappings, attacks on buildings), (2) displacement and demographic shifts that fragment congregations, and (3) resource diversion from growth activities to protection and humanitarian response (Barnes & Kalu, 2020). Empirical research from conflict-affected settings



shows both negative effects (decline in public worship, closure of congregations) and complex adaptive responses (increased house-church networks, faith-based humanitarian outreach), but the net effect on long-term growth depends on duration, intensity, and protective capacity of state and civil institutions (Perez, 2021). Nigerian-specific analyses indicate increasing targeting of Christian communities by extremist groups and armed militias, with significant implications for church stability and expansion.

Key statistics on Christian-targeted violence and displacement (selected indicators)

On 19 February 2018, 110 school girls (ages 11-19) were abducted from the Government Girls Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State by Boko Haram (Vanguard, 2018). While 5 of them died in captivity and 104 girls were released on 21 March 2018, Leah Sharibu reportedly remained in captivity (West Point, 2018) because she refused to renounce her Christian faith and remained in captivity to date. Her case became emblematic of the intersection between jihadist violence and targeted religious persecution, drawing national and international attention and sustained advocacy for her release. Leah's continuing captivity has been repeatedly highlighted by monitoring bodies and religious-freedom advocates as indicative of the specific risks faced by Christian girls and women in insurgency-affected zones.

On Sunday, 5 June 2022, gunmen attacked worshippers gathered at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State, killing dozens and wounding many more (HumAngle, 2025). The attack shocked the nation because it occurred in the southwestern region traditionally considered safer and targeted a liturgical gathering. The massacre intensified fear among worshippers and underscored that places of Christian worship remain vulnerable to mass-casualty attacks.

Mob Violence and Accusations of Blasphemy: The Case of Deborah Samuel. On 12 May 2022, a female student, Deborah Samuel, was lynched by a mob at Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto State, where a mob of Muslim students stoned and set her on fire after accusations of blasphemy (Punch Newspaper, May 12 2022). The killing provoked national outrage and international condemnation. Human Rights Watch and other observers linked the incident to a toxic local combination of vigilante justice, weak rule of law, and religious tensions, highlighting how Christian individuals can become extremely vulnerable when allegations or rumors arise in deeply polarized contexts.

Targeted Killings of Evangelists and Pastors (Eunice Olawale and Others): There have been several widely reported murders of Christian ministers and evangelists in public spaces, including the killing of Evangelist Eunice Olawale while evangelizing on the streets of Abuja on 9 July 2016 (Punch Newspaper, July 9, 2016). Such incidents dramatically affect the morale and sense of safety of Christian workers and public evangelists and contribute to self-censorship, retreat from public witness, and increased security consciousness among congregations.

Also, on 18 November 2025, Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) Oke Isegun, Eruku, Kwara State, was attacked. The attack took place on Tuesday, 18 November, 2025, in the town of Eruku, Ekiti Local Government, Kwara State. Gunmen entered the Church between 6:00 p.m 6:30 p.m during the worship service, opened fire, and seized 38 persons, including the pastor, killing two persons



and injuring one person (Sahrareporters, 19 November 2025). The victims were later released on 23, November 2025 after serious intervention by both the Federal and state governments.

Broader Patterns: Church Burnings, Kidnappings, Displacement, and Sexual Violence

Beyond specific cases, recent documentation points to broader trends: repeated attacks on church buildings (arson, sacking), an increase in kidnappings, including a noted rise in clergy abductions and mass displacement of Christian communities from rural areas, especially in the north and middle belt. Several church and humanitarian monitoring groups have reported hundreds (and in some tallies thousands) of attacks on Christian properties and numerous kidnappings of priests and pastors over the past decade. Catholic and ecumenical organizations have recorded tens to more than a hundred clergy kidnappings in recent years, with some fatalities, statistics that underscore the violent targeting of religious leaders. These physical attacks are often accompanied by sexual violence and forced displacement of women and girls, amplifying the social and spiritual harm suffered by communities.

Fatalities among Christians (recent years): Open Doors' World Watch List reporting placed Nigeria among the countries with the highest number of Christian killings: approx. 3,100 Christians killed in 2024 (Open Doors/World Watch reporting summarized by multiple outlets). Other NGO compilations and watchdog groups report higher or cumulative counts for broader periods; some civil-society analyses estimated thousands more into 2025. These variations reflect differing methodologies but collectively show a sustained, large-scale toll.

Kidnappings of Christians (2024): Open Doors cited 2,830 Christians kidnapped in 2024, a major driver of pastoral disruption and community trauma. Clergy abducted or killed: Multiple reports documented hundreds of clergy abducted in recent years (Catholic World Report, Intersociety compilations), with hundreds of priests and pastors among victims in 2024–2025 reporting periods.

Church property attacks and closures: Reports indicate hundreds to thousands of church attacks over multi-year spans; specific accounts note entire denominations temporarily shutting down dozens of congregations in particularly affected states (e.g., Plateau, Kaduna). Some investigative reports allege up to 100 church attacks per month in peak periods in 2025.

Internal displacement (IDPs): Humanitarian reporting from UN OCHA and partner displacement tracking places total IDPs in Nigeria in the low-to-mid millions, depending on the region and cut-off date (UN OCHA reported c. 2.3 million IDPs at end-2024 with regional DTM/IOM rounds showing 1.3–1.4 million in particular north-central/north-west rounds). Displacement fractures the congregational bases and interrupts institutional continuity.

Recent policy action: In late October/early November 2025, the U.S. administration under President Donald Trump redesignated Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), citing severe violations of religious freedom and threatened potential penalties and pressure should the Nigerian government not curb attacks on Christians. This produced diplomatic pushback from Nigerian authorities, who contested the characterization.



The implications of insecurity on Church growth in Nigeria

Insecurity in Nigeria has had adverse effects on the growth of the Church in Nigeria in many ways including but not limited to:

Physical and psychological trauma: Repeated exposure to violence, massacres, lynchings, and abductions produces acute and chronic trauma among survivors and witnesses. Loss of loved ones, disruption of funerary practices, and the fear of gathering publicly have undermined psychological well-being and communal cohesion.

Numerical decline and congregation closures: Repeated attacks on congregations (burning of church buildings, raids during worship) have directly caused closures of local churches and suspensions of public services in high-risk areas. Attacks on churches and worshippers have had immediate effects on attendance, liturgical practices, and evangelistic outreach. Many congregations reduce public services or shift meeting times; some relocate entirely. This constrains church growth and visible Christian presence in affected areas. Denominational reports show dozens of congregations forced to suspend operations in specific states; combined with fatalities and displacement, this reduces the base for numerical growth and new church plants. The immediate numeric effect is negative: fewer functioning congregations and lower regular attendance where attacks are frequent.

Leadership depletion and pastoral fear: The abduction and killing of clergy (hundreds reported across 2024–2025 windows) erodes leadership capacity. Pastors are killed, abducted, or forced to flee; replacements are scarce where communities are dispersed. Leadership losses reduce the church's ability to disciple, to organize outreach, and to coordinate social ministries, all core mechanisms of church growth. The kidnapping and killing of clergy create leadership vacuums. Fear of targeted attacks discourages clergy from itinerant ministry, outreach, and social activism, areas where church leadership historically engaged in community development and human rights work: **Perceptions of State Injustice and Marginalization.** Many Christians in affected regions report perceptions of selective protection and impunity, believing that security forces prioritize other communities or fail to investigate and prosecute perpetrators effectively. These perceptions fuel mistrust of institutions and can exacerbate communal tensions and cycles of reprisal.

Displacement and demographic disruption: Large IDP populations fragment established congregations. Displaced Christians often lose physical church homes and social networks. At the same time, some find refuge in urban congregations or informal house churches; the net effect is weakened institutional continuity and reduced capacity for intentional evangelistic expansion in origin communities. UN OCHA and IOM/DTM data showing millions displaced demonstrate the scale of this disruption.

Shift of church focus from expansion to relief/protection: Congregations increasingly redirect resources (financial and volunteer) toward emergency relief, trauma care, and security measures (e.g., hiring private security, fortifying church premises). While these ministries are vital, they consume time and resources that otherwise would be invested in church-planting, theological education, and evangelism — thereby slowing organic growth. Faith-based organisations have



expanded humanitarian activities, but at the cost of longer-term discipleship and expansion programs.

Psychological effects and social trust erosion: Trauma from violence reduces public willingness to gather; fear of attacks discourages converts and reduces family willingness to allow youths to publicly affiliate with churches in highly targeted zones. Social trust necessary for communal religious life is degraded where neighbours cannot protect one another and where suspicion between ethnic/religious groups grows. This ecological damage undermines the relational pathways (friendship evangelism, community involvement) underpinning growth.

Operational constraints on denominational institutions: Bible schools, seminaries, and denominational headquarters located in insecure regions face faculty shortages, interruption of programs, and sometimes relocation, reducing the pipeline of trained leaders necessary for sustained growth and healthy expansion. Several denominational leaders report reassigning training online or to safer regions, which can change theological emphases and outreach strategies.

Economic dislocation and poverty: Displaced Christians often lose homes, farmland, and livelihoods; internal displacement pushes families into urban peripheries where poverty deepens. The economic impact of periodic attacks and chronic insecurity reduces congregational capacity to support ministries and social services; and

Gendered Impacts: Rape and Victimization of Women and Girls. Women and girls in affected Christian communities are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence during raids and kidnappings, which have long-term consequences for health, social standing, and family structure.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are offered:

The Church should invest in decentralized leadership training: Expand short-cycle pastoral training for lay leaders (mobile/remote formats) so congregations can sustain ministry even if ordained leaders are lost or displaced.

Integrate protection into ministry planning: each church should develop context-appropriate security protocols and contingency plans for worship (time/location variation, discreet meeting options, community watch coordination).

Develop a Security Plan: Create a comprehensive security plan that outlines procedures for emergencies, threats, and regular safety protocols. Include responses for scenarios like intrusions, medical emergencies, and natural disasters.

Train Security Personnel: Hire or appoint trained security personnel to monitor the premises during services and events.



Implement Access Control Measures: Use identification badges for staff and volunteers, and consider visitor logs to keep track of attendees. Install secure entry systems, like key card access or video intercoms, especially for sensitive areas.

Increase Surveillance: Install security cameras around the church premises to monitor activities and deter crime. Ensure the camera feeds are recorded and can be reviewed in case of incidents.

Utilize Technology: Consider using mobile apps for emergency alerts that notify congregation members in real-time. Implement alarm systems that can alert authorities quickly in the event of an emergency.

Review and update security measures periodically based on new threats or challenges.

Engage the Community: Work with local law enforcement to develop a relationship and obtain guidance on security practices. Encourage congregants to stay vigilant and report suspicious activities.

The Church should prioritise trauma and pastoral care: Scale faith-based psychosocial support to reduce long-term deterrents to gathering and participation.

Create a Safe Environment: Establish safety protocols for children's programs to ensure their protection during church activities.

Conclusion

Insecurity in Nigeria has had profound, multi-dimensional negative effects on church growth: directly through killings, abductions, and attacks on church property; indirectly through displacement, leadership loss, and diversion of resources toward survival and humanitarian relief. For church growth to recover and thrive, denominational strategies must combine adaptive pastoral training and protection planning with sustained advocacy for effective state protections and community reconciliation. Church leaders must not only lead people to pray but must be proactive on security matters. They should combine prayer with proactive security measures, speak out when the government fails to protect citizens, and take decisive action to safeguard their congregation. By doing so, they not only protect lives but also create an environment where the Church can grow and thrive.

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