

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) and Social Justice in Nigeria

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(Received 14 February 2025; revised 18 December 2025; accepted 24 December 2025)

## Abstract

Despite its vast human and natural resources, Nigeria continues to grapple with many socio-political and economic crises that have challenged the nation's internal security and territorial integrity. These challenges underscore a significant deficit of social justice. Using phenomenological descriptive and analytical research design, this study explores the role of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) in the pursuit of social justice in Nigeria. The study found that the church has risen to challenge the culture of social injustice in Nigeria, taking the lead and paving the way in the campaign of building “a nation where peace and justice shall reign”. The Anglican Church in Nigeria has played a significant role in promoting social justice through advocacy, education, and community development.

**Keywords:** Anglican communion; Church; democracy; Nigeria; nation building; social justice

## Introduction

Nigeria is considered one of the most highly endowed nations on earth, owing to its wealth of human and natural resources, ranging from a veritable climate and aerial landscape, vast and high-quality mineral resources, unique historical monuments, archaeological sites, and tourist attractions. Regrettably, despite possessing such assets that significantly contribute to human capital and economic development, Nigeria is ranked among the poorest countries in the world, with over 95.1 million of its people living in extreme poverty, according to the World Poverty Clock (Ewodage, 2018). It is ranked 157th out of 189 countries by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2018) and 152nd out of 157 countries by the World Bank in the Human Development Index (Ujah, 2018). Nigeria presents a paradox of abundance and deprivation. With a population of over 200 million people and vast natural resources, the country is often described as the “giant of Africa.” Yet the lived reality of many of its citizens is marked by extreme poverty,

corruption, illiteracy, high mortality rate, ethnocentrism, nepotism, religious extremism, youth unemployment, intergroup conflicts, militia restiveness, and insurgency, which have challenged the internal security and territorial integrity of the nation. Consequently, the 2018 Global Law and Order Report by the Gallup Poll ranks Nigeria among the least safe countries in the world and one of the worst places to be born, 116 out of 142 sampled nations, rated even less safe than war-torn Libya (Akinloye, 2018). At the heart of these crises lies the problem of social injustice: the persistent failure to ensure fairness, equality and dignity for all citizens regardless of class, ethnicity, religion or gender. Social justice refers to a fair and just relationship between individuals and society, which “ensures an optimum balance between individuals’ joint responsibilities as a society and their responsibilities as individuals to contribute to a just society” (Anku-Tsedee, Amankwaa & Amertowo, 2014, p. 582). It consists of a systematic and social structure that guarantees fairness, equality, and just treatment of members of society, without bias to their sex, ethnicity, race, religious or political affiliation, or socio-economic status, in the assignment of fundamental rights, duties, and opportunities. Although the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria promises justice, fairness, and equality to all its citizens, in practice, there is a glaring deficit in social justice. This deficit is evident in the widening inequality gap between the opulence of a few political figures and the widespread poverty of ordinary citizens, measured by factors such as capital income, access to basic social amenities and services, personal security, property ownership, and other assets. It also manifests in the systemic violation of human rights, disregard for the rule of law and court orders, marginalisation of the minorities, gender bias, intimidation by state security agents, human trafficking, embezzlement of public funds, and the persistent dysfunction of essential infrastructures such as electricity, transportation system, portable water, housing, education, and healthcare (Hoffmann, 2025).

This situation has left the masses with deep feelings of frustration and discontentment, which, in turn, has fuelled the prevalent rate of crime and antisocial behaviours, such as kidnapping, youth restiveness, ethnic militancy, insurgency, endless struggles for secession, and all forms of acts of self-help in which the citizens take the law into their hands. Unfortunately, these sporadic protests against injustice in Nigeria, even when vehement, have yielded little or no result. Institutions that should have championed the campaign for social justice have been compromised. Political parties have been reduced to platforms solely for winning elections rather than for genuine governance. Trade Unions, such as the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), have seen a decline in influence, as their focus has shifted primarily to wages and remuneration. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), once a strong counterforce, have been vitiated by the monetisation of social relations and the tyranny of government policies (Prince, 2023; Songonuga, 2015).

In the absence of an effective state-led response, the church has emerged as a vital voice in the campaign to build “a nation where peace and justice shall reign.” Among Christian denominations, the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) has played a leading role in addressing inequality and advancing social justice in Nigeria. This paper examines how the Anglican Church, through its dioceses and institutions, has addressed social justice issues in Nigeria, using the Diocese of

Nsukka in Enugu State as a case study. The study is situated within a qualitative research paradigm, designed to explore the complex, context-dependent nature of institutional responses to social issues (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Isik, 2025). Specifically, it adopts a phenomenological approach (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Van Manen, 2023) to focus on the lived reality and essential structures of the Anglican Church's engagement with social justice, as manifested in a specific context. Data were gathered from both primary sources, particularly personal observation, and secondary sources (including Diocesan archives, church publications, and relevant scholarly literature). The analysis is both descriptive and analytical.

### **The Face of Social Justice in Nigeria; 1999-2025**

Social justice is the principle and practice of organising society to ensure the equitable distribution of resources, rights, dignity and opportunity for all individuals and groups. It is the cornerstone of a just, peaceful, and prosperous society and is essential to good governance and sustainable development (Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2025). While the philosophical and theological foundations of social justice vary across cultures and traditions, from secular human rights frameworks to religious doctrines, its core mandate is to protect the vulnerable and foster human welfare and existence (Chukwudozie, 2024).

In the Christian tradition, social justice is grounded in the belief that all humans bear the image of God (*imago Dei*; Gen. 1:26-27), a conviction that confers inherent dignity and equal worth on all persons. Throughout scripture, God commanded his people to defend the poor, oppressed, and marginalised (Deut. 10: 18-19, Isaiah 1: 17, Amos 5: 24), making social justice a core expression of covenant faithfulness. Jesus' ministry embodies this mandate, presenting the pursuit of social justice as participation in God's redemptive work of human flourishing (Luke 4: 18-19).

Thus, social justice is not merely a social good but integral to divine intent for human existence. It is the foundation for peace, prosperity, good governance, and the socio-economic development of any nation. It guarantees that every individual is entitled to the basic conditions necessary for a meaningful life, including access to education, healthcare, political participation, and economic opportunity. Its global importance is affirmed by institutions such as the United Nations, which has proclaimed February 20 as the World Day of Social Justice, a commitment to which Nigeria is a signatory (Leadership Editorial, Feb. 27, 2018).

The issue of social justice has been a knotty matter in Nigeria since its independence. Nigeria has witnessed a plethora of complaints and cases of social injustice; violations of human rights, socio-economic inequality, ethnic marginalisation, gender disparity, and disregard for the rule of law, among others, especially during the era of the military. The transition to democratic rule in 1999 marked a turning point that raised hope for social justice. With the end of the prolonged military dictatorship, there were expectations of accountable governance, strengthened rule of law, and a fairer distribution of resources. However, after more than two and a half decades of democratic government, there is no evidence that political liberalisation has translated into substantive justice for the majority of the

citizens. Structural poverty, youth unemployment, gender inequality, and widespread corruption remain persistent features of Nigerian society (Aniche and Ukaegbu, n. d).

While democracy provides a framework for freedom and participation, it has not guaranteed an equitable outcome in Nigeria. Nigeria's lack of social justice is evident in the irreconcilable socio-economic inequality gap, notably measured in terms of economic power, accessibility to basic social amenities and services, personal security, ownership of property and other assets. For instance, the wealthiest man in Nigeria would have to spend 1 million US Dollars a day for 42 years to exhaust his wealth (Oxfam, 2017). However, in the face of such stupendous wealth, over 112 million Nigerians live below the extreme poverty line of 1.90 US Dollars a day (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). According to Oxfam's calculation, the annual earnings of Nigeria's richest man could lift 2 million Nigerians out of poverty for one year, and the combined wealth of Nigeria's five richest men, which is a ton of 29.9 billion US Dollars, is sufficient enough to lift all Nigerians living below the extreme poverty line at the cost about 24 million US Dollar (Oxfam, 2017).

The economic disparity between the rich and the poor in Nigeria can be attributed to social injustice and inequity in income distribution. It has reached a worrisome stage with the return of democracy, finding expression in the daily struggle of ordinary Nigerian workers in the face of the accumulation of an obscene amount of wealth by the politicians and their appointees and allies. While the public servants in Nigeria grapple for a 70,000 Naira monthly National Minimum Wage amidst economic recession and high inflation rate, Nigerian lawmakers are one of the best paid in the world, with the average annual salary of 189,000 Dollars (Pindiga, 2013), equivalent to 37 million Naira (excluding allowances), which is 63 times the country's GDP per capita, in 2013 (Oxfam, 2017).

The injustice in income distribution has created overwhelming gaps in the living standards of political elites and the majority of ordinary Nigerians. An ordinary Nigerian citizen has little or no access to basic social services, such as education, healthcare, housing, security, etc, as provided by the constitution. The World Bank (2016) observed that Nigeria has an estimated housing deficit of over 17 million units. According to UN-Habitat (2018), about 1.6 billion people live in substandard housing globally, while over 100 million are homeless. Nigeria hosts an uncomfortably large percentage of these two, with over 100 million Nigerians technically homeless (Thisday, 2018, October 25).

Nigeria's healthcare system has also been poorly ranked, with the country positioned 140th out of 195 nations in the Global Healthcare Access Report from 1990-2015 (Sun Editorial, 2017). This poor performance is rooted in systemic deficiencies, such as a lack of state-of-the-art hospitals with diagnostic and treatment equipment that are accessible to all, a lack of universal health insurance coverage, poor personal access to healthcare services, and a high infant and maternity death rate. Nigeria has the 11<sup>th</sup> highest ranking in infant mortality rate in the world (UNICEF-Nigeria, 2018). Similarly, the educational system is crippled by extreme inequality. The underfunded public schools serve the poor, while the state-of-the-art private institutions cater to the elites, turning education into a status symbol. Consequently, Nigeria has a record of about 13.2 million out-of-school

children, a crisis driven mainly by economic barriers among other social and cultural factors (UNICEF-Nigeria, 2018).

In a country with such an abysmal record in the human development index, Certain Political, Public and Judicial Office Holders (Salaries and Allowances, etc) (Amendment Act) of 2008 enumerates the allowances of these public officers as follows (using the annual basic salary of N2,026,400 as the basis) accommodation 200 per cent; utilities 30 per cent; domestic staff 75 per cent; entertainment 45 per cent; medical facilities and security are provided by the state and will cover treatment in foreign hospitals; furniture 300 per cent; personal assistants 25 per cent; motor vehicle loan 400 per cent; motor maintenance and fuel allowance, 75 per cent; severance gratuity, 300 per cent; leave allowance, 10 per cent; newspaper allowance, 15 per cent; duty tour allowance, N35,000; estacode \$900; monitoring allowance 20 per cent (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008).

Social injustice in Nigeria cannot be reduced to economic deprivation alone. It is a complex interplay of colonial legacies, ethnic fragmentations, religious polarisation, and class privilege (Nwokike et al., 2023; Yusuf, 2025). As Onyambayi et al. (2024) and Okoko and Ahamefule (2023) noted, the colonial administrative system bequeathed on the Nigerian state hierarchical administrative systems that privileged certain groups, especially mission-educated elites, while marginalising others through inequitable policies on land Use Acts, access to education, and political participation. These asymmetries did not disappear with independence but were reproduced within postcolonial state structures, shaping contemporary forms of inequality (Afigbo, 1989; Mamdani, 1996).

Ethnicity has become a potent axis of social injustice in Nigeria. The colonial strategy of 'divide and rule' institutionalised ethnic differentiation through indirect rule, census classifications, and regionalised development policies. This laid the groundwork for the politicisation of ethnic identity in the postcolonial era, where competition over revenues, federal appointments, and political participation has intensified ethnic mistrust (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Similarly, religious identity, particularly Christian–Muslim relations, intersects with ethnic divisions, often producing layered forms of marginalisation in states where access to power is informally tied to dominant faith traditions (Omoigberale et al., 2025; Adepeju-Fashina, 2023). The result is not simply religious conflict, but a structural privileging that determines who receives state resources, whose narratives shape policy, and whose security is protected.

Gender inequality further complicates this landscape as patriarchal norms limit women's access to education, inheritance, and political visibility, reinforcing broader patterns of social injustice in Nigeria. Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment or perception of individuals on the basis of sex or socially construed gender roles (SCIAF, 2025). Although the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides equality for all genders under the law and protection of fundamental human rights, in practice, the lives and rights of Nigerian women are affected by myriad discriminatory traditions and socio-cultural practices that put them at a disadvantage in a number of areas compared to men. Women are notably limited in the ownership of some property, and often find it challenging to access a variety of social services and amenities freely enjoyed by their male counterparts (Ajala, 2017).

For example, some cultures believe that it is a waste of resources to send a girl child to school. Instead, they are encouraged or pushed into early marriage at a tender age, while the male folks go to school. Others still insist on female genital mutilation, which exposes the girl child to health hazards. More so, women own no property of their own, outside of their husbands, and in case of the death of the man, some are denied access to their husband's property, and often subjected to inhuman treatment to prove their innocence in their husband's death (Kimani & Obianwu, 2020). Domestic violence and sexual abuse against wives by husbands are often not generally condemned in some cultures, as it is seen as a family affair, and women are forbidden from reporting such acts to the public (Ngwoke, 2021). Precisely, the Penal Code of Northern Nigeria provides that an assault by a man on a woman is not an offence; if they are married, if native law or custom recognises such 'correction' as lawful, and if there is no grievous hurt (Northern Nigeria Penal Code, Section 55(1d)).

Thus, the rights of women are largely trampled upon. They are also kept out of full participation in the nation's socio-economic and political landscape. For instance, women have continued to have low representation in all tiers and levels of government, despite having 49.2 per cent of the nation's population; 94,762,333 out of 193 million (NBS Statistical Report, 2018). Findings reveal that no female politician has occupied any of the positions of President, Vice President, or Governor (except for the controversial case of Virginia Etiaba of Anambra state). Currently, there are 6 states with female deputy governors (Kaduna, Plateau, Ogun, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Ebonyi States) representing 16.7 per cent of the deputy governors' seats in Nigeria. In the National Assembly, there are 469 legislators: 109 in the Senate and 360 in the House of Representatives, respectively. Out of this, only 4 women are in the Senate, while 16 are in the House. Thus, female lawmakers constitute 4.2 per cent while male legislators, 95.8 per cent. At the state assembly level, there are 45 women out of 991 members, representing 4.5 per cent in terms of representation (PLAC Legist, 2023; Opara, 2025).

The rise in social justice and socio-economic inequality in Nigeria has resulted in the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The urge to get more profit has also led the bad policies that cut down social spending in education, health, infrastructural development, and security. Agitation to this by ordinary Nigerians has often led to gross injustice in the abuse of human rights, disregard for the rule of law, intimidation from institutions of government, such as police, army, State Security Services (SSS), the Economic and Financial Crime Control (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), etc. The government often uses these institutions to witch hunt its opposition. Police brutality, gross disrespect for human rights by law enforcement agents, criminal breach of trust by the government and its agencies, as well as negligence and exploitation of the masses by government agents, ministries and parastatals constitute issues of social injustice in Nigeria.



## Consequences of Social Injustice in Nigeria

After about sixty years of independence from colonial rule, Nigeria is still referred to as a Third World nation (Greene, 1980). Although this phrase has been described as inappropriate, its replacement, “developing nation,” does not reflect the nation in a good light. Arguably, with its vast array of human and natural resources, Nigeria should have been able to achieve a high level of development commensurate with that of Malaysia, China, Korea, and other developed nations of the world, with which it was at the same level of economic development at independence.

At the heart of the vicious cycle of Nigeria’s underdevelopment lies the issue of social injustice and violation of human rights. This injustice chiefly promulgated by men and women in power in all levels of leadership in the country, characterized by disregard for rule of law, denial or violation of fundamental right of individual or group, nepotism, indiscipline, discrimination, unjust policies and many other acts of high-handedness that creates a status inequality in the society, has rampantly engendered socio-political culture of corruption that have destroyed national institutions and entrenched a climate of impunity. In Nigeria, riches are made at the expense of the poor; position at the price of oppression and intimidation; opulence and influence at the price of integrity. Ordinary Nigerians thus suffer severe exploitation of both the basic civil rights and social amenities and infrastructure required for a good living.

Poverty, therefore, has exponentially increased in Nigeria, earning the country the designation of the “poverty capital of the world.” The Global Poverty Clock (2018) reported that about 86.9 million Nigerians are living in abject poverty. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2012) had earlier estimated that over 112 million Nigerians live below the poverty line. More recent data underscores the persistence of this challenge. In 2022, the NBS reported that 63% of Nigerians (about 133 million people) are multidimensionally poor, experiencing deprivations across health, education, living standard, and access to basic services (NBS, 2022). The pulverising poverty in Nigeria, manifests in inadequate access to healthful food; poor feeding; poor housing, poor clothing, lack of access to high-quality medical care; unsafe workplace; low-quality education; low job opportunities; poor political participation by the majority of its citizens and infrastructural dysfunctions among others, is an offshoot of social injustice.

The poverty of Nigeria is more than the poverty of a people within a poor society, but the poverty of a people in a rich society. The problem is not a lack of resources but rather their persistent ill-use, misappropriation, and mismanagement. The culture of corruption and impunity of the leaders, particularly political elites, who often appear disconnected from the lived reality of ordinary Nigerians, has entrenched inequality and hindered equitable development, being out of touch with the daily struggles of the average Nigerian. Poverty has become rampant in Nigeria. It retards the growth and development of both the citizens and the nation.

These negative situations have significantly affected the life expectancy of the people. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2018), the average life expectancy in Nigeria is 55.2 years (male: 54.7; female: 55.7), rating Nigeria 178th out of 192 countries. The National Bureau of Statistics (2017) offered a lower estimate, suggesting an average life expectancy of 49 years at birth (female: 51;

male: 47). The inconsistency in the data may be explained in terms of the research methodology; however, both data highlight the nation's poor health outcomes in comparison to global standards. The burden of premature mortality in Nigeria is associated with preventable diseases, road traffic accidents, maternal and birth-related complications, and inadequate health infrastructure (WHO, 2018).

Research has shown there is an inexorable link between social injustice, poverty, life expectancy and overall wellbeing of individuals in a country. Absence of social justice in Nigeria often represents increased physical and emotional suffering as well as greater vulnerability to poverty, which adversely affects the life expectancy of individuals in many ways. Levy (2013) stated that

Poor people have higher rates of morbidity and mortality for most diseases, shorter life expectancy, and higher rates of injury and disability. They have less access to high-quality medical care and less access to preventive services. They have less health literacy—less knowledge about threats to their health and how to navigate the health care system. And they are less likely to receive health care from providers who are sensitive to their needs and who understand both their living conditions and their personal and cultural perspectives on health and illness (p. 170).

In addition, there is a high rate of negative health-related behaviour amongst poor people. Specifically, people with a lower level of income are more likely to live in a ghetto, and thus are more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards, drug and substance abuse, drug trafficking, sexual abuse, abduction, and more likely to be victims of violence and infrastructural dysfunctions. Many Nigerians have met their untimely death on the nooses of inadequate health facilities, bad roads, etc. These factors contribute to shortening lifespan

Social injustice in Nigeria has created tension between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' (or the 'have-nots' and the society at large), resulting in crimes, conflicts, violence, and general insecurity of the nation. Nigeria today is facing an existential crisis. Since the return of democracy, practically, no day passes without a report of suicide, robbery, abduction, kidnapping, banditry, bomb attacks, etc. As the security operatives battle these social vices, thousands of Nigerians caught up in the crossfire have lost their lives, property worth tens of billions destroyed and development opportunities worth billions lost. Insecurity in Nigeria is an offshoot of disenfranchisement, resentment and discontentment of the people. It manifests when people take it upon themselves to challenge perceived injustice in social exclusion and inequitable distribution of common wealth.

Social injustice, in terms of the inequitable distribution of common goods and social exclusion, has an impact on national cohesion. It erodes trust, increases anxiety, encourages corruption and threatens economic dynamism and democracy. As extreme inequality is established as a *status quo* in Nigeria, whereby extreme wealth coexists with extreme poverty, it makes the elite more self-interested and less connected and concerned with society, and therefore more likely to act without respect for others or their fundamental rights, even when the acts are potentially illegal.



In addition, social injustice in Nigeria has engendered a culture whereby the citizens' allegiance is to their ethnic inclination rather than the Nigerian state. This has led to the weakening of the state authority in propagating the national agenda and interest, as it has become that the issue of national interest can no longer be considered on its own merit, but on how it affects individuals ethnic groups, which is detrimental to the peace and development of Nigeria. Thus, Abdusalami Abubakar, former Nigerian Head of State, reiterates 'lasting peace and development would continue to elude Nigeria until the culture of social justice was placed at the top in activities of both public and private organisations' (Eze, 2017).

### The Church and Social Justice in Nigeria

The problem of social injustice in Nigeria is inextricably linked to the challenges of governance and state-building. As a pluralistic state, Nigeria comprises diverse ethnic, religious and sociocultural groups with competing interests. In an attempt to promote social justice and achieve balanced representation, the state introduced mechanisms such as the federal charter principle, revenue allocation formulas, and affirmative action policies (Suberu, 2022). However, the uneven implementation of these measures often exacerbates grievances, fuelling perceptions of marginalisation (Okoye & Asogwa, 2021). This situation has further aggravated the country's security crisis, evident in insurgency in the northeast, banditry in the northwest, and separatism in the southeast, all of which undermine citizens' right to life and wellbeing. These multivarious challenges underscore the limitations of a state-centric approach to addressing social injustice. Within this context, religious institutions such as the Anglican Church have emerged as a vital force in the pursuit of social justice.

The involvement of the church in the struggle for social justice in Nigeria has been debated. While some believe that the church, as a spiritual body, should focus exclusively on preparing people for the kingdom of God and avoid entanglement in civic affairs, others contend that the church has both spiritual and social responsibility to pursue social justice (Van Raken, 1999; Nwankwor et al., 2022). The argument is continuous. However, this paper argues that the church has a crucial role to play in the pursuit of social justice, whether as an institution or as a social organism. Jesus derided the Pharisees for their contempt for the weightier matter of the law; justice and mercy, which all ought to work for (Mathew 23:23). Paul (2018) therefore argued that the church "has no moral choice, before God, but to delve deeper into the struggle for social justice- and to do so with greater reliance on non-violence and with greater unity, coordination, sharing and Christian understanding."

The church's involvement in social justice is deeply rooted in Scripture and tradition. The prophets denounced oppression (Amos 5:24; Isaiah 1:17), while Jesus inaugurated a kingdom characterised by justice, compassion, and inclusion (Luke 4:18-19). Anglican social teaching, expressed in the *Five Marks of Mission*, affirms that to transform unjust structures of society is integral to the church's mission (Zink, 2017). The Five Marks of Mission, framed from the Anglican Communion, outline how the church participates in God's mission: Tell (proclaim the Good

News), Teach (nurture new believers), Tend (serve human need), Transform (challenge injustice, pursue peace), and Treasure (safeguard creation). This framework provides a holistic view of Anglican mission, covering evangelism, discipleship, social action, justice advocacy, and environmental care, uniting Anglicans worldwide in a shared understanding of ministry. As an integral part of society, the church cannot repudiate its mission of promoting social justice. In balance with her intra-communal call to communion, there is a trans-communal call to mission or witness which takes the form of services to society in the name of Christ (DeHart, 2006). Therefore, whoever sets any boundary to the church's involvement in socio-political issues in the nation and other institutions of men, to that extent, denies the redemption and restorative power of the Christian faith. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the role of the Anglican Church in promoting social justice in Nigeria.

### **The Role of the Anglican Church in the Pursuit of Social Justice in Nigeria**

The Anglican church in Nigeria traces its origin to the mid-nineteenth century through the missionary activities of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). From its earliest years, the church establishes itself as more than a spiritual institution, playing a central role in education, healthcare and the promotion of general human wellbeing. Mission schools founded by the Anglicans were among the first providers of Western-style education in Nigeria, while mission hospitals and dispensaries played a significant role in the development of the country's healthcare system (Adetunmbi et al., 2024; Asaju, 2024). These initiatives demonstrate that the church has historically functioned both as a religious and socio-political institution, shaping the moral, intellectual, and physical life of Nigerian society.

Over the years, the Anglican church has consolidated its position as one of the largest Christian denominations in Nigeria, with a nationwide presence across all geopolitical zones. Its diocesan structure, headed by bishops and linked to parishes at the grassroots, provides both a hierarchical and community-based framework for engagement. This structure allows the church to respond contextually to local realities while maintaining a collective voice at the national level through synods, communiques and episcopal interventions. The church, therefore, operates at the intersection of faith, morality and social responsibility, making it a critical actor in national discourse on justice and equality.

The historical trajectory of the Anglican Church in Nigeria's commitment to social justice can be delineated into three distinct phases, each reflecting the church's adaptive response to shifting socio-political conditions and its deepening engagement with the nation's evolving realities. The colonial period (1842–1960) represented the foundational phase of the church's social mission, principally initiated by the Church Missionary Society. During this period, evangelisation and social intervention were mutually supportive pursuits: missionary expansion was accompanied by the establishment of schools, hospitals, and vocational centres, which functioned as instruments of both religious instruction and social uplift (Ayele, 2017; Chmielewski, 2025). The CMS also established itself as a moral voice

in the anti-slave trade movement, advancing a theological ethic rooted in human dignity and freedom (Anderson, 2017; Githige, 1986). Thus, the seeds of a socially engaged Anglicanism were planted in a context where spiritual transformation and social reform were understood as inseparable.

The post-independence era (1960–1999) witnessed a significant recalibration of the church's priorities as Nigeria grappled with political instability, economic restructuring, and the devastation of the Civil War (1967–1970). Throughout this period, the Anglican Church increasingly embraced a nation-building agenda, articulating its mission in terms of moral regeneration, national reconciliation, and social healing. The establishment of relief agencies, youth ministries, and community-based initiatives reflected a shift from missionary paternalism toward a localised, contextually informed praxis of social responsibility (Anene, 2023; Uchegbue, 2013). This era consolidated the church's self-understanding as not merely a spiritual institution but also a moral stakeholder in Nigeria's post-war reconstruction.

The contemporary period (1999–present), marked by a return to democratic governance, deepening socio-economic inequality, and escalating security challenges, has introduced a new phase in the Church of Nigeria's commitment to social justice. The church now operates within a pluralised civil society in which religious institutions increasingly undertake quasi-public roles. Thus, the Church of Nigeria's social action has expanded to include policy advocacy, civic education, democratic accountability campaigns, peacebuilding programmes, and extensive humanitarian interventions targeting the poor, internally displaced persons, and other vulnerable groups (Uchegbue, 2013; Adetunmbi et al., 2024).

The Anglican church has become increasingly vocal in its response to governance failures in contemporary Nigeria. Through its pastoral letters, synod's resolutions and press statements, the church has consistently drawn attention to issues such as corruption, insecurity, electoral malpractice, and economic inequality (Enietan-Mathews, 2025; Guardian Nigeria, 2025). In doing so, the church assumes a prophetic role, holding the leaders accountable and amplifying the voice of marginalised communities. However, this role is not limited to advocacy alone; it is complemented by practical interventions in healthcare, education, poverty alleviation, and peacebuilding across various dioceses.

The engagement of the Anglican church in social justice in Nigeria is best understood through the work of its diocese, where faith is translated into practical action at the community level. Each diocese operates within its own sociopolitical context and therefore responds to the peculiar injustice experienced in its region. These interventions illustrate the church's commitment to holistic mission, where the proclamation of the gospel is inseparable from the promotion of human dignity and societal well-being.

### 1. Provisions of basic infrastructures as a tool for Justice

One of the most visible contributions of the Anglican Church to social justice is its investment in basic infrastructure. In a society where state institutions have often failed to provide essential services equitably, the church has stepped in to bridge the critical gaps, particularly in education, health and access to clean water. Several

Anglican dioceses in Nigeria have established schools, hospitals, and community water projects as a deliberate strategy to reduce inequality and enhance human dignity. These schools not only provide academic training but also inculcate moral discipline and civic responsibility. For instance, in the Nsukka diocese, the establishment of community-based schools, such as St. Cyprian's Girls Secondary School, St. Cyprian's Special Science School, Nsukka High School, also known as Anglican Grammar School, among others and healthcare facilities like Faith Foundation Mission Hospital, has expanded opportunities for the poor, ensuring that vulnerable groups who would have otherwise been excluded from such services are not left behind.

This provision of social infrastructure by the church is not merely charitable but fundamentally restorative, aimed at addressing structural inequalities. Through these initiatives, the church tackles systemic deprivation by ensuring that the marginalised population gains access to quality education and healthcare. By widening access to education and health, the church not only alleviates immediate needs but also empowers individuals to participate meaningfully in society and break free from cycles of exclusion. The Anglican church embodies the biblical imperative to defend the cause of the poor and the marginalised. As Uchegbue (2013) noted, these interventions represent the church's attempt to transform its theological mission into a practical expression of social justice.

## 2. Open and Radical Criticism against Acts of Social Injustice.

Beyond service delivery, the Anglican dioceses also challenge all forms of social injustice in society through advocacy aimed at holding political leaders accountable. According to Archbishop Cyril Gerbett, the church is to challenge the system of social injustice by "bearing against it militant and prophetic witness . . . showed in open attacks on the sin . . ." (Ryan, 1987, p. 159). Thus, the Anglican Church in Nigeria has spoken out against acts of social injustice, corruption, electoral malpractices and insecurity in Nigeria in the light of biblical ethics and Christian principles. The church, through her Diocesan Synod, Standing Committee, and sermons, has openly and officially condemned the culture of impunity and social injustice in Nigeria, and has also called the people to true repentance.

For instance, in her 3<sup>rd</sup> session of the 8<sup>th</sup> synod of the Diocese of Nsukka, the Church once again reprimanded Nigerians on the high level of inequality, discrimination, abuse of human rights, human trafficking, child labour, and gender inequality prevalent in the society. She sternly condemned the corruption of public office holders, the collapse of civil services in Nigeria, the imposition of candidates by the state governors, especially in local government elections, and the hypocritical silence of the federal government in the herdsmen mayhem and the proposed cattle ranch policy. She further called for social justice and true federalism in Nigeria, which should manifest in restructuring, devolution of power, state police, and local government autonomy and regard for the rule of law (Agbo, 2017).

In an attempt to make her voice loud and widely heard, the church has leverage on what Uchegbue (2013) called 'alternative voice' to speak against social injustice through the establishments of independent and unbiased media outfits, devoid of government interference and ethnic colouration; such as Anglican Cable Network of

Nigeria (ACNN), Anglican Voice, etc. Through these media outlets, the church, in its social advocacy and human rights education programmes, has raised the citizens' consciousness on the basic principle of civic responsibility that inform Christian involvement in socio-political issues, ranging from politics, good governance, social justice, concern for one another, sanctity of human life, respect for the rule of law, gender equality etc.

These public statements, though sometimes controversial, positioned the Anglican church as a moral conscience in national affairs. Advocacy at the diocesan level not only amplifies the concern of ordinary citizens but also pressures leaders to uphold the principles of fairness and transparency. The church, as the conscience of society, has also served as a moral check on government policies and actions, particularly those of the ruling class. Through its social action litigation, it has held the government accountable for its actions and compelled it to fulfil its responsibilities to the people. Moreover, through its open, militant, and prophetic criticism, the church has empowered citizens, especially its followers, to rebuff, resist, denounce, and mobilise mass protests against ungodly and unpopular policies and laws of the land that militate against social justice and equality. A potent example is the church-led response to the 'Osu Caste system' in the Nsukka cultural zone of Enugu State. The Osu Caste system is a traditional practice that designates certain individuals and their descendants as 'ritual slaves or outcasts, subjecting them to severe socioeconomic discrimination, dehumanisation and exclusion from community life, such as marriage, title-taking, education and socioeconomic opportunities. Although the system has been legally abolished, its social stigma persists in Igboland (Ubaka & Ugwuja, 2014; Ezeanya, 1967).

In pursuit of social justice, the Anglican Communion of Nsukka Diocese have not only preached against this practice as fundamentally un-Christian and a violation of human dignity but also has organised grassroots campaigns, facilitated dialogues with traditional rulers and publicly integrated Osu individuals into congregational life and ordained ministry. This direct challenge to a deep-seated socioeconomic injustice has mobilised communities to resist a long-standing cultural norm, advocating for social inclusion and equality of all people.

### 3. Practical Social Welfare Actions and Poverty Alleviation Initiative.

The role of the church in the pursuit of social justice does not end with the campaign against acts/systems of social injustice; it also includes alleviating the misery and painful conditions of victims of injustice. "The church, which criticises social injustice and offers goals for transformation but lacks practical actions, becomes hypocritical." (Wei, n.d.). Thus, the Anglican Church of Nigeria, through its various arms and directorates, has provided social welfare intervention programmes and packages aimed at alleviating the suffering of marginalised masses and addressing socio-economic inequality in the society.

For instance, in her 2018 Standing Committee held in St. Peter's Cathedral Church, Minna, Niger State, the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) reiterates its decision on the official lunching of her 'Church of Nigeria Relief Fund', aimed at the relief of the afflictions of victims of natural disasters, ethnic and religious crises, indigent children and widows, etc, later in the year (Oko; 2018,

p. 24). In the same vein, in the Diocese of Nsukka, the church, through the Women Ministry, has provided free medical care for the sick, financial and material support for the needy, scholarship funds for indigent students, job training for the unemployed, long-term support for the widow, relief materials for the IDPs, and a welfare package for the orphans. More so, the Diocese, through its legal luminaries, has also provided free legal assistance to victims of human rights violations, especially at the hands of law enforcement officers (Agbo, 2018, pp. 35–52).

The church's material solidarity with victims of social injustice extends beyond mere charity to the provision of their subsistence needs. Through its various capacity-building programmes, entrepreneurial training, and job placement services, the Anglican Church in Nigeria works to gainfully engage the ever-increasing number of unemployed Nigerian youths as a key strategy for poverty alleviation. It has further engaged in the provision of infrastructure and socio-economic development projects, such as the construction of schools, hospitals, housing facilities, and business ventures, aimed at improving the lives of victims of social injustice. The projects have not only provided employment for the unemployed but have also provided quality education, better health care services, and accommodations to the helpless masses in the hinterlands, who are disadvantaged by the callous bureaucratic system of the government institutions (Uchegbue, 2013, p.150) in accessing these basic needs.

#### 4. Reconciliation of the victims of social injustice and the offenders

The reconciliation of the victims of social injustice with their offenders constitutes another important role of the church in the pursuit of social justice. This is necessary because the perception of injustice tends to elicit anger, envy, psychological stress, and moral outrage. Thus, victims of social injustice frequently call for retributive justice, which holds that a wrongdoer deserves punishment proportionate to the harm caused. This approach is rooted in the principle of proportional payback, mostly articulated in the ancient *Lex Talionis* (Latin for law of retaliation), expressed in the Old Testament “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” (Exodus 21: 22–25; Levi. 24: 10–23) (Nissel, 2010; Koomson, 2020). The cries for retributive justice, even from a diabolical and unworkable criminal justice system, are notably driven primarily by the desire for revenge- a response to inner grievances. Yet as Karmen (1990) noted, “Forcing the perpetrator of injustice to suffer does not really alleviate the victim's distress, nor does degrading the wrongdoers erase the humiliation felt by the injured party” (p. 31).

Rather than punitive retribution, the Anglican Church adopted a restorative justice paradigm, which is not primarily concerned with punishing the offender but with repairing the harm caused by injustice. It focused on the needs of victims, the responsibilities of offenders, and community involvement. The goal is reconciliation and the restoration of the relationship through processes like dialogue, repentance, confession, forgiveness and restitution (Jacob, Asbill & Tauati, 2023; Sivasubramanian, 2017). The church understands that “a punitive and vengeful approach to social injustice can only increase the level of violence, which is already endemic to our culture” (Pepinsky, 1991). The central idea of the restorative justice



model is not only in repairing harm in the past, but also in striving towards a better future; a future in which people will live in right relationships with one another.

This is seen in the case of the Alor-Uno community in Nsukka Local Government, Enugu State, where the Anglican Church diocese of Nsukka waded into the knotty crises and conflicts among the people that have lasted for generations, and ensured peace in the community. The move of the Anglican Church for reconciliation and peace in the community was based on the principle of restorative justice, which shows concern and respect for the victims and victimisers. The way to reconciliation lies through an effective grappling with the root cause(s) of the enmity that had existed among the people. Defaulters were made to apologise for their misconduct, make reparation or restitution and where applicable, pay the stipulated fine. As Uchegbue (2013) points out, the church's indictments of the defaulters were not mere, arbitrary, malicious and vindictive criticism, but rather a constructive and corrective approach, which ultimately was aimed at the eventual liberation of both the oppressors from the vices and the oppressed from their victimisation, thereby reconciling them. The process has provided the mechanism to question norms or traditions and alter social structures that contribute to social injustice.

In North Central Nigeria, where communal clashes have destabilised rural communities, the Anglican church has facilitated relief for displaced persons, combining humanitarian aid with a reconciliation programme. The church has also played an active role in conflict resolution; the church has been actively involved in interfaith dialogue with Muslim leaders to reduce tension and promote peaceful coexistence. Initiatives such as joint community projects have sought to build trust across religious lines. These efforts demonstrate the church's commitment to peace as an essential aspect of justice.

## 5. Personal conversion of the ordinary man

The church's role in ensuring social justice extends beyond mere philanthropic activism or welfare. It involves protesting against social injustice and motivating and mobilising people for active participation in social transformation, ultimately aiming for a total transformation of men from the inside through the power of the gospel. As Douglas Webster, cited in Uchegbue (2013), noted, "the human tragedy is sin and not hunger, while the worst privation is ignorance of God rather than social inequity" (p.152). Thus, the Anglican church of Nigeria, while seeking a social, political and economic system in Nigeria, relentlessly seeks the spiritual well-being of all people through the conversion of the human soul. The church understands that if social change is to bring lasting fruits, a deep-seated conversion and fundamental spiritual transformation of the individual members of the society – the oppressed, the oppressor, and the liberator are of indispensable necessity.

## Conclusion

The entrenchment of the principle of social justice is inevitable in the Nigerian quest to build a peaceful and prosperous nation. Consequently, the church in Nigeria, particularly the Anglican Church, has assiduously worked in the actualisation of this

vision. Though much success has been recorded so far, there is still more to be done. With the collaboration of other churches, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, and the government itself, the culture of social injustice in Nigeria will be abated.

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