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Denominational Loyalty on the Cooperative Programme of the Nigerian Baptist Convention Between (2013-2023)

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Abstract. The Baptist Cooperative Programme is a system in which churches, who cooperate with the Nigeria Baptist Convention (NBC), make contributions in the form of certain percentages of their tithes, offerings, and undesignated income to their associations, state conferences, and the national body. This paper explores the effects of denominational loyalty on the Cooperative Programme of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) and strategies to deepen this loyalty among church members. Social identity theory suggests that individuals define themselves based on their membership in social groups, leading to the formation of an identity that is partly derived from their group membership. The decline in the commitment of churches within this period of ten years is worrisome. The existing problem lies in the need to strengthen denominational loyalty to the Convention amidst changing societal dynamics and competing religious influences. Using secondary sources of data collection, including scholarly articles, books, and Convention reports, this study analyses the historical context and current practices of the Baptist Cooperative Programme. Preliminary findings suggest that the Cooperative Programme plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty among members, contributing to the overall growth and sustainability of the denomination. Also, while there is a strong desire for cooperation among Baptist Churches, challenges such as lack of loyalty, proper communication, and financial constraints hinder the commitment of the members. The study concludes that the Baptist Cooperative commitment has the potential to strengthen denominational loyalty among Baptist churches in Nigeria. Hence, by addressing these challenges and building on the potential successes of the Cooperative Programme, the Nigerian Baptist Convention can further enhance unity and cooperation among its member churches, ultimately strengthening the denomination as a whole.

Keywords. Autonomy, Cooperation, Cooperative Programme, Denominational Loyalty, Nigerian Baptist Convention, Unity

Introduction

Baptists are renowned for their commitment to congregational autonomy, individual liberty, and the priesthood of all believers (Afolaranmi, 2022a). The aforementioned emphasis on autonomy is also present within the local church, wherein members are actively encouraged to engage in governance and decision-making (Forde, 2019). Notwithstanding this preoccupation with personal autonomy, the Baptist denomination concurrently fosters a robust sense of loyalty to one's denomination. This is the reason why denominational loyalty play a

crucial role in the functioning and sustainability of religious organizations most especially the local churches. It refers to the allegiance and commitment of individuals or groups to a specific denomination within Christianity. Hoagland (2020) rightly aver that denominational loyalty fosters a sense of belonging and identity among members of a religious organization and provides a framework for shared religious beliefs, values, and practices, creating a cohesive community bound by a common faith.

From the perspective of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC), denominational loyalty is particularly significant due to the history and mission of the apex Baptist body. It is on this basis that Ogunlana (2014) posits that NBC has a long-standing tradition of evangelism, education, and social welfare programs in Nigeria. Denominational loyalty is therefore essential for sustaining these initiatives and advancing NBC's mission of spreading the gospel and serving the community. Some scholars such as Ndzi (2023) highlighted the importance of denominational loyalty in religious organizations, with some emphasizing its role in maintaining doctrinal purity and theological integrity. Denominational loyalty is sometimes discussed in relation to the Cooperative Programme of the Nigeria Baptist Convention, as a key strategy used to raise funds for mission work and church planting. It is important to state that the Cooperative Programme of the Nigeria Baptist Convention (NBC) is not solely limited to finance; it encompasses a broader spectrum and different components of 'cooperative efforts' aimed at advancing the mission and vision of Baptist operations in Nigeria (Nwومانogbo, 2020). While financial contributions are a significant aspect, the Cooperative Programme also involves the sharing of resources, knowledge, and skills among churches and members.

An essential element of the Cooperative Programme is its strong commitment to missionary and collaborative ministry. By combining their resources, churches within the NBC collaborate in evangelism, discipleship, and community outreach programmes to achieve greater impact (Nwومانogbo, 2020). The role of the Cooperative Programme in enhancing church loyalty to the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) is crucial, especially amidst changing societal dynamics and competing religious influences. However, the existing problem lies in the need to strengthen denominational loyalty to the Convention. This loyalty is essential for the growth and sustainability of the denomination but faces challenges such as a lack of proper communication for the leaders of the local Baptist churches and financial constraints from members, which in turn lead to a diminishing sense of loyalty among churchgoers (Blount, 2023). In recent years, societal changes and the rise of other religious movements have challenged the traditional loyalty that members once had toward the Nigerian Baptist Convention. These changes have led to a decline in the commitment of some members, affecting not only the significance of the church contribution but also the effectiveness of the Cooperative Programme in fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty among local Churches.

Additionally, while there is a strong desire for cooperation among Baptist Churches, practical challenges hinder the full commitment of members to the Cooperative Programme. These challenges include financial constraints, where some members may not be able to contribute as much as they would like, as well as a lack of proper communication between the church leaders, deacons, and its member churches, leading to a disconnect between the leadership and the congregation. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the Nigerian Baptist Convention to maintain its relevance and influence in the face of changing societal dynamics. Strategies to deepen loyalty among church members must focus on improving communication and fostering a stronger sense of belonging and commitment to the denomination. This study aims to explore these challenges and propose strategies to overcome them, ultimately strengthening the Cooperative Programme and enhancing church loyalty to the NBC.

Brief History of the Nigerian Baptist Convention

The history of the Nigerian Baptist Convention started with the visit of Thomas Jefferson Bowen sent by the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in August 1850. He arrived in Badagry and proceeded to Abeokuta where he stayed for eighteen months learning the Yoruba Language. He produced a book on Grammar and Dictionary of the Yoruba Language which later became a helpful tool for the study of the Yoruba language especially to missionaries.

After a series of setbacks, due to wars, ill health, the death of some of the missionaries, and the American Civil War which broke out between 1861 and 1865 followed by twelve years of reconstruction, the Yoruba Baptist Association made up of the mission churches in the western region was born on the 11th March, 1914 at Idikan Baptist Church Ibadan. In 1916 and 1918, Baptists from Sapele and Calabar attended the annual meeting of the Yoruba Baptist Association. To accommodate the non-Yorubas and foster love and unity, the Yoruba Baptist Association was changed to the Nigerian Baptist Convention in 1919 (Afolaranmi, 2022b).

An extract of its objectives from the constitution of the Nigerian Baptist Convention are as follows:

1. To take the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who do not know it, or who have not received it, wherever the opportunity may be found.
2. To strengthen and assist needy Baptist churches.
3. To encourage and assist in the establishment and maintenance of Sunday schools, Church training programmes, women's and men's missionary unions, and similar organizations as circumstances may require.
4. To assist in the development of schools, where children may be educated under Christian influence.
5. To foster schools, colleges, and tertiary institutions where young men and women may be specially trained for Christian service as workers ministering to the needs of people in body, mind, and soul.
6. To be the Proprietor of all Baptist medical institutions.
7. To be Proprietor of the Baptist Ministerial training Institution(s).
8. To be loving and efficient care for those who are sick in body, mind, and soul.
9. To afford the opportunity for united action concerning matters affecting the welfare of churches in the Convention and to cultivate fellowship with all who love the Lord Jesus Christ, through an annual conference, the publication of regular periodicals and other literature, and by such others means as the Convention may adopt.
10. To confer with and cooperate with other Christian churches and organizations, as occasions may arise.
11. To own properties, real and personal, including shares and stocks in companies whose aims and objectives are not at variance with the declared principles and objectives of the Convention.
12. To establish companies to deal in the sale of religious and other educational books, stationeries, and other items.
13. To invest in such other financial undertakings that are for the propagation of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today, the Nigerian Baptist Convention has grown to be the largest Baptist denomination in Africa and the second largest in the world after its mother, the Southern Baptist Convention. It is now one of the most formidable and largest Conventions in the Baptist World

Alliance. The Nigerian Baptist Convention has over fourteen thousand churches, ten million members, ten theological institutions, fifteen secondary schools, Bowen University named after Thomas Jefferson Bowen, a University Teaching Hospital named Bowen University Teaching Hospital, Ogbomoso, and a microfinance bank known as Bowen Microfinance Bank to mention a few (Afolaranmi, 2022b).

Conceptual Review Church

The etymological genealogy of the word "church" is quite intriguing, tracing its origins back to ancient Greek and Hebrew and continuing through its development across multiple languages and scholarly interpretations or explanations. The term "church" as used in the Bible is derived predominantly from the Greek word "*ekklēsia*," which signifies "assembly" or "called-out ones" (Matshobane and Masango, 2018). It refers to the congregation of the Israelites in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. This notion underwent development in the New Testament, wherein Jesus employed the term "*ekklēsia*" to denote his disciples, the congregation of believers. This term was adopted by the earliest Christian communities to emphasise their gathering and unity in Christ.

Barth (2015) defined the concept of the church with profound theological depth and practical relevance. Central to Barth's understanding was the idea that the church is not a human institution but a divine reality, called into being by God's initiative. For Barth, the church is the "people of God," a community gathered around the *Word of God* and the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Lord's Supper. Barth (2015) emphasized the church's role as a witness to God's kingdom, called to proclaim the Word of God in both its preaching and its actions. He further saw the church as a sign of God's presence in the world, pointing to a reality beyond itself. This understanding led Barth to reject any notion of the church as a mere human organization or a social institution, emphasizing instead its supernatural and spiritual nature.

John Calvin cited in Milner (2022) is another leading figure who offered a comprehensive definition of the church that continues to influence Christian thought. He viewed the church as the "community of believers" who are united by their faith in Jesus Christ. He emphasized the importance of the church as a visible institution, where believers gather for worship, instruction, and mutual edification. Central to his understanding of the church was the concept of the "invisible church" and the "visible church." The invisible church according to him refers to the spiritual unity of all believers throughout history, known only to God. The visible church, on the other hand, is the outward manifestation of the church in the world, characterized by the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.

Additionally, the notion of the church may be seen through the lens of the collective entity known as the body of Christ. The attribution of the term "body of Christ" to the Church was largely made by the Apostle Paul (Kristiono, 2017). Paul used this metaphor in the New Testament to explain the amalgamation and multiplicity within the Christian society. The concept is most expressed in 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul draws a parallel between the church and a human body, with Christ serving as the leader and other believers fulfilling different roles. This metaphor highlights the intricate and interrelated nature of believers, with each individual making a distinct and essential contribution to the overall functioning of the body. Regarding the allegiance of members to the body of Christ, the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ highlights numerous crucial aspects. Firstly, it emphasises the concept of solidarity among believers. Similar to how a physical body consists of several components or systems that collaborate for the general health and functioning of the body, Christians are also expected to

collaborate in unity for the betterment of the church (Pryor, 2016). This oneness surpasses individual interests and preferences, as each member acknowledges their interdependence with others in the collective. Furthermore, the metaphor highlights the significance of having a diverse range of individuals within the community of believers. Similar to the way a biological body is composed of several components that serve distinct purposes, Christians too possess a variety of gifts, skills, and vocations within the church. This variety is not only tolerated but also embraced, since each member is esteemed for the distinct contribution, they provide to the collective.

The definitions presented provide profound insights into the notion of the church, emphasising its theological, historical, and practical aspects. In this article, the church is defined as a "group of believers", both visible and invisible, who are united by their trust in Jesus Christ and are considered to be divinely constituted. It is a congregation of humans called by God, exemplifying the concepts of unity, solidarity, and diversity. As a "people of God," the church is distinguished by its observance of the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper and baptism, and its devotion to the Bible. The church is not just a human institution, but rather a supernatural and spiritual being that speaks to the existence of God's kingdom and serves as a manifestation of His presence in the world. It is a collective of individuals who share a common faith and gather for worship, teaching, and supporting one another, recognising their reliance on one another and the many roles they play in the Christian community.

Denominational Loyalty

Denominational loyalty originated in religious traditions as a method to promote unity, identity, and dedication among followers. It demonstrates loyalty to a certain religious group, often defined by common ideas, rituals, and organisational frameworks (Gouda and Park, 2016). Denominational loyalty can be said to be cultivated by the dissemination of doctrines, performance of religious rites, and active participation in community affairs, therefore strengthening the connections that bind people to their religious denomination.

Norman (2005), offers a conceptualization of denominational loyalty within the Baptist tradition. Norman emphasizes the importance of loyalty to the Baptist denomination as a means of preserving its distinct identity and heritage. He argues that denominational loyalty is rooted in the commitment to Baptist principles and practices, including believer's baptism, congregational autonomy, and the priesthood of all believers. Norman (2005) further suggests that denominational loyalty is not simply about allegiance to a particular organization but is instead a reflection of a deeper commitment to the core beliefs and values that define Baptist identity. He emphasizes the role of denominational loyalty in fostering unity among Baptists and maintaining a sense of shared purpose and mission. According to Norman, denominational loyalty is also closely tied to Baptist ecclesiology, which emphasizes the authority of the local church and the autonomy of each congregation. He suggests that denominational loyalty should not be understood as a rigid adherence to denominational structures or practices but rather as a dynamic commitment to the ongoing renewal and growth of the Baptist tradition.

Nathan Finn's work, titled "Why Denominational Identity Provides a Brief Conceptualization of Denominational Loyalty," explores another aspect of denominational loyalty in literature. He views denominational commitment as a strategic approach to achieve successful mission and outreach, rather than an ultimate goal in itself. Finn (2015) asserts that sustaining denominational loyalty is crucial for preserving the individuality and identity of a denomination, hence enhancing its ability to accomplish its goal with more effectiveness. Finn asserts that denominational devotion is based on a profound dedication to the theological

beliefs, rituals, and customs of a certain denomination. This devotion is not only inactive but rather proactive, compelling Christians to actively participate in the mission and ministry of their denomination with fervour and enthusiasm. Finn (2015) underscores the significance of denominational loyalty in promoting unity and collaboration among churches within a denomination, allowing them to collectively pursue shared objectives.

The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) places great importance on denominational loyalty, which signifies a strong dedication, shared principles, and a feeling of belonging among its members. Several scholars examined different facets of denominational allegiance within the Nigerian Baptist Convention. Tilley (2015) highlighted the importance of the denomination in safeguarding tradition and upholding doctrinal purity. The denomination serves as a means to preserve its unique identity in the face of social changes. Others highlight the practical ramifications of this, such as its ability to effectively gather and use resources and people for mission work, education, and social welfare programmes.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, suggests that individuals define themselves based on their membership in social groups, leading to the formation of an identity that is partly derived from their group membership. The theory posits that people strive for a positive social identity, which can lead to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination (Harwood, 2020). The proponent of the theory posits that social identity theory is that individuals categorize themselves and others into groups, leading to a sense of belonging and identity within these groups (Trepte and Loy, 2017). Other proponents argue that people derive self-esteem from their group membership and may enhance their group's status to improve their self-esteem. The theory is significant as it provides insights into how group membership influences behaviour, attitudes, and intergroup relations.

Scholars have found support for social identity theory in various contexts, including studies on group dynamics, intergroup conflict, and organizational behaviour. For example, Mutz and Kim's (2017) research found that individuals are more likely to favour members of their group and discriminate against members of other groups, even in minimal group settings where group membership is arbitrary. Within the context of this study, social identity theory can help explain denominational loyalty through the Cooperative Programme. Members of the Nigeria Baptist Convention may identify strongly with their denomination, viewing it as an important part of their social identity. Participating in the Cooperative Programme, which involves contributing financially to support the denomination's activities, can enhance their sense of belonging and status within the denomination, thereby strengthening their loyalty.

However, social identity theory has been critiqued by Hogg et al (2017) for oversimplifying the complexity of human behaviour and for its potential to justify intergroup bias and conflict. Critics argue that the theory may not fully account for individual differences and the influence of situational factors on behaviour. People can also come together for negative reasons such as cultism, thuggery and other heinous crimes. Despite these critiques, social identity theory remains a valuable framework for understanding group dynamics and intergroup relations.

Historical Context of the Baptist Cooperative Programme and the Role of the Nigerian Baptist Convention

The Cooperative Programme of the Southern Baptist Convention is universally acknowledged by all Baptist ministers as a cornerstone of the Baptist faith. This programme, which was initially introduced in 1925 by the Southern Baptist Convention of the United States, was subsequently modified for implementation by the Nigerian Baptist Convention in 1972. It is revered as a customary practice among Baptists across the globe. After committing their lives to Christ, individual church members contribute their tithes and offerings to their local congregation under this system. Following this, the church voluntarily contributes a portion of these funds to the central authority, known as the convention (or Union in certain regions), by mutual agreement. The contribution made by each church represents a pre-established percentage of its undesignated income and serves as a demonstration of its dedication to the national convention. Furthermore, Associations and Conferences receive additional percentages of the church's undesignated income that have been mutually agreed upon (Nwomnogbo, 2020).

The preservation of local Baptist church autonomy is an essential principle enshrined in the doctrinal beliefs of the denomination (Afolaranmi, 2022a). Cooperation among autonomous congregations results in the formation of the Cooperative Programme. This programme can be defined as the deliberate consolidation and application of every resource at the disposal of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) to accomplish goals that may be unattainable for individual congregations operating in isolation. The Baptist Cooperative Programme functions practically through a system in which members, who have made a personal commitment to Christ, make contributions in the form of tithes and offerings to their designated local churches. Subsequently, by mutual consent, these congregations transfer a pre-established proportion of their unallocated revenue to the NBC, which functions as the convention or central body. This monetary investment signifies the churches' participation in the national convention, which promotes cohesion and a shared sense of objective.

The Nigerian Baptist Convention's Cooperative Programme exemplifies a strong and dynamic alliance of partnership. It functions as a medium for cultivating companionship and fostering affectionate connections founded on a mutual belief in the deity Christ.

The Importance of the Baptist Cooperative Programme

The Baptist Cooperative Programme functions as a mission-focused entity within Baptist churches, primarily responsible for spearheading and supporting their missionary endeavours. It serves as a vital channel through which churches collectively engage in and advance their mission work, both locally and globally. Acting as a developmental agency, the Baptist Cooperative Programme plays a crucial role in enhancing the capacity and viability of local churches (Sotirov et al, 2017). Providing resources, guidance, and support helps these churches to grow and thrive, thereby contributing to the overall strength of the Baptist community. Another key role of the Baptist Cooperative Programme is its function as an information and inspiration hub for member churches. It serves as a valuable source of knowledge, offering insights, updates, and educational materials to enrich the understanding and commitment of church members. It helps to subsidize theological education to enhance greater enrolment thereby enhancing thoroughbred ministers. It also helps to foster schools, colleges, and tertiary institutions where young men and women are specially trained for Christian service.

Additionally, the programme is instrumental in fostering missions awareness and participation among churches. By coordinating and consolidating the resources of member churches, it facilitates a unified approach to missions, enabling more impactful and effective outreach efforts. Beyond its mission-oriented functions, the Baptist Cooperative Programme also plays a vital role in fostering fellowship among member churches. By providing a platform for churches to collaborate and engage in matters of common interest, it strengthens the bonds within the Baptist community, promoting unity and solidarity.

Challenges to Denominational Loyalty

Denominational loyalty within local churches and its members faces several challenges stemming from societal dynamics and competing religious influences. These challenges impact the effectiveness of the Cooperative Programme in enhancing church loyalty. According to Magu (2015), one significant challenge is the influence of globalization and modernization, which have led to increased exposure to diverse religious beliefs and practices. As people become more interconnected, they are exposed to different ideologies that may conflict with or challenge their traditional denominational loyalty. For example, the rise of charismatic and Pentecostal and white garment church movements in Nigeria has attracted many Christians away from the Baptist Convention, leading to a decline in denominational loyalty among some members of the Convention family.

Another challenge is the changing societal values and priorities. As Nigeria undergoes rapid urbanization and economic development, individuals and communities may prioritize material wealth and social status over religious affiliation. This shift can weaken denominational loyalty as people become more focused on personal gain rather than collective religious identity (Barro, 2019). Additionally, political and social unrest in Nigeria can also affect denominational loyalty. In times of crisis, individuals may turn to alternative sources of support and comfort, including different religious groups or movements, leading to a weakening of their ties to the Nigerian Baptist Convention (Afolaranmi, 2022b).

Researchers have observed these difficulties and their influence on the level of commitment to certain religious groups within the NBC. Kuponu and Talabi (2021) contend that the expansion of churches in Nigeria has led to a competitive atmosphere, necessitating denominations to actively involve their people to sustain allegiance. Akinboye (2016) proposes that the Nigerian Baptist Convention should modify its methods of reaching out and engaging with its members to effectively serve their evolving needs and ideals. The Nigerian Baptist Convention's commitment is being tested by the forces of globalisation, modernity, shifting cultural ideals, and political and social turmoil. These problems have a significant influence on the success of the Cooperative Programme in increasing church loyalty. To overcome these difficulties, the Nigerian Baptist Convention has to modify its approaches to actively involve its members and cultivate a feeling of inclusion and dedication to the denomination.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research examines the Baptist Cooperative Programme in the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC), focusing on its impact on church loyalty and the difficulties encountered in preserving denominational commitment. The Cooperative Programme, which originated from the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States, serves as a fundamental aspect of the Baptist faith. It plays a crucial role in promoting unity and collaboration among member churches. By centralising resources and fostering awareness of missions, it enhances the NBC and its efforts in carrying out its tasks. Nevertheless, denominational loyalty is threatened by

problems including globalisation, modernity, and shifting social ideals. To tackle these difficulties, the Nigerian Baptist Convention should modify its methods of reaching out to members to effectively include them and foster a feeling of inclusivity and commitment to the denomination. This would guarantee the ongoing success of the Cooperative Programme. The paper recommends that the Nigerian Baptist Convention should implement targeted outreach programs to engage members and reinforce denominational loyalty, particularly focusing on the youth who are more susceptible to external influences. Secondly, enhanced communication and information-sharing mechanisms should be put in place within the Nigerian Baptist Convention to foster a sense of community and unity among member churches.

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