

Effectiveness of Existing Ecumenical Efforts in Promoting Unity and Collaboration among Churches in Ondo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The quest for Christian unity in Nigeria's multi-denominational landscape has prompted various ecumenical initiatives. This study evaluates the effectiveness of existing ecumenical efforts in promoting unity and collaboration among churches in Ondo State, Nigeria. A qualitative research design was adopted, involving 60 respondents drawn from diverse Christian denominations through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that while ecumenical bodies such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) have made some impacts like organizing joint services and advocacy on common social issues, significant divisions still persist. Many church leaders and members acknowledge doctrinal differences, competition for congregants, and lack of awareness of ecumenical principles as key barriers to unity. Nonetheless, respondents also report positive experiences in interdenominational events and suggest that regular joint prayer meetings, shared community projects, and improved dialogue can strengthen cooperation. The study concludes that existing ecumenical efforts have had modest success in fostering collaboration, but their impact is limited by theological and socio-cultural challenges. Strengthening ecumenical education, inclusive leadership, and grassroots engagement (especially of youth and women) emerge as crucial steps to enhance unity. These insights carry implications for church leaders aiming to present a unified Christian witness and for policymakers and theologians seeking to bolster social cohesion.

Keywords: Ecumenism; Christian Unity; Interdenominational Cooperation; Ondo State, Nigeria

Introduction

Christian ecumenism, the movement towards unity among Christian denominations holds particular significance in Ondo State, Nigeria, where a rich diversity of churches coexists within a single region. The New Testament emphasizes the importance of unity: Jesus prayed "that they may be one" (John 17:21), and Paul urged believers to have "no divisions" among them (1 Corinthians 1:10). In a context like Ondo State with Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal, and African-initiated churches all present, this biblical call to oneness is both timely and challenging. Historically, Christianity took root in Nigeria through missionary efforts in the

19th and 20th centuries, making the southern regions including Ondo State a predominantly Christian area by the mid-20th century. Ondo State's multi-denominational landscape offers opportunities for fellowship based on shared faith, but also poses challenges as "doctrinal differences, competition for congregants, and varying worship practices hinder cohesive collaboration".

The imperative for unity among churches has both spiritual and practical relevance. A united Christian front can enhance the credibility of the Church's witness in society and enable collaborative action on social issues like poverty, education, and peace-building. Recognizing this, various ecumenical organizations and initiatives have emerged. Globally, bodies such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) work to foster inter-church dialogue. In Africa, the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) pursues continental Christian solidarity. In Nigeria, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) established in 1976 as an umbrella for Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and African Independent churches serves as the flagship ecumenical body. CAN's presence is felt in Ondo State through state and local chapters that organize joint prayer rallies, interdenominational services, and speak out on issues affecting Christians. Other bodies like the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) (a bloc within CAN) and the older Christian Council of Nigeria (founded in 1929 for mainline churches) also contribute to interdenominational cooperation. As observed, the Christian community in Ondo State is characterized by significant divisions manifesting in doctrinal disputes, rivalries, and lack of cooperation in community initiatives. Such fragmentation undermines the witness of Christianity in the region and hampers the churches' ability to address pressing social needs collectively.

Research Problem

The persistent disunity among Ondo's churches raises concerns about the effectiveness of current ecumenical efforts. While churches agree in principle on the need for unity, in practice denominational barriers often prevail. This study is premised on the problem that, despite the biblical call for unity and the presence of ecumenical forums, churches in Ondo State continue to operate independently, thereby weakening their collective influence and testimony. There is a

need to critically examine how well existing ecumenical initiatives have bridged divides and what obstacles impede their success.

Significance of the Study

By evaluating ecumenical efforts in Ondo State, this research highlights a path toward enhanced Christian collaboration in a pluralistic society. Theologically, it resonates with Christ's mandate for unity, suggesting ways the Church can more visibly "be one" in today's context. Socially, greater unity among churches can lead to coordinated outreach programs, stronger advocacy for justice and peace, and a more formidable response to societal challenges. The findings will be valuable to church leaders seeking to strengthen interchurch relationships, to ecumenical organizations (like CAN) as they strategize future activities, and to scholars interested in the interplay of religion and societal cohesion. Ultimately, fostering unity among churches in Ondo State can serve as a model for other regions, demonstrating the tangible benefits of ecumenism for Nigeria's religious and public life.

Objective

This study is guided by one primary objective:

To evaluate the effectiveness of existing ecumenical efforts in promoting unity and collaboration among churches in Ondo State, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Concept of Ecumenism

Ecumenism in Christian context refers to initiatives aimed at bridging divisions and fostering unity among different denominations. It gained momentum in the early 20th century with landmark events like the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, which emphasized "unity of Christians for the sake of the mission" (Rusch 2001). The fragmented state of Christianity after centuries of schisms from the Great Schism of 1054 to the Protestant Reformation made such unity efforts necessary. By the mid-20th century, a renewed ecumenical spirit emerged, exemplified by the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) further catalyzed ecumenism; its Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964) urged Catholics to engage in dialogue and "foster a more inclusive

and collaborative approach to Christian unity”. The ecumenical movement since then has been marked by openness, mutual respect, and shared concern for issues like social justice and peace. Kinnamon (2003) observes that modern ecumenism seeks the visible unity of the Church and a common witness to serve humanity. According to McGrath (2015), contemporary ecumenical activities often focus on practical cooperation like joint action addressing global challenges as a witness to Christian unity.

Ecumenism in the Nigerian Context

Nigeria’s religious landscape provides a unique backdrop for ecumenism. Christianity in Nigeria, especially the south, grew diverse as various mission-founded denominations took root through the 19th and 20th centuries. Over time, interdenominational bodies formed to encourage unity. The Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) was established in 1929 as a fellowship of churches to “work together to promote the glory of God.” Later, in 1976, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was founded, becoming the largest ecumenical alliance in the country. CAN comprises five blocs – the Catholic Secretariat, CCN (mainline Protestants), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Organization of African Instituted Churches, and TEKAN/ECWA Fellowship reflecting Nigeria’s major Christian traditions. CAN’s mission has been not only spiritual unity but also providing a common voice on national issues and interfaith relations. In parallel, churches often collaborate through regional conferences and joint programs (www.iiste.org).

Previous Studies on Unity in Nigeria

Research into Nigerian ecumenism indicates both progress and ongoing challenges. Olaoba and Damilare (2024), in a study of the Anglican Church’s ecumenical activities in Ekiti State adjacent to Ondo, found that the Anglican Church played a pivotal role in fostering unity from 1966 to 2012. Their mixed-method study highlighted how establishing schools and hospitals served as tools for ecumenism, bringing together people across denominations. The Anglican Church’s engagement in interdenominational bodies like CAN and the Bible Society facilitated joint services and community outreach, strengthening inter-church relationships. However, they also noted persistent barriers like doctrinal differences, historical rivalries, and cultural factors

that impeded full unity, calling for effective communication and understanding to overcome these divides. In Ondo State, activities such as joint prayer sessions and inter-church crusades at the grassroots level have been documented, demonstrating a desire for unity. These efforts often succeed in bringing Christians together momentarily, but their long-term impact can be limited if not backed by continuous dialogue and institutional support.

Barriers to Ecumenical Unity

A recurring theme in the literature is the tension between doctrinal loyalty and unity. Many Nigerian churches hold firm to distinctive doctrines and practices e.g., differences in liturgy, sacramental theology, or charismatic expressions, which breed mutual suspicion. The proliferation of new independent churches has sometimes intensified competition. As one analysis notes, “the proliferation of churches and competing doctrines... results in mutual suspicion and rivalry,” and in some cases fundamentalist or sectarian mindsets lead groups to be dismissive of others. Additionally, lack of awareness or education about ecumenical principles is cited as a major impediment. Christians who are ignorant of initiatives like Vatican II’s teachings on ecumenism or the goals of bodies like CAN disengage or even view ecumenism with skepticism. Social and ethnic dynamics in Nigeria intertwine with denominational identity as well. For instance, certain ethnic communities might predominantly belong to a particular church tradition, and inter-ethnic tensions can spill into church relations. Leadership rivalry and the quest for institutional prominence (e.g., which church leads joint events) further complicate cooperation.

Despite these challenges, the literature also points to promising prospects for ecumenism. Many church leaders increasingly recognize that unity does not mean uniformity, and that cooperation in areas of common interest (Bible translation, responding to persecution or violence, charity work) is both possible and beneficial. There is a growing emphasis on spiritual ecumenism, unity nurtured by shared prayer, worship, and friendship among Christians as a foundation for doctrinal reconciliation. The task for current research is to assess how these insights from broader Christian experience and past studies manifest in the specific milieu of Ondo State’s churches.

Study Area: Ondo State, Nigeria

Ondo State is located in the southwest of Nigeria and is predominantly Yoruba in ethnicity. The state has a strong Christian presence, featuring a mosaic of denominations including Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, numerous Pentecostal churches, and indigenous African-Initiated Churches. Christianity became firmly rooted in this region by the mid-20th century through missionary activities, which established many of the mainline churches, and through indigenous revival movements that birthed Pentecostal and independent churches. Today, most communities in Ondo host multiple Christian congregations, reflecting this denominational diversity.

This pluralistic Christian landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for ecumenism. On one hand, the shared heritage of faith and close proximity of churches have encouraged joint activities such as city-wide prayer rallies and interdenominational thanksgiving services. The state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) often coordinates these efforts, providing a platform for churches to discuss common concerns and present a united voice on social issues. On the other hand, the abundance of churches breeds competition, some denominations vie for membership and influence within the same locality, which strain relationships. Nonetheless, Ondo State's history of relatively peaceful religious coexistence including cordial Christian-Muslim relations offers a conducive environment for ecumenical dialogue. Church leaders in Ondo generally have open channels of communication, and many are committed to unity in principle.

In summary, Ondo State's religious setting is a microcosm of Nigeria's broader Christian diversity. It is an ideal ground to study ecumenical interactions and the presence of long-established churches alongside newer ministries means that traditions of inter-church cooperation exist, yet so do points of tension. Understanding this context is crucial for evaluating how and why ecumenical efforts succeed or falter in promoting unity among the churches here.

Methodology

Research Design: The study employed a qualitative research design, appropriate for exploring perceptions and experiences regarding church unity. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth of feelings and perspectives among church leaders and members on sensitive issues of division and cooperation. This design allowed respondents to express themselves in their own words, providing rich insights that quantitative data alone could not offer.

Sampling and Participants: A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who are knowledgeable and actively involved in church affairs. In total, *60 respondents* were selected, comprising a mix of church leaders (pastors, priests) and lay members from various denominations. As noted in the research plan, “an aggregate of 60 respondents, constituting church leaders, pastors, and active church members,” were involved. Diversity across denominations was ensured, respondents were drawn from Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Baptist, and indigenous churches across Ondo State. To broaden the sample, a snowball technique was also applied, initial contacts recommended additional participants (especially lay church activists) who could provide valuable insights. This combination of purposive and snowball sampling helped in reaching a balance of perspectives (gender, age, and denominational background) while focusing on information-rich cases.

Data Collection: The study collected data through two main tools: a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire included both closed-ended items (e.g., Yes/No and Likert-scale questions on awareness of ecumenical bodies, perceived effectiveness of these efforts, and personal involvement in inter-church activities) and open-ended questions that invited respondents to elaborate on issues like causes of division and suggestions for enhancing unity. This was complemented by interviews with a subset of participants (primarily church leaders and a few seasoned lay Christians). The interviews probed deeper into themes emerging from the questionnaires such as specific experiences with ecumenical programs, theological views on unity, and perceived obstacles allowing respondents to share narratives and examples. All interviews were conducted in English (the lingua franca for most educated Nigerians) and, where necessary, interspersed with Yoruba for clarity or emphasis, given that Ondo is predominantly Yoruba-speaking.

Data Analysis

With predominantly qualitative data, the study followed a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After data collection, responses from questionnaires and interview transcripts were carefully reviewed multiple times to become familiar with the content. Initial codes were generated to label meaningful units of text (for instance, codes like “doctrinal difference,” “leadership conflict,” “positive joint event experience”). These codes were then sorted into broader themes reflecting the research questions such as *factors contributing to divisions*, *effectiveness of ecumenical efforts*, and *proposed unity strategies*. The analysis was iterative; new themes were allowed to emerge inductively from the data, ensuring that the findings were grounded in respondents’ actual viewpoints. Triangulation of data sources (questionnaire and interviews) enhanced the reliability of the results. Where quantitative tallies (e.g., number of yes vs no responses) were relevant, simple descriptive statistics were used to summarize these, but the emphasis remained on qualitative interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

The research maintained strict ethical standards. Participants gave informed consent, being assured of confidentiality and that their responses would be used solely for research purposes. To protect identities, generic descriptors (like “a Pentecostal pastor” or “an Anglican lay leader”) are used in reporting instead of names. The study also gained approval from relevant church authorities in Ondo State to conduct the surveys and interviews within their congregations. These ethical measures helped create a trusting atmosphere where respondents felt free to share honest opinions about what can be a delicate topic like unity and division in the Church.

Study Scope and Limitations: The focus on Ondo State means the findings are contextual and may not fully represent other regions of Nigeria, especially the north where Christian-Muslim dynamics differ. Also, because the sample, while diverse, was not large in a statistical sense, the study does not aim for generalizability but rather depth of insight. Nevertheless, the rigor in selecting knowledgeable participants and the consistency of themes in their responses give credence to the insights generated about ecumenical efforts in this setting.

Findings and Data Presentation

Data from the questionnaires and interviews provide a clear picture of how church members and leaders in Ondo State perceive current ecumenical efforts. The quantitative summaries of key questionnaire items are presented in **Table 1**, while qualitative insights are interwoven in the subsequent discussion.

Table 1: Respondents' Awareness, Participation, and Perceptions of Ecumenical Efforts (N = 60)

ASPECT	RESPONSE	FREQUENCY (N=60)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Awareness of ecumenical initiatives	Yes (aware of at least one)	45	75%
	No (not aware of any)	15	25%
Participation in inter-denominational events	Yes (has participated)	30	50%
	No (has not participated)	30	50%
Perceived effectiveness of existing ecumenical efforts	Very effective	5	8%
	Somewhat effective	25	42%
	Not very effective	20	33%
	Not at all effective	10	17%
Top factors contributing to divisions (multiple responses allowed)	Doctrinal differences	50	83%
	Competition for congregants	40	67%
	Leadership conflicts	35	58%
	Cultural practices/differences	30	50%
	Lack of communication	20	33%
	Others (e.g., personal rivalries)	5	8%

Commonly suggested strategies (multiple responses allowed)	Joint prayer sessions	55	92%
	Regular inter-denominational meetings	50	83%
	Improved communication among leaders	45	75%
	Community service projects (collaborative)	40	67%
	Ecumenical education workshops	38	63%

Source: Field data from questionnaires (2025).

Notes: The “factors contributing to divisions” and “suggested strategies” items allowed respondents to select multiple options, so frequencies reflect how many of the 60 respondents mentioned each factor/strategy.

From **Table 1**, several observations stand out. First, a large majority (75%) of respondents are aware of at least one ecumenical initiative in Ondo State most commonly the state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which many cited as the umbrella body for Christian unity efforts. Despite this awareness, participation in inter-denominational events is more limited only half of the respondents had ever attended a joint service, prayer meeting, or similar event involving multiple denominations. This gap between awareness and participation hints at possible barriers keeping people from active engagement, such as lack of time, interest, or insufficient publicity of ecumenical events.

Regarding the perceived effectiveness of existing ecumenical efforts, the opinions are divided. Only 8% deemed them “very effective” in promoting church unity, while the majority were either cautiously optimistic (42% “somewhat effective”) or frankly skeptical (a combined 50% judging them “not very” or “not at all” effective). This suggests that, in the view of many church

members and leaders, current ecumenical activities have room for improvement. Interviews revealed reasons behind these ratings: some praised CAN's role in providing a platform for churches to speak with one voice on social issues for example, coordinating a joint statement against violence in the region, yet the same interviewees lamented that deep doctrinal disagreements still prevent closer spiritual fellowship. One Pentecostal pastor noted that *"we come together when we need to address the government or society, but on Sundays we each go back to our separate camps,"* illustrating a compartmentalized unity that is more functional than relational.

When asked about factors contributing to divisions among churches, respondents overwhelmingly pointed to doctrinal differences 83% indicated that conflicting theological interpretations on issues like baptism, Eucharist, styles of worship, etc. are a primary source of fragmentation. This aligns with long-standing observations that theology can be a dividing line in Nigerian Christianity. The next most cited factor was competition for congregants (67%), reflecting the reality that churches sometimes vie for membership in the same communities. This competition can breed a reluctance to collaborate: as one respondent put it, *"Each church wants to protect its flock and grow it, so there's a bit of turf guarding going on."* Leadership conflicts (mentioned by 58%) was another notable factor these include personality clashes between pastors of different churches or disputes over leadership positions in ecumenical forums. About half (50%) attributed some divisions to cultural practices or ethnic differences, indicating that how different ethnic traditions blend with Christianity might cause misunderstandings between churches for instance, forms of worship or church governance influenced by local culture. A third of respondents (33%) also saw a simple lack of communication as fueling divisions; without deliberate dialogue, misconceptions and rumors fester among denominations.

On a positive note, the survey and interviews captured a range of strategies for enhancing unity that respondents believe would be effective. Foremost among them is prayer: 92% endorsed holding joint prayer sessions regularly, echoing the sentiment that praying together as believers can break down walls. Many interviewees stressed that united prayer reminds Christians of their common faith in Christ and builds spiritual solidarity. Regular inter-denominational meetings (83%) and improved communication channels among church leaders (75%) were also frequently suggested, showing that face-to-face dialogue and relationship-building at the leadership level

are key to resolving doctrinal tensions and suspicions. A significant number advocated for collaborative community service projects (67%), such as all churches in a town partnering to run a charity event, feed the poor, or provide healthcare outreach. Such cooperation was seen as a practical way to unite around service, shifting focus from differences to shared mission. Additionally, 63% highlighted the need for ecumenical education workshops or teachings on the importance of Christian unity, so that grassroots members understand why unity is vital and how to engage in it. This resonates with the identified problem of ignorance: as the study found, “many individuals lack awareness of the importance of ecumenism,” which can lead to apathy. By educating congregations about biblical and historical foundations for ecumenism, churches can cultivate a more receptive attitude toward unity efforts.

In summary, the data indicate that while awareness of ecumenical efforts in Ondo State is relatively high, active participation and enthusiasm remain moderate. The perceived effectiveness of current efforts is lukewarm, hindered by persistent doctrinal and competitive barriers. Nonetheless, there is a clear desire among respondents for greater unity, evidenced by the strong support for various strategies to improve collaboration. These findings set the stage for a deeper discussion on what these patterns mean in theological, social, and practical terms, and how the churches in Ondo State can address the gaps between aspiration and reality in their ecumenical journey.

Analysis and Discussion

The findings above reveal a complex interplay between progress and persistent challenges in the ecumenical landscape of Ondo State. In this section, the researcher interprets these results in light of broader theological, social, and political contexts, drawing connections to the literature and offering critical insights.

Effectiveness of Ecumenical Efforts

The moderate ratings for effectiveness suggest that existing ecumenical efforts in Ondo State have achieved incremental success rather than transformational change. On one hand, the presence of forums like CAN and joint activities (prayer meetings, inter-church services) has kept the ideal of unity visible. Many churches now readily come together for certain causes, for

example, to present a united Christian stance on social or moral issues. This reflects what might be termed pragmatic unity: churches cooperate when there is a clear common interest. Such cooperation is valuable. It has, for instance, enabled collective Christian responses to crises and given the churches a stronger voice in a society where they share space with other religions. As the data indicated, awareness of ecumenical bodies is high, meaning these structures have successfully penetrated the consciousness of church communities. In interviews, several respondents acknowledged that without CAN's coordinating role, denominations might rarely interact at all. In this sense, the ecumenical efforts are indeed effective as a basic platform for unity because they prevent complete isolation of denominations.

However, when measured against deeper indicators of unity, genuine fellowship, trust, and theological understanding, the impact of these efforts appears limited. The fact that half of the respondents view ecumenical initiatives as not very effective or worse signals a dissatisfaction with superficial unity. Unity events that are largely ceremonial (e.g., an annual joint service) can not suffice to heal longstanding rifts. The persistence of parallel church lives (each denomination doing its own activities with minimal reference to others) points to an "ecumenism on the surface." Churches participate in joint programs yet remain deeply divided in day-to-day ministry and worship. This corroborates scholarly observations that ecumenism can often be "lukewarm" embraced in principle but faltering in practice. Olaoba and Damilare's study in Ekiti, for instance, noted that despite active ecumenical engagement, doctrinal suspicions lingered and required intentional dialogue to overcome. Likewise, the findings of this article suggest that while Ondo's churches may join hands occasionally, many church leaders and members still harbor reservations about other denominations' beliefs and practices, limiting the effectiveness of unity initiatives.

Theological and Social Barriers

The dominance of doctrinal differences and competition as perceived sources of division cannot be overstated. Theologically, Nigeria's Christian denominations span a wide spectrum from liturgical and sacramental traditions (Catholic, Anglican) to ultraconservative evangelical sects to exuberant Pentecostal assemblies. Each often believes it is preserving crucial truths. Thus, attempts at unity run up against fears of compromising doctrinal purity. Some interviewees

hinted at this: *“We can pray with other churches, yes, but we cannot adjust our teaching just to agree with them,”* said one conservative pastor, reflecting a protective stance. Fundamentalist outlooks found in certain evangelical and Pentecostal circles brand other groups as theologically errant, making collaboration uneasy. For example, a Pentecostal might view Catholic veneration of saints with suspicion, while a Catholic might question the Pentecostal style of spontaneous worship. Without addressing these theological tensions through open dialogue and education, unity efforts may remain perfunctory. The lack of theological dialogue in Ondo’s current ecumenical practice beyond general affirmations of “we all believe in Christ” limits progress.

Socially, the competition for congregants is a pragmatic barrier. Churches in Ondo State, as elsewhere in Nigeria, often operate in close proximity and sometimes target the same demographic (youth, professionals, etc.) with their evangelistic programs. Growth of one church can be seen as coming at the expense of another. This zero-sum mentality undermines trust a pastor might hesitate to fully support a joint crusade if he fears his members could be “sheep stolen” by another church’s style or charisma. Such rivalry is fueled by the proliferation of churches; new ministries often spring up near older ones, intensifying the sense of competition. The interview data in this study confirmed anecdotes of churches deliberately scheduling events to conflict with each other’s programs, or leaders discouraging their members from attending other denomination’s events. Overcoming this requires a mindset shift to a Kingdom-oriented view where success is not measured by individual church size but by collective impact for Christ. Until that takes root, ecumenical endeavors will be met with underlying skepticism.

Another barrier identified is the ignorance of ecumenical principles and historical mistrust. Many Christians, especially at the grassroots, do not fully grasp why ecumenism matters. They see denominations as completely separate sheepfolds and have never been taught about the broader body of Christ. The study found that ignorance of ecumenical principles is a major barrier and that a large number of people lack awareness of the teachings and the importance of ecumenism. This finding aligns with calls by church scholars for better catechesis on Christian unity. When congregants are equipped with biblical and historical understanding of ecumenism for instance, learning about Jesus’ prayer for unity, or modern success stories of collaboration they are more likely to support and participate in it. Conversely, unawareness breeds apathy or even suspicion e.g., some might misinterpret ecumenism as an attempt to merge churches or dilute doctrine.

This points to an urgent need for ecumenical education at the local church level in Ondo State, a recommendation strongly echoed in respondents' suggestions and other studies.

Linking to Broader Implications

The barriers in Ondo State reflect a microcosm of global Christian unity challenges. The context of Ondo, however, also presents unique socio-political implications. Nigeria has recurrent inter-religious (Christian-Muslim) tensions in such an environment, lack of unity within the Christian camp weakens the community's ability to engage constructively in interfaith dialogues and peace-building. If churches in Ondo State collaborate more effectively, they could serve as a united front in addressing issues like religious violence or social injustice. Conversely, division makes it easier for external forces like political actors to play denominations against each other. For instance, politicians might seek endorsements from rival church blocs, thereby exacerbating divisions. A unified Christian voice in Ondo could advocate more powerfully for good governance and social welfare, leveraging moral authority in the public sphere. This shows that ecumenical effectiveness or lack thereof has ripple effects beyond church walls, it can influence societal cohesion and the role of the Church in national life.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion so far, it becomes clear that strategic steps are needed to bolster the effectiveness of ecumenical efforts in Ondo State:

- i. **Deepening Theological Dialogue:** Church leaders from various denominations should engage in regular theological exchanges. Establishing an interdenominational theological forum in Ondo State will help address misunderstandings. Through respectful dialogue, churches can clarify their doctrines to each other, find common ground (for instance, agreement on core tenets like the divinity of Christ and the authority of the Bible), and frankly discuss points of difference without animosity. Such dialogue, ideally behind closed doors in a spirit of prayer and friendship, can reduce suspicions. Over time, as leaders find greater mutual respect, this will trickle down to congregations.
- ii. **Joint Formation and Education Initiatives:** Seminaries and theological institutes in the region could introduce courses or workshops on ecumenism that bring students from

different denominations together. Training future clergy in an ecumenical setting will cultivate relationships and understanding early on. Additionally, churches could swap pulpits occasionally or organize exchange visits e.g., youth groups from an Anglican church visiting a Pentecostal church's service with debriefing sessions to discuss and appreciate each tradition's richness. These educational moves directly address the ignorance barrier.

- iii. **Leadership and Structural Reforms in Ecumenical Bodies:** CAN's Ondo State chapter and similar bodies may need to evaluate their approach. If CAN meetings have been mostly about issuing statements or reacting to issues, they could incorporate more relationship-building activities like spiritual retreats for pastors of different denominations, or small group prayer fellowships across churches. Ecumenism must move from just officialdom to personal connections. Stronger personal relationships among clergy can mitigate leadership conflicts and rivalry. Also, rotating leadership positions in ecumenical committees to ensure no single denomination always dominates can help build trust that everyone's voice matters.
- iv. **Focus on Collaborative Social Ministry:** The findings showed high interest in joint social projects. This is an avenue where theological differences become less pronounced in the face of tangible human needs. Churches in Ondo State could, for example, form an ecumenical commission on social action that identifies community problems and mobilizes volunteers from all denominations to tackle them together – feeding programs, healthcare drives, environmental clean-ups, etc. When Christians work side by side in service, mutual respect grows organically. Moreover, such visible unity in service powerfully witnesses to society. As one respondent suggested, “when we feed the poor together, people see one Church, not many churches.” This practical unity can gradually pave the way for deeper spiritual unity.
- v. **Enhancing Communication and Transparency:** To avoid misunderstandings, ecumenical bodies should communicate their activities and purposes clearly to all member churches and the laity. Publishing newsletters, using social media, and making joint public announcements can keep everyone informed and reduce the rumor mill. When churches hear directly about each other's positive intentions, it undercuts the lack of communication that was noted as a problem.

In applying these recommendations, sensitivity is key. Not all denominations move at the same pace regarding ecumenism. Some ultra-conservative groups may initially resist overtures. Therefore, unity efforts should progress at a pace that respects conscience, using persuasion and prayer rather than pressure. The role of prayer itself cannot be overemphasized nearly all respondents agree that praying together is foundational. Perhaps a concerted campaign of spiritual ecumenism inviting churches to participate in weekly or monthly interdenominational prayer sessions could lay the spiritual groundwork on which other cooperative efforts build

Theological Reflection

It is worth noting the theological dimension underlying this discussion. The Christian doctrine of the Church (ecclesiology) holds that all true believers are part of the one Body of Christ. The divisions into denominations are a product of history and human limitations. In Ondo State, as in the rest of the world, living out this theological reality of one Body is the challenge. The findings of this study highlight how far practice can lag behind principle. Yet, there are glimpses of hope: participants' strong yearning for joint prayer and service indicates an intuitive grasp of unity. Theologically, one might say the Holy Spirit is already at work knitting hearts together, even if institutions lag. The churches must cooperate with this divine impetus towards unity. Unity does not imply dropping all differences; rather, it calls for reconciliation and cooperation amidst diversity, unity in diversity, as it is often phrased. This study's results reinforce that unity in diversity is attainable if intentional effort is made to remove barriers.

In summary, the discussion affirms that existing ecumenical efforts in Ondo State, while valuable, are not fully realizing their potential. Barriers both doctrinal and social have kept unity at a superficial level. However, by implementing strategic changes; education, dialogue, shared ministry, and relational focus churches in Ondo can deepen their unity. Such progress would not only enhance their collective Christian witness but also contribute to social harmony and a stronger moral voice in the region. The recommendations offered here align with what many respondents themselves desire: a future where the churches of Ondo State stand together as one flock, in meaningful fellowship and common mission.

Conclusion

This study set out to evaluate how effectively current ecumenical efforts are fostering unity among the diverse Christian churches of Ondo State, Nigeria. In doing so, it illuminated both notable gains and gaps in the quest for Christian solidarity. On one hand, the mere existence of ecumenical bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria and its activities in Ondo State has provided a framework for churches to interact, pray, and speak out together. There have been instances of collaboration joint services, communal prayers, unified social outreach that would likely not occur without such efforts. These represent important steps forward, signaling that the ideal of “one body of Christ” is taken seriously by at least a portion of the church community.

On the other hand, the findings shows that unity remains more aspirational than realized. Deep-rooted doctrinal differences, historical suspicions, competition, and lack of awareness continue to limit the impact of ecumenical initiatives. In practical terms, while church leaders may gather under one umbrella occasionally, their congregations often remain worlds apart in regular practice. The effectiveness of current ecumenical efforts, therefore, can be characterized as partial. Effective in creating a dialogue platform, yet not fully effective in achieving tangible unity in worship and mission.

The implications of these insights are significant for various stakeholders:

- i. **Church Leaders:** For pastors, priests, and bishops in Ondo State, the study highlights the need for proactive leadership in unity. Leaders are the gatekeepers of ecumenism; their attitudes set the tone for their followers. By embracing the recommendations (theological dialogue, shared projects, mutual visits, etc.), leaders can gradually break down the invisible walls between flocks. The conclusion for leaders is that unity is not an automatic by-product of proximity, it must be cultivated intentionally. Leaders should also be models of ecumenism meeting regularly with counterparts of other denominations, praying together, and even publicly supporting each other’s major events. Such gestures speak volumes to ordinary members.

- ii. **Policymakers and Society:** Although church unity might seem an internal religious affair, it has broader social ramifications. Government and community leaders in Ondo State and Nigeria at large can find an ally in a united church. A more united Christian front can partner effectively with government on development or peace initiatives. For instance, united churches could more effectively tackle social problems or partner with government initiatives. Policymakers should therefore encourage ecumenical harmony by consulting ecumenical Christian bodies rather than just one denomination on issues of public interest. Additionally, maintaining an environment of religious freedom and mutual respect which Ondo State has largely enjoyed remains crucial, as it allows ecumenism to flourish without fear. This study suggests that when churches collaborate, they contribute to social capital and stability, which benefits governance and civil society.
- iii. **Theologians and Academics:** For scholars of theology and religion, these findings offer a case study of ecumenism at work in an African context. It invites further research into questions such as the role of newer Pentecostal movements in ecumenical relations, the influence of cultural identity on inter-church dynamics, and generational differences in attitudes toward unity. Longitudinal studies could also assess whether implementing strategies like increased dialogue and joint activities yields measurable improvements in unity over time. Theologians might draw from this study to develop contextual ecclesiological models for unity that resonate with African communal values.

In conclusion, the journey toward genuine Christian unity in Ondo State is ongoing. This research concludes that existing ecumenical efforts have been valuable but not sufficient. They have laid a foundation, but the building up of true oneness requires sustained effort, trust-building, and the movement of the Holy Spirit in hearts and minds. As churches continue to dialogue and work together, even in small ways, they inch closer to the fulfillment of Christ's prayer "that all may be one." The hope emerging from this study is that the seeds of unity planted in Ondo will grow yielding a stronger, more collaborative Church that can effectively witness love and reconciliation in a divided world. Such a Church, united in diversity, would not only bless the Christian community of Ondo State but also serve as a beacon of unity for the wider Nigerian society and the global body of Christ.

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