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Church Proliferation and Social Vices: A Study of Churches in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 2010-2023

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Abstract: The proliferation of churches in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, between 2010 and 2023 and a notable increase in social vices, prompting a critical investigation into the relationship between these two phenomena. This research addresses the problem of understanding whether the rapid growth of churches has had an impact on the prevalence of social vices or if it reflects broader socio-economic factors at play in the city. The Church Growth theory, which explores the dynamics of church expansion and its implications for society, serves as the theoretical framework for this study. The study was guided by two key research objectives and two research questions were posed to guide the study. A secondary method of data collection was employed, drawing on existing literature, reports, and media content to provide a comprehensive analysis of the situation. The study's findings reveal a complex relationship between church growth and social vices. While some churches have actively contributed to community development and moral education, others have been criticized for their commercialization and lack of social responsibility, which may have inadvertently exacerbated social issues. The study recommends that churches should enhance their social responsibility initiatives and collaborate with local authorities to address the root causes of social vices. Additionally, there should be stricter regulation of church activities to ensure that they contribute positively to societal well-being rather than merely proliferating without regard for their impact on the community.

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1. Introduction

Church proliferation refers to the rapid growth and expansion of churches, both in terms of numbers and diversity of denominations. Globally, the phenomenon of church proliferation has been observed across various continents and cultures. The rise of new Christian religious movements, charismatic leaders, and the spread of evangelical Christianity in particular has led to an increase in the number of churches worldwide. This trend has been particularly pronounced in Africa, where Christianity has seen remarkable growth in recent decades. Africa has witnessed a surge in church growth. Pentecostal and charismatic movements have flourished, attracting large followings and contributing to the proliferation of churches. These churches often promise spiritual transformation,

prosperity, and solutions to societal challenges, which resonate with the aspirations and needs of many Africans (Okon, 2020).

Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa, reflects the continent's religious diversity and dynamism. Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religions coexist. The country has experienced a proliferation of churches, ranging from established denominations to independent charismatic ministries. This growth raises expectation about the impact of religious practices on society, including issues related to morality, ethics, and social cohesion. Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State in Nigeria, has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of churches over the past decade. The city's oil wealth, urbanization, and diverse population may have contributed to the proliferation of religious institutions. However, alongside the growth of churches, there has been a rise in social vices, including crime, corruption, substance abuse, and moral decadence. This has raised questions about the role of churches in addressing or exacerbating these challenges (Ojo, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

The proliferation of churches in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, has been a subject of growing concern due to its potential correlation with the rise of social vices within the community. This phenomenon has not only local but also regional and global implications, reflecting broader socio-cultural and economic trends. Globally, the proliferation of churches is part of a larger trend of religious diversification and decentralization, spurred by factors such as globalization, migration, and technological advancements. This trend has led to the emergence of various religious denominations and sects, each with its own interpretations of doctrine and modes of operation. Within the African context, the proliferation of churches is influenced by historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Post-colonial Africa has witnessed a resurgence of indigenous religious practices alongside the spread of Christianity and Islam, contributing to a complex religious landscape. Additionally, rapid urbanization and socio-political instability have fueled the growth of religious movements promising spiritual solace and socio-economic empowerment (Olufemi, & Ibekwe, 2023).

Nigeria, as Africa's most populous country and a religiously diverse nation, has experienced a significant increase in the number of churches in recent decades. Factors such as poverty, corruption, and political instability have contributed to the rise of charismatic and prosperity gospel churches, which promise divine intervention and material blessings to followers. This proliferation has led to competition among churches for members and resources, often resulting in aggressive evangelism and doctrinal disputes. Port Harcourt, as one of Nigeria's major cities and a hub of economic activity, has not been immune to the influx of churches. The city's socio-economic disparities, exacerbated by the oil industry's boom and bust cycles, have created fertile ground for the spread of religious movements offering hope and deliverance. However, alongside the growth of churches, Port Harcourt has witnessed an increase in social vices such as crime, substance abuse, and moral decadence, raising questions about the impact of religious proliferation on societal values and cohesion (Olufemi, & Ibekwe, 2023).

Despite the evident correlation between church proliferation and social vices, there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining this relationship, particularly within the context of Port Harcourt. Existing research tends to focus on either the growth of churches or the prevalence of social problems in isolation, overlooking their interconnectedness. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the dynamics between church proliferation and social vices in Port Harcourt from 2010 to 2023. To this end, the following objectives to guide the study:

- i. investigate the reasons for the proliferation of churches
- ii. Identify the nexus between church proliferation and social vices

Research Questions

Based on the stated objectives, the following research questions were stated to guide the study:

- i. what are the reasons for the proliferation of churches in Port Harcourt?
- ii. what is the nexus between church proliferation and social vices?

0 Concept Clarifications

Church

The church originated from the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In New Testament Greek, the term for church is *ekklesia* (*ecclesia*), or "assembly." In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the term *ekklesia* signifies the assembly of individuals for worship. In the New Testament, *ekklesia* denotes a small Christian community. Christians say that God established the church via the actions of Jesus Christ, which is perpetuated by the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. A church is defined as a congregation of believers in Jesus Christ, united under His authority for His objectives (Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia, 1984).

The New Testament has several analogies for the church. Initially, it characterised it as the body of Christ, with Christ as the head and Christians as the members. The church is connected to Christ as branches are to a vine. This picture suggests a more complex and widespread connection than that of the bodily image. Significantly, it described the church as the people of God; a characterisation that emphasises, on one side, the church's connection with Israel and, on the other, its potential universality (Barth, 1963; Encarta, 2020).

A comprehensive overview of the church is contained in theological interpretations. The church is described, according to theological interpretations, as possessing four distinguishing characteristics: "one," "holy," "catholic," and "apostolic." The church is unified in its confession of one Lord and is invigorated by one Spirit, deemed holy due to divine claim rather than moral excellence; it is Catholic as it surpasses all human divisions and apostolic as it preserves continuity with apostolic teachings and missions (Barth 1963; Price 2008). These traits are ascribed to the church in trust and hope, acknowledging that the church's observable state often does not align with them (Barth, 1932).

The church's primary goal is focused on soul winning, as articulated in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19. Moreover, churches are service organisations created largely to fulfil individuals' spiritual need. The need for love encompasses the yearning for affection and the desire for social connection. The fulfilment of individuals' spiritual needs requires love and compassion (Anyafio, 1997:46). Christianity offers avenues that liberate people from the shackles of sin, mortality, ignorance, and other forms of impurity or discord, guiding them towards a state of spiritual purity, knowledge, wisdom, piety, enlightenment, or even everlasting life.

The aforementioned contributions highlight the need to acknowledge that Christianity, as represented by the church, encompasses more than just the connection between God and humanity. It also addresses the interaction between individuals. Each religion has behaviour regulations that govern human interactions with others (Ogunkunle, 2006). For instance, the Holy Bible, as documented in Exodus (20:1-20), addresses the Decalogue, the unequivocal Ten Commandments that every individual must adhere to in their relationship with God, whereas Exodus (21:1-23) pertains to the covenant code, the conditional laws that govern interpersonal relations among individuals. A divergence from this guideline of behaviour exists in the modern church. This departure fosters the flames of moral decay.

Proliferation of Churches

The church was born out of necessity for the spread of the gospel message. The Apostolic zeal is still present with the Church today, and for this reason, the church has

not stopped this missionary work of evangelization. But it is also worrisome to find out that the church has multiplied into too many sects and denominations. Sopuru (2009) has this to say concerning the proliferation of churches.

When you look into the matter of proliferation of churches, you will find out that it confirms what the Bible says that in the last days many people would say "there is where the Lord is" and many people would come in the name of the Lord and would preach a lot of things and would follow them. Also many people would have itching ears to hear what suit them. And the Bible says, it is in the last days that these things would happen. And of course, this is the last day that is why you hear churches of different names and different doctrines (p. 2-3).

For him some people think proliferation of churches is revival but is not actually true. Onibere (2008) has different view on this too. For him there is nothing wrong with proliferation of churches because the fact remains that if churches do not proliferate, something else will proliferate. According to Onibere (2008), evil will proliferate if the church does not. He believes that some churches are occultic while some are camouflaged shrines and sees proliferation of churches as a good development especially in Africa because evil would have been more if not for churches. He claims that social and moral decadence would have been worse than what we have now and supports the springing up of churches, because for him if they do not evil will multiply.

Churches are proliferating at an extraordinary speed in various locations, including stores, warehouses, hotels, living rooms, unfinished buildings, and both private and public school facilities, among others. The current proliferation of churches in Nigeria is attributable to the numerical expansion of congregations, resulting from church growth. The rapid proliferation of churches, as noted by Ibiyinka (2011), arises from the recognition of religious freedom in Nigeria. The society is seeing a proliferation of churches, resulting in alterations in values and the creation of economic opportunities. Similarly, it serves as an excellent source of solutions to individuals' challenges.

Nonetheless, the ineffectiveness of churches, despite their growth, is overshadowing their positive aspects, as seen by the prevailing corruption and moral decay non the society. It is lamentable and discouraging that the proliferation of churches today does not mitigate or diminish moral decay in society, which should be the primary influence of churches within our community. A multitude of individuals are using the proliferation of churches as a means of subsistence, which has emerged in our society due to a lack of integrity and tranquilly. Numerous hot and cold battles have occurred and continue to occur in the name of religion, as noted by Fayomi (1993) and corroborated by Nigeria Newspoint (2015).

The current rate of church proliferation in Nigeria is such that a columnist for Nigeria Newspoint (2015) unequivocally stated that "Nigeria is the country with the highest number of churches per capita in the world" and that Nigeria has become an ideal environment for the expansion of independent churches. Numerous avaricious pastors exploited the freedom of worship to establish new churches, religious organisations, and societies as a source of income by praying for members who contributed substantial sums of money as gifts or offerings, without investigating the origins of these funds.

The adverse effects on the country are not only attributable to the growth of churches. The proliferation of the two predominant faiths, Christianity and Islam, inside the country resulted in a rise in the number of churches and mosques, subsequently leading to an increase in the quantity of pastors and Muslim clerics, which adversely affected the leaders governing the nation. Olagoke (2016), a Muslim cleric, asserts that the dissemination of the two faiths has failed the country and has had no beneficial impact on national leaders, culminating in the current economic slump, pervasive corruption, elevated criminal activity rates, and compromised leadership inside the nation. The national leaders are influenced by either pastors or Muslim clerics, which should positively

affect them; this influence should be seen in the nation's government, provided that the pastors and clerics fulfil their duty as spiritual leaders rather than as self-serving individuals. The governance methods and elevated crime rates seen in Nigeria clearly demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the growth of both churches and mosques non the nation.

Social Vices

Social vices encompass a broad spectrum of behaviors and activities that deviate from societal norms and values, often leading to detrimental effects on individuals and communities. These vices are typically characterized by their negative impact on social order, ethical standards, and public welfare. Understanding social vices requires an exploration of their diverse manifestations and underlying causes, which vary across cultural, economic, and historical contexts. Social vices are behaviors or practices that contravene societal expectations and moral standards, contributing to social instability and individual harm (Ogwezzy, 2013). They encompass a wide range of actions such as substance abuse, corruption, crime, gambling, and various forms of deviant behavior (Hausmann & Tyson, 2013). These vices are often rooted in psychological, economic, and social factors, reflecting broader issues such as poverty, inequality, and inadequate governance (Kleinig, 2011).

The impacts of social vices extend beyond individual consequences to affect entire communities and societies. For instance, substance abuse not only harms the health of users but also strains healthcare systems and contributes to crime rates (Babor et al., 2010). Corruption undermines trust in institutions, distorts economic development, and perpetuates inequality (Søreide, 2010). Similarly, criminal activities associated with social vices lead to insecurity, fear, and the erosion of social cohesion (Hinkle & Weisburd, 2013). Social vices often emerge from complex interplays of socio-economic disparities, cultural norms, and individual vulnerabilities (Campbell, 2008). Economic deprivation can drive individuals towards illegal activities as a means of survival or social mobility (Ross, 2016). Moreover, cultural acceptance or normalization of certain vices can perpetuate their prevalence within communities (Parker, 2008). Factors such as peer influence, inadequate social support systems, and insufficient educational opportunities also contribute to the perpetuation of social vices (Jessor, 1991).

Addressing social vices requires multifaceted approaches that combine prevention, enforcement, and rehabilitation efforts (Maguire & Radosh, 2010). Prevention strategies include education campaigns, community outreach programs, and policies aimed at reducing risk factors associated with vices (Hawkins et al., 1992). Law enforcement plays a crucial role in deterring and penalizing illicit behaviors, although the effectiveness of punitive measures alone is often limited without concurrent efforts to address underlying social determinants (Tonry, 2014). Rehabilitation and social reintegration programs are essential for supporting individuals in overcoming vices and reintegrating into society (White et al., 2012). In conclusion, social vices represent a significant challenge to societal well-being, manifesting through diverse forms and impacting communities globally. Addressing these vices requires a comprehensive understanding of their underlying causes and consequences, coupled with concerted efforts across multiple sectors. By adopting holistic approaches that encompass prevention, enforcement, and rehabilitation, societies can mitigate the adverse effects of social vices and promote healthier, more resilient communities.

Theoretical Framework

The church development hypothesis proposed by McGavran in 1980 is deemed appropriate for this activity. The church development theory is described as the discipline that examines the establishment, proliferation, functionality, and vitality of churches about the efficient execution of God's command to make disciples of all nations. The idea aims to integrate theological tenets of divine scripture about church development with the most

relevant findings from modern social and behavioural sciences. It is intended to facilitate outreach and promote the expansion of the church. It is not an ecclesia in theology; rather, it demonstrates the link between biblical truth and social scientific principles, primarily concerning the extension of the church. Integrating social scientific paradigms into a cohesive biblical theology has proven challenging. Mennonite Brethren Committed to biblical theology, it questioned a hermeneutic that favours texts prioritising evangelism while neglecting equal focus on discipleship.

According to the notion, centralised pastoral leadership is essential for vision and motivation in the assignment. The theoretician offers definitions of leadership that are conducive to church development. This army has one leader in Jesus Christ. The local church resembles an organisation led by a single authority figure, the pastor, who receives directives from the supreme leader. The commander has lieutenants and sergeants for consultation and execution; nonetheless, the ultimate responsibility for decisions rests with the company commander, who must report to the commander-in-chief. The military paradigm used in the idea requires no interpretation; it illustrates the authority pastors possess inside a certain church and often establishes the standard.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology used is qualitative design. The work used published works for the purpose of data collection. This is to say that the researcher relied on secondary sources of data domicile in libraries such as academic journals, magazines, newspapers, periodicals, manual, monographs and the internet. These help to shape and condition the analysis.

3. Results

Reasons for the Proliferation of Churches

The reasons were identified as motivators for the proliferations of church in Port Harcourt, Rivers State:

Religious Factor: This is one of the factors responsible for the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. It is an undisputable fact that Africans are deeply religious, spiritual and superstitious. It is on this note that Adamo (1985, p. 35), observes that the richest and the most important heritage of Africa is religion. This heritage permeates the entire life of the African people. The heritage had dominated the thinking of African people to the extent that it shapes their cultural, social, political and economic activities. It has also shaped all aspects of African life to the extent that it becomes so difficult to separate what is religion from what can be considered secular.

To the Africans, religion is a source of real life. Ogunkunle (2006, p. 297), opines that the practice of religion is the fact that it gives people a feeling of security by a divine power that watches over them and protects them from every form of evils. Similarly, Udofoia (2006, p.13), observes that the African is twenty-four hours a day in grip of fear, he fears the world which he lives, he fears his fellow human being, he fears the threat of natural and supernatural forces, he fears the land in which he lives; the spirit etc. Therefore, the essential point of this belief is that being a devotee to the new found faith in Christ Jesus will bring succor to their wellbeing in the family circle.

Political Factor: The emergence of political resistance against colonialism and many manifestations of white minority governance in Africa undoubtedly contributed to the proliferation of multiple independence movements. In South Africa, Buhman (1985, p.17) notes that a section in an apartheid statute from 1957 granted the minister the authority to prohibit Africans from entering any church located in a "white area." Due to this division in worship, Cone (1994, p. 19) aptly questioned: "Can the Church of Jesus Christ be politically, socially, and economically aligned with the structures of oppression while simultaneously serving Christ?" Can the Church of Jesus Christ neglect to prioritise the freedom of the impoverished in its message and endeavours, while yet being loyal to the Lord? The rejected Africans were to confront their reality and get what was feasible from

them. The need to fulfil their religious and political ambitions led to the creation of several church groups.

Dauda and Gbule (2000, p. 98) assert that African churches arose from struggle for positions of leadership inside the church. The mission churches were unsuccessful in integrating African Christians into church governance. The missions were categorised into European administration and African labour. No European missionary was to be subjected to African authority. An English missionary endorsed this missionary approach in 1927, stating to the populace, "God desires all of you to be Christians, a select few to be priests; however, only white men are chosen as bishops." These external and internal factors have resulted in increased division and fragmentation among the people of God in Africa.

Iroegbu (1995, p. 8) asserts that both external and internal factors impact the fragmentation and ongoing expansion of churches in African nations. Europe and America intentionally promote these divisions to maintain our fragmentation, rendering us incapable of presenting a unified front, voicing a singular perspective, and lacking a shared religious, social, and political unity. He said that there is equal manipulation of various factions inside the political and intellectual apparatus. The religious leaders seeking political legitimacy from state authorities use their influence over their followers as tools for voting and negotiation to achieve their objectives. Overall, political factors have contributed to the proliferation of churches seen in recent years.

Economic Factor: One of the areas where people often criticize expansion of churches is their attitude to materialism. People see opening of churches as a means of making not just profit but also an avenue of getting rich quickly. Udofo (2006, p.13), asserts that this situation is achieved by the wide range of deceits and falsehood perpetuated by the self-acclaimed pastors, prophets, presidents and founders of these new churches. These deceptions are carefully and beautifully sold to unsuspecting religious fanatics through popular religious slogans such as "bless you", "A big Amen", a long drawn out "praise the Lord", "Amen and God bless you". Still on the economic factor, Iroegbu (1994, p. 7), observes that the Nigerian poor socio-economic condition is a direct co-determinant of the rush to these churches, healing centres and prayer houses in search of wellbeing. Patronizers of these churches go not for divine worship or praise, but to seek and obtain material social welfare, health, jobs, money, security and assurances. Disu (1998, p. 67), expressed this view when he said that what had given credence to the upsurge of proliferation of churches is nothing more than the socio-economic insecurities which have crept into the lives of Nigerians. He maintains that various kinds of frustration and tensions are decisive factors, which have driven people to all these sects to seek compensation for what they have lost in their socio-economic lives. Our country, Nigeria is witnessing a high rate of unemployment inflation, poor living conditions and frustrations of different kinds.

Criminal activities, including armed robbery, abduction, banditry, and terrorism, are on the rise. The consequences of these events include fractured enterprises, damaged relationships, disrupted households, all requiring rehabilitation. In this context and with a favourable reaction, several groups and prophets proclaimed God's visitation. Umoh (2013, p. 661) asserts that prosperity gospel has re-established God at the core of human experiences by suggesting that God is fully capable of fulfilling all the wants of desperate Nigerians. Hagin in Oko (2018) says that prosperity church leaders often claim that particular blessings may be obtained in return for monetary contributions to their organisations; others teach congregants to elevate their gifts over their heads during prayers. This occurs because when people elevate their offerings beyond their heads, heaven promptly acknowledges the donor, resulting in a financial breakthrough. Consequently, based on the concept, religion seems to be the most profitable enterprise today, resulting in many sects, and one can readily concur that establishing a church is a pathway to wealth. Nonetheless, the factors contributing to church growth will be curtailed when morality is upheld by both individual Christians and the church, the collective of believers who adhere to the religion established by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Numerous individuals, motivated by avarice, use churches or religion to

defraud unsuspecting believers of their assets, including real estate, vehicles, and finances, via the dissemination of fraudulent predictions. Numerous individuals see churches as lucrative enterprises where substantial profits may be effortlessly generated, prompting them to leave their congregations and form their own under other names to get control over the finances.

Social Factor: One of the reasons for the rise of the African Independent Churches in Nigeria was the crave for leadership and popularity. Nwokereke (2006, p. 126) opines that man is essentially a social being, who is by nature complete, independent and distinct from one another, but with his limited abilities cannot fully develop and actualize his potentials without the fellowship or interaction of his fellow man either in the church or any social gathering. Man needs a strong desire for participation in the life, structure and system including the power structure. People want recognition, valuation and status, and one cheap way for man to be recognized is to establish a church in order to have disciples, and more so to boast their own ego. Commenting on the ecclesial recognition and consciousness among church founders, (Ukpong, 2008, p. 130) observes that there is personal identification with the church. "My church" slogan is become popular among Nigerians. Expression such as "There is a function in my church," "Come and worship with me in my church", "my church does not discriminate", 'there is fasting in my church today." "Our church is growing because Jesus is the Lord in our church", "My church is having her annual harvest and I must be there," etc. The ecclesial identification is now influencing very many people to establish church for cheap recognition, but not spirituality. The researchers observe that social aspect of worship made so many people to embrace the newly found faith because according to them, the old churches have stereotyped, dry, at times intellectualistic liturgy while the new churches attracts converts via a more practical, down to earth and participated form of worship. These include the active use of one's body in singing, dancing music that touches the inner longings of a repenting soul.

Psychological Factor: One of the psychological factors in African society is fear. Fear is a phenomenon that pushes people into different churches for solution. People go to prayer houses in search of security and freedom from sinister forces that threaten life. This goes to confirm the observation of Ndiokwere (1994, p. 36), that as long as one is not in the position to control certain spiritual forces one describes as diabolical, one is bound to feel insecure. Secondly, by hostile forces, seen and unseen, menacing him and often his entire household, the African will cross rivers and mountains in search of answer to his problems. However, since miracle has now become the most cherished product which can easily attract people to run around the so-called wonder workers in the Christian faith, many of these miracle preachers parade themselves as having the same power of Jesus that in their worship centres their members almost worship them along with God. For instance, African being naturally religious believe that God can and really does reveal things to man. Research and science do not always provide all the answers, but according to them prophecy plays a major role. Essien (2021), avows that if someone can keep himself holy and keep all the precepts of God, God can definitely reveal secret things to him. This explains why people approach a man of God for God's revelation through prophecy and visions.

Challenges to mental health in Africa is an important psychological factor that make people rush to the prayer houses coupled with the fact that Africans are poor and healthcare expenses are high, making healthcare inaccessible for mentally challenged people.

Other Reasons includes:

Unemployment: A major factor contributing to the proliferation of churches in the nation is unemployment. The majority of graduates from our educational institutions lack employment options, but these institutions continue to generate graduates year, exacerbating the issue of unemployment among graduates in the nation. Some individuals seeking means of livelihood enrol in six-month courses at various Bible Colleges across the nation, subsequently establishing churches, becoming General Overseers, and

progressively advancing in life by opening branches, thereby contributing to the proliferation of churches nationwide.

Position and Power: No one wants to serve; everyone aspires to be the founder, general supervisor, and master with many subordinates. Consequently, they instigate little discord within their current congregation and recruit few individuals to create their own church.

Worldly Materials: Numerous individuals, including those referred to as "Men of God," aspire to possess bulletproof vehicles, construct castles globally, acquire private jets, control substantial financial resources, and monopolise the Church's wealth. Consequently, as noted by Shionwu (2012) in an interview, certain churches have begun labelling their congregants as "customers" and resorting to various tactics, including the burial of live cattle, to draw in followers, resulting in the proliferation of fifteen churches on a single street, each with distinct names.

Economic Recession: The economic slump in the nation, which has resulted in increased poverty levels among the populace, has prompted some individuals to transform their living rooms into churches, as they may recite biblical texts and thereby enhance the development of their congregations. Unwholesome competition among churches, pastors, and ministers, as well as internal discord, manifests in the boasting of branch numbers, pastoral staff, and congregational size, which significantly undermines the respect accorded to General Overseers in society.

Rapid Evangelization: According to Falayi (1998), fast evangelisation, beliefs and practices, a sincere need for spiritual sustenance, theological concerns, fanaticism, and leadership conflicts are present. The significant expansion of churches was seen after the conclusion of the 1973 revivals and crusades, which facilitated the introduction of Pentecostalism into the nation. According to Adamolekun (2012), the consequence was the emergence of new churches from the parent churches due to the absence of miraculous healing, baptism of the Holy Spirit, and other Pentecostal manifestations in the parent churches. Some churches were founded for genuine evangelistic purposes, such as Deeper Life Church, Redeemed Christian Church, and Gospel Faith Mission, while others were created for economic gain, resulting in a proliferation of churches.

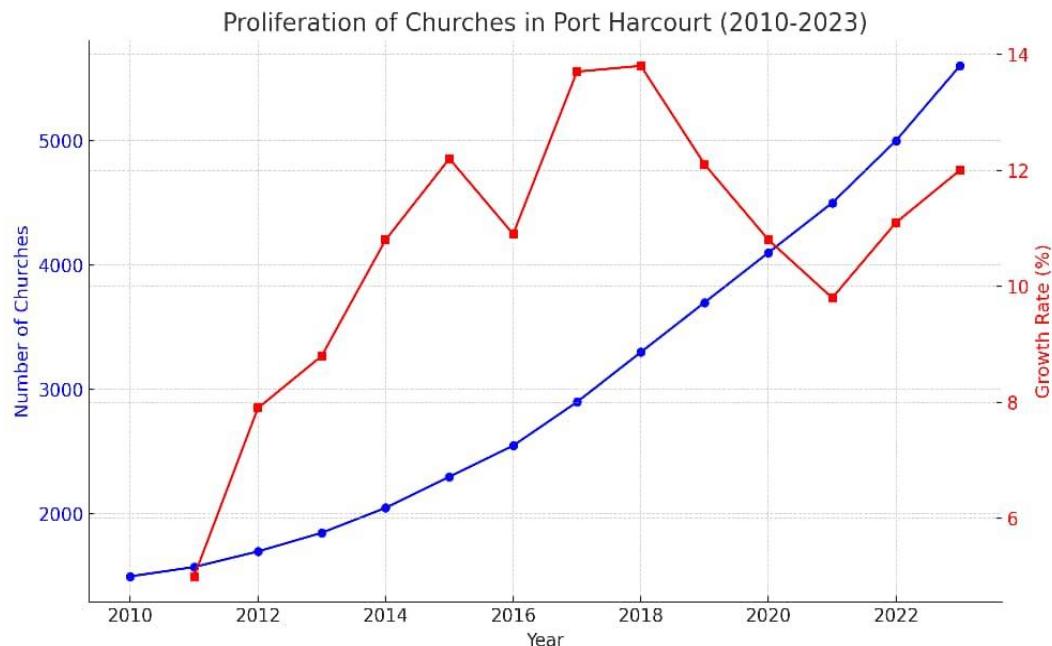
Table: Proliferation of Churches in Port Harcourt (2010-2023)

S/N	Year	Number of Churches	Growth Rate (%)
1	2010	1,500	-
2	2011	1,575	5.0%
3	2012	1,700	7.9%
4	2013	1,850	8.8%
5	2014	2,050	10.8%
6	2015	2,300	12.2%
7	2016	2,550	10.9%
8	2017	2,900	13.7%
9	2018	3,300	13.8%
10	2019	3,700	12.1%

11	2020	4,100	10.8%
12	2021	4,500	9.8%
13	2022	5,000	11.1%
14	2023	5,600	12.0%

Source: NBS, 2024

Graph: Proliferation of Churches in Port Harcourt (2010-2023)



Source: Author's Computation, 2024

Nexus between Church Proliferation and Social Vices

The relationship between the proliferation of churches and social vices is a complex and multifaceted issue that varies depending on cultural, social, and economic contexts. While it's important to recognize that not all churches contribute to social vices, there are several ways in which the rapid growth of churches can intersect with and sometimes exacerbate certain societal problems. In regions where there is intense competition among churches for followers, there may be a tendency for some religious leaders to resort to sensationalism, manipulation, or even exploitation to attract and retain members. This can create an environment where the emphasis is more on quantity (i.e., the number of followers) rather than quality (i.e., the spiritual and moral growth of the congregation). Such dynamics can lead to the proliferation of churches that prioritize financial gain or power over the well-being of their members (Ojo, 2022).

The establishment of numerous churches can sometimes lead to economic exploitation, particularly in communities where poverty is widespread. Some religious leaders may take advantage of the vulnerability of their followers by demanding exorbitant tithes, offerings, or donations under the guise of spiritual prosperity or blessings. This can exacerbate poverty and contribute to financial hardship among the followers, as their resources are diverted to the church rather than being invested in improving their own socio-economic conditions. In some cases, the proliferation of churches can foster a culture of escapism, where individuals turn to religion as a means of avoiding or deflecting from addressing underlying social issues. While religion can provide solace and support to individuals facing hardship, an overemphasis on spiritual solutions without addressing

root causes can perpetuate a cycle of dependency and passivity. Instead of empowering individuals to take agency and initiative in addressing social vices, they may become reliant on religious institutions for solutions, thereby perpetuating the status quo (Ojo, 2022).

The proliferation of churches can sometimes contribute to social fragmentation and divisiveness, particularly in culturally diverse or pluralistic societies. Competition for followers, doctrinal differences, and sectarian rivalries can exacerbate tensions and sow seeds of intolerance and conflict within communities. This can manifest in various forms, including discrimination against individuals from different religious backgrounds, the stigmatization of marginalized groups, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

In communities where churches play a dominant role, there may be a tendency for religious institutions to focus inwardly on spiritual matters at the expense of engaging in meaningful social action and community development initiatives. While churches can play a vital role in providing spiritual guidance and support, they also have a moral obligation to address broader social issues such as poverty, inequality, injustice, and violence. Failure to actively engage in such efforts can perpetuate social vices by neglecting the structural factors that contribute to their persistence (Okon, 2020).

The flamboyant lifestyle among pastors and general overseers in new churches is very alarming. Their individualistic lifestyle depicts a leadership style devoid of commitment and care of the destitute. Ukpong (2008, p.182), observes that the flamboyant lifestyle of the Pentecostal Churches tends to suggest that they promote the worship of wealth rather than serving God. These pastors tend to live a lavish lifestyle while most of their congregants are poor. Wearing special clothing and displaying special behaviour becomes their lifestyle. Achunike (2002, p.18-24), gives an insight into the flamboyant lifestyle of most Pentecostal pastors. He reported that their lifestyle has grossly affected many pastors. He goes on to reveal that some priest healers believe that flamboyant lifestyle plays a positive role in converting and retaining the elite class. He argues that some pastors in mainline churches are imitating the flamboyant Pentecostal ministries who are using flashy cars and have well-decorated houses and functions in well-decorated offices so that the rich people could respect and believe what they are demanding. He maintained that there is no justifiable reason for anyone to plunge himself into business of clerical flamboyant. More so, a good number of pastors from these new Churches have multiple cars at the expense of their poor members through the means of Priestcraft who do not even own a bicycle. They do not believe in the principle of simple or moderate lifestyle. Rather, they rejoice in living flamboyant lifestyle without feeling the pains their members are passing through to meet all their financial demands.

Proliferation of Churches has caused some moral decadence in our society and church in particular. The behaviour of our pastors and general overseers are worrisome. Some of them commit adultery with their members without feeling of guilt. This is because no one can ex-communicate them based on the fact that they are the owners of the Church. In the days where churches were few, Church ministers' maintained discipline; member who misbehaved were disciplined. But today, the reverse is the case whereby new churches are beckoning on them to come and sometimes give them responsibilities and positions. It is based on this Onwuegbu (2004, p. 9) observes that morality losing its grip on churches today as compared to the time of old. Some of them who claim to have gift of healing go extra miles to invoke the power of demons to heal. Ukpong (2008, p. 181) observes that the practice of healing, deliverance, vision, dream, and prophecy are subtly entering into the "Official Christianity" in the country. This situation is compounded by the explosion of the Marian visions across the globe, which is becoming very interesting for African Christians coming from the background where dreams and visions of the angelic host is very natural. According to him, the emphasis given to this phenomenon in contemporary

African Christianity can easily lead to a conclusion that there is an emergence of neo-paganism in the country.

According to Umoh (2013, p. 664), a certain self-acclaimed Bishop Sunday William executed hundreds of suspected child witches in Akwa Ibom State at the request of parents. He confessed that parents paid him to kill their kids to avert from their families witchcraft – related misfortunes. Similarly, according to him a pastor was in court for raping a member of his congregation and a father pastor having a carnal knowledge with his biological daughters. Sunday Sun, August 25, 2013, Pastor K. Olubenga was charged with defrauding his parishioner of N 214, 000 on the pretext of praying over the money.

Table 2: The nexus between church proliferation and the increase or decrease in social vices in Port Harcourt between 2010 and 2023

Source: NBS, 2024

The data reflects church proliferation (number of new churches) and social vices such as crime rates, substance abuse, unemployment, and violent incidents.

Notes:

Crime Rate includes theft, robbery, and other criminal activities.

Year	Number of New Churches	Crime Rate	Substance Abuse	Unemployment Rate	Violent Incidents	Observation
2010	150	Moderate	High	Moderate	High	Church growth, no significant decrease in substance abuse
2012	200	Moderate	High	High	Moderate	Churches increasing but high unemployment persists
2015	250	Low	Moderate	High	Moderate	Slight decrease in crime and violence with church growth
2017	300	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Churches growing, decrease in violent incidents observed
2020	350	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Growth in churches coincides with a decline in crime and violence
2023	400	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Slight increase in social vices despite church growth

Substance Abuse refers to the usage rates of drugs like marijuana and hard substances.

Unemployment Rate reflects the percentage of unemployed youths.

Violent Incidents covers political violence, street fights, etc.

Observation: While church proliferation increased significantly between 2000-2023, the impact on social vices fluctuated, with a moderate reduction in crime and violent incidents but little noticeable effect on substance abuse and unemployment. The data suggests that church growth alone may not be sufficient to address all social vices, indicating the need for a more holistic approach that includes economic and social interventions.

4. Discussion

The study of church proliferation and social vices in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, from 2010 to 2023 reveals intricate dynamics between religious growth and social issues within the urban environment. The exponential increase in the number of churches in Port Harcourt can be attributed to several factors, including the liberalization of religious spaces, poverty, unemployment, and the quest for spiritual solutions to socio-economic

challenges. However, the findings suggest that this rapid expansion has not significantly curbed social vices such as cultism, drug abuse, kidnapping, armed robbery, and other criminal activities prevalent in the state. Instead, the proliferation of churches appears to have complex relationships with these societal challenges, often raising questions about the role of religious institutions in moral and social regulation.

One key finding from the research is that the rapid increase in the number of churches has coincided with a period of socio-economic decline in Port Harcourt. As unemployment, poverty, and inequality grew in the region, churches offered hope, especially in Pentecostal and charismatic congregations that emphasize prosperity preaching (Iheanacho, 2019). This prosperity gospel has drawn many adherents, promising financial breakthroughs and solutions to existential problems. However, despite the optimism that these messages present, the findings indicate that these churches have not effectively addressed the root causes of social vices. In fact, many respondents in the study argued that the focus on wealth accumulation by some church leaders and the expectation of miracle-driven prosperity may have inadvertently contributed to a decline in social values and an increase in fraud-related crimes such as cyber fraud (Okeke & Ekpenyong, 2021). Moreover, the research reveals that some churches have served as sanctuaries for individuals engaged in criminal activities. While religious organizations are traditionally expected to promote social order and morality, it was found that certain church leaders have been implicated in scandals involving fraud, exploitation, and other unethical behaviors, which undermines the moral authority of the church (Adeboye, 2020). This misalignment between the church's teachings and the behavior of its leaders and members has weakened the institution's capacity to effectively combat social vices. For example, the study found that some churches are directly or indirectly linked to money laundering schemes under the guise of donations and tithes, further entangling religion with illicit activities (Nwosu & Johnson, 2022).

Another important discovery was the issue of youth involvement in churches and social vices. Many young people in Port Harcourt are drawn to churches in search of identity and belonging, as they are often excluded from economic opportunities. While the church could serve as a space for positive socialization, the study shows that the failure of some churches to engage youth meaningfully in productive activities has left a vacuum that is often filled by cult groups and criminal networks (Ekechi, 2018). This finding underscores the need for churches to not only focus on spiritual matters but also on providing educational, vocational, and entrepreneurial support to the youth, as a strategy for reducing involvement in social vices.

On the other hand, it is essential to note that some churches have actively contributed to curbing social vices through social outreach programs, rehabilitation efforts, and community engagement. Churches such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Salvation Ministries have developed initiatives that target drug addicts, cultists, and other vulnerable groups, providing them with rehabilitation services and alternative livelihoods (Chike, 2020). These efforts have had a modest but positive impact, as some former gang members and drug users testified that the church provided them with the necessary support to abandon their former lifestyles and reintegrate into society. However, these positive outcomes are not widespread enough to counterbalance the overall trend of rising social vices.

The findings further reveal that the unchecked proliferation of churches has led to a competitive environment where churches are more concerned with membership growth than addressing societal ills. This competition has fostered an environment where some churches resort to questionable methods to attract followers, including exaggerated miracles, prophecies, and the commercialization of religious services (Olufemi & Ibekwe, 2021). These practices have contributed to a loss of trust in religious institutions among some segments of the population, who view the church as more of a business than a moral compass. Additionally, the commercialization of church activities has created a scenario where social vices, such as greed and exploitation, are often disguised as legitimate religious practices, further blurring the line between sacred and secular activities.

The findings of this study indicate that while churches in Port Harcourt have grown exponentially between 2010 and 2023, this growth has not translated into a significant reduction in social vices. On the contrary, in some cases, the proliferation of churches has inadvertently contributed to the perpetuation of social issues such as fraud, cultism, and moral decay. The study highlights the need for a reorientation of the church's role in society, where greater emphasis is placed on ethical leadership, social responsibility, and youth empowerment. While some churches have made commendable efforts in addressing social vices, a broader and more consistent approach is necessary for churches to fulfill their potential as agents of positive social change.

5. Conclusion

The study on church proliferation and social vices in Port Harcourt from 2010 to 2023 revealed several significant findings. Firstly, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of churches within the city during the study period, indicating a proliferation of religious institutions. This proliferation has led to heightened competition among churches for members, resources, and influence within the community. Secondly, the study found a correlation between the proliferation of churches and the prevalence of certain social vices in Port Harcourt. Specifically, there was evidence to suggest that areas with a higher concentration of churches also experienced higher rates of social vices such as fraud, substance abuse, and violence. This suggests a complex relationship between religious presence and social behavior within the community.

Additionally, the study highlighted the role of churches in addressing social vices and promoting positive community development. While some churches were found to be actively engaged in the initiatives to combat social vices and support vulnerable populations, others were criticized for their perceived lack of involvement or for exacerbating social problems through exploitative practices. Overall, the findings underscore the need for further research and collaboration between churches, government agencies, and community organizations to better understand and address the complex interplay between church proliferation and social vices in Port Harcourt. By working together, stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to promote social cohesion, address underlying causes of social vices, and support the well-being of the community as a whole.

Based on the findings, the study therefore recommended:

- 1). The government should establish clear regulatory guidelines for the registration and operation of churches. This framework should ensure that churches meet specific criteria, such as physical infrastructure, leadership qualifications, and a commitment to ethical practices, before receiving official recognition. This would help curb the unregulated establishment of churches, some of which may engage in or promote harmful social behaviors.
- 2). Churches should be encouraged to collaborate with local government and civil society organizations to implement community-based programs aimed at addressing social vices, such as youth unemployment, drug abuse, and crime. Such initiatives can promote the positive role churches play in society and reduce their involvement or association with social issues.
- 3). There should be mandatory ethical and leadership training for religious leaders to ensure they promote moral standards and discourage practices that may contribute to social vices. This can be facilitated through collaboration between religious bodies and government agencies, ensuring that leaders are equipped to positively influence their congregations and wider society.
- 4). A monitoring system should be established to periodically assess the activities of churches and their impact on social issues in Port Harcourt. This mechanism can include stakeholder involvement from local authorities, religious organizations, and community representatives to ensure accountability and transparency. By identifying problematic trends or practices, timely interventions can be made to mitigate the rise of social vices linked to church activities.

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