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**Churches and prayer houses in urban areas in Nigeria
and their influence on mental health**

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Abstract

Urban areas in Nigeria are characterised by rapid population growth, economic uncertainty, overcrowding, insecurity, and rising psychosocial stress. In this context, churches and prayer houses have become central spaces where many urban residents seek emotional, spiritual, and social support. This study examines the influence of these religious institutions on the mental health of people living in Nigeria's metropolitan centres. Using a combination of literature review and analysis and observation, the research explores both the positive and negative psychological impacts associated with the activities of churches and prayer houses. Findings reveal that these institutions provide significant mental health benefits, including emotional comfort, stress relief, social belonging, counselling, and coping mechanisms that help individuals manage anxiety, depression, and

urban pressures. However, the study also identifies potential risks, such as psychological manipulation, stigmatisation of mental illness, noise pollution from constant vigils, and over-reliance on spiritual interventions in place of professional mental health care. The paper concludes that while churches and prayer houses play a vital supportive role in urban mental well-being, their impact would be more beneficial if complemented by mental health education, professional collaboration, ethical practices, and regulatory oversight.

Keywords: *Churches, prayer houses, urban areas, mental health*

Introduction

Urbanisation in Nigeria has accelerated rapidly over the past few decades, transforming cities into densely populated, socially diverse, and economically dynamic spaces. While urban centres serve as hubs of opportunity, they also generate significant physical and psychological pressures. According to Srivastava (2009), urbanisation increases stressors like overcrowding, violence, and reduced social support, leading to increased mental disorders, including depression. Rising unemployment, noise pollution, overcrowding, housing shortages, traffic congestion, and weakened social ties contribute to growing mental health challenges among urban residents. Anxiety, stress-related disorders, depression, and emotional fatigue have become increasingly common, yet access to formal mental health services remains limited, under-funded, and stigmatised in many Nigerian urban centres. Like other parts of the world, there is a systemic challenge with regards to mental health services, including that of policy development and legislation, financing, research, training and integration of mental health care into primary health care (Wada, Rajwani, Anyam, Karikari, Njikizana, Srour, & Khalid, 2021). In Nigeria's urban centres, there are major weaknesses in mental health systems because of the lack of creation and implementation of mental health policies, lack of adequate funding, lack of sufficient research, lack of proper training of professionals, and the lack of inclusion of mental health services in primary health care. These challenges have linkages with spirituality in the areas of spiritual guidance and counselling for inhabitants of urban centres.

Churches and prayer houses have emerged as accessible and culturally trusted spaces that offer not only spiritual guidance but also emotional and psychological support. Thus, the church could be regarded as a therapeutic space. This is because it fosters mental health and well-being and has served as places of healing, restoration, and growth for individuals

grappling with emotional and psychological struggles (Nganyu, 2025). These religious institutions are deeply embedded in Nigeria's social fabric and play a central role in shaping individual coping strategies, community interactions, and general well-being. In urban areas with their attendant social isolation, economic pressure, and existential uncertainty, churches and prayer houses often function as therapeutic environments that provide hope, communal belonging, counselling, and mechanisms for stress relief through prayer, worship, fellowship, and pastoral care. Sometimes the book of Psalms is read. This may be because the book of Psalms is a songbook, and so many of the recorded psalms are prayers (Desplancke, 2020). Thus, these churches and prayer houses feel that God hears them better when they read out these psalms with crying and lamentation.

In urban areas of Nigeria, the growing dependence on these religious spaces for mental and emotional stability raises important questions about their actual influence on mental health. While some scholars highlight the positive effects of spirituality on resilience, social support networks, and coping mechanisms, others warn about potential negative dimensions such as spiritual exploitation, over-dependence, or emotional manipulation in certain prayer houses (Crawford, Wright, & Masten, 2006; Schwalm, Zandavalli, de Castro Filho, & Lucchetti, 2022). Despite their centrality in Nigeria's urban life, research examining the psychological implications of these institutions remains limited. This article therefore seeks to explore how churches and prayer houses in urban Nigeria influence the mental health of their members and the wider community.

Research Methodology

This study used the qualitative design. This is because the method makes it possible to have deep insights into human experiences. This method strives to explore, describe and understand it, and delve into a colorful, deep, contextual world of interpretations (Cypress, 2015). Data was obtained from relevant academic literature such as gazettes, journal articles, government and non-governmental databases, and textbooks. The data was analysed using content analysis. It is the best method for reviewing secondary data because it observes communication process over time and this helps researchers for trends in message over time and the dynamics involves in these messages. Content analysis is useful for studying historical contexts, which exposed researchers to more detailed data (Maier, 2017).

Urbanism in Nigeria

Urbanism in Nigeria refers to the growth, development, and character of Nigerian cities, as well as the ways people live and interact within them. Nigeria is one of the fastest-urbanising countries in Africa, with millions moving from rural communities to major cities in search of better opportunities. This rapid movement has produced cities that are vibrant, diverse, and economically significant but also heavily strained by population pressure. In Nigeria, migration causes urbanisation (Ayuba, 2023), and because rural areas lack the basic facilities that small cities have. Migration and urbanisation affect the growth of cities as well as the housing stock, and this has implications for the quantitative and qualitative urban housing deficit that culminates in slum formation (Anierobi & Obasi, 2021).

Urbanism in Nigeria is rooted in both precolonial and colonial histories. Before colonial rule, cities like Ibadan, Benin, Kano, and Ife served as centres of trade, governance, and culture. Before Ibadan, the Old Oyo Empire was dominant. Its collapse led to Ibadan's rise, which used slave labour extensively in state building (Salami, 2020). Benin City, originally known as Edo, was once the capital of a pre-colonial African empire and was one of the oldest and most highly developed states in West Africa, dating back to the 11th century (Koutonin, 2016). Colonialism later intensified urban growth by creating administrative and commercial hubs, building transportation routes, and concentrating political and economic power in selected cities. Following the imposition of colonial rule in Nigeria, British policies such as transport and education policies, the export-orientated economy, and the establishment of administrative networks, which often diverged from pre-colonial centres of political power and influence, altered the rate and pattern of urbanisation in Nigeria (Osoba & Fajana, 1999). After independence, these cities continued to attract industries, services, and institutions, making them focal points of national development.

Nigerian urbanism is defined by rapid population increase, mixed land-use patterns, and the dominance of the informal economy. Many residents live in informal or unplanned settlements due to inadequate housing supply, while street trading, private transportation systems, and small-scale businesses shape everyday city life. The city's urban footprint continues to sprawl due to weak land use planning that leads to the proliferation of informal settlements in flood-prone areas (Rouhanaivan & Bruce, 2016). Cities are culturally diverse, bringing together ethnic and religious groups whose interactions create dynamic urban cultures, from music and

fashion to religious practices and political identities. However, urbanism in Nigeria also presents numerous challenges. Traffic congestion, overcrowding, limited infrastructure, poor waste management, environmental pollution, rising unemployment, and insecurity affect the quality of urban life. Unfortunately, in Nigeria basic services such as clean water, transportation, electricity, and healthcare are lesser compared to the population growth. These pressures contribute to stress and mental health issues among urban residents.

Churches and Prayer Houses in Urban Areas in Nigeria

Churches and prayer houses in urban areas in Nigeria are highly visible and influential religious institutions that play major spiritual, social, and cultural roles in city life. As Nigeria's urban population continues to grow rapidly, these religious centres have multiplied across cities in the 36 states of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory. The reason for this is that there is this conviction that the most effective way to evangelise is by planting new churches, and every group or community should have at least one church (Daniel & Yusufu, 2025). They appear in various forms—large denominational churches, Pentecostal, shopfront prayer houses, house fellowships, and independent prophetic ministries—reflecting Nigeria's diverse and vibrant religious landscape. At the front of these religious centres, what is seen is the very presence of cars and motorbikes parked by those seeking solutions to their problems. This sometimes causes traffic jams and other security challenges.

The siting of churches and prayer houses is present and tied to the realities of urban living. About half of all Nigerian urban residents live in informal settlements and survive on precarious jobs in the informal economic sector (Lawanson, 2023). Nigerian cities are characterised by intense economic pressure, competition for jobs, high living costs, traffic congestion, insecurity, and social isolation. For many residents, churches and prayer houses provide emotional relief, hope, and a sense of community in environments that can be stressful and overwhelming. No doubt, in the different communities in Nigeria, there is a dire need of hope and solace, and these churches emerge as pillars of faith and community through which they have a unique opportunity to spread hope and positively impact their communities (Jones, 2024). They serve as spiritual refuges where people seek guidance, healing, deliverance, and solutions to personal problems such as unemployment, family conflict, health issues, or financial hardship.

These religious centres also function as social and support systems. They offer opportunities for fellowship, counselling, mentorship, and the building of social networks. Many urban churches organise programmes such as youth development, skill acquisition, charity outreach, and support groups that help members navigate the challenges of urban life. Their activities often extend beyond worship, influencing daily routines, neighbourhood interactions, and even local economies through events, markets, and employment.

The rise of independent pastors and spiritual leaders who establish small worship centres in rented shops, flats, or makeshift structures shapes the spread of prayer houses in particular. These prayer houses often emphasise intense prayer, fasting, prophecy, spiritual warfare, and deliverance practices. According to Uroko, Okponung, & Ngozika (2022:44), these prayer houses pray against physical challenges, including lack of sight, lack of hearing, lack of ability to walk, spinal cord injury, epilepsy, and other illnesses or accidents; regarding economic challenges, Nigerians come to prayer houses in huge numbers to find solutions to problems such as poverty, a lack of food, affordable housing, and other necessities. While they attract followers seeking immediate spiritual intervention, they also raise concerns about noise pollution, unregulated practices, and, sometimes, exploitation or unhealthy levels of dependency.

Causes of the Increasing Prayer Sacred Spaces in Urban Areas

The increasing number of prayer houses and churches in urban areas results from several social, economic, cultural, and spiritual factors that shape life in modern Nigerian cities. These factors work together to create an environment where religious centres multiply rapidly and attract large followings. One major cause is rapid urbanisation. Rapid urbanisation is the increasing population concentration in urban areas (UPPCS, 2025). As millions of people move into cities in search of work and better living conditions, they also carry their spiritual needs and anxieties with them. Due to the pressures of city life, such as unemployment, high living costs, insecurity, and social isolation, people seek comfort, hope, and community in churches and prayer houses for safe mental health. Thus, most of these churches and prayer houses are Pentecostal in organisation, and they believe in the transformative power of prayer, in a way, their hope and expectation of a God who hears and answers prayer (Nyanni & Andoh-Kesson, 2025). Religious centres become places where people can find emotional support, companionship, and spiritual reassurance in a stressful environment.

Another factor is the search for solutions to personal and economic problems. Many urban residents face challenges, such as joblessness, marital conflict, health issues, and financial hardship. Prayer houses, particularly Pentecostal and prophetic ministries, position themselves as places of divine intervention where miracles, deliverance, and breakthroughs are promised. In fact, some people run to these sacred spaces for intervention in Nigeria's challenges because of the mistrust Nigerians have in the government of the day (Editor, 2021). This attracts people who feel neglected by formal systems or who believe spiritual assistance can solve their problems.

The Pentecostal and charismatic revival in Nigeria also contributes to the rise of prayer houses. The growth of new religious movements, led by independent pastors, evangelists, and prophets, encourages the establishment of small worship centres in shops, houses, or temporary structures. These ministries often emphasise prophecy, healing, and spiritual warfare, which resonate with urban populations dealing with uncertainty and rapid change. Furthermore, economic factors also play a role in the rising establishment of churches and prayer houses in Nigeria. For some religious founders, establishing a prayer house can become a pathway to economic survival or upward mobility. Leading a church may provide financial support through offerings, tithes, and donations, especially when congregations grow. This economic opportunity motivates the proliferation of small ministries in urban neighbourhoods.

In addition, the decline of traditional extended family support in urban areas increases reliance on religious communities for social and emotional support. In many urban contexts, the traditional expectation of multi-generational cohabitation has diminished, leading to increased geographic separation between parents and their adult children (Haq, 2024). Churches and prayer houses step in to fill the gap by offering counselling, charity, social interaction, and group belonging. Life can present challenges, and the church during these times provides support and guidance (Yaba Baptist Church, 2025). Cultural and spiritual beliefs also contribute. Many Nigerians interpret life challenges through spiritual lenses, believing that prayer, deliverance, and divine guidance are essential for success. This worldview naturally sustains the growth of prayer-based ministries. Thus, these churches and prayer houses address the personal, emotional, and spiritual concerns of Nigerians in urban centres. Finally, weak regulation in religious sectors allows almost anyone to open a prayer house or church without strict oversight. This contributes to the rapid and sometimes uncontrolled increase of new religious centres across cities.

Churches and Prayer Houses and their Impact on Mental Health

Churches and prayer houses play a significant role in shaping the mental health of people living in urban areas in Nigeria. Life in Nigerian cities is increasingly stressful because of unemployment, high living expenses, overcrowding, insecurity, traffic congestion, social isolation, and fast-paced lifestyles. These pressures often lead to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, emotional fatigue, and psychological distress. In this context, churches and prayer houses become important spaces where people seek relief, stability, and emotional support.

One major positive impact is emotional and psychological comfort. Worship, prayer, and fellowship help many urban residents cope with daily challenges, providing a sense of peace, hope, and reassurance. Religious teachings often encourage resilience, patience, gratitude, and faith, which are values that help reduce stress and strengthen mental well-being. For people dealing with loneliness, churches offer a sense of belonging and community, which is crucial in urban environments where family networks are often weakened. Loneliness is much more than feelings of isolation. Its ramifications include serious health issues and early mortality (Morelli, n.d.). Churches create avenues for companionship and support through activities such as small groups, Bible study sessions, and social gatherings. These meetings give people a comfortable environment to express their experiences, challenges, and successes, helping them build meaningful relationships. The emotional and spiritual encouragement gained from such interactions can reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness (Bethany, 2023).

Churches and prayer houses also provide social support systems, which are essential for mental health. Members often receive counselling, encouragement, mentorship, and assistance from pastors, church leaders, and fellow congregants. Many churches run youth groups, women's groups, charitable programmes, and skill-building activities that help individuals gain confidence, purpose, and social connection. For instance, the Daystar Skill Acquisition Programme, established in November 2009 through basic and specialised hands-on skills training, has empowered individuals to embrace self-reliance, foster value creation, and drive lasting economic impact in their communities and beyond (DayStar, 2020). With regards to charitable programmes, RCCG runs free healthcare clinics, provides scholarships, and has poverty alleviation projects like skill acquisition centers and food banks across the country; Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners Chapel) supports poverty alleviation through agricultural empowerment programs and free medical outreach, and the

Apostolic Church which provided free healthcare services, and supporting agricultural development projects and are also known for building schools and offering vocational training to empower youth and women (CSR, 2024). These forms of social inclusion help reduce feelings of isolation, which is a major contributor to mental health problems in urban settings. Another impact is coping and meaning-making. Religion helps people understand and interpret their struggles, giving them a sense of purpose and direction. Prayer services, worship sessions, and spiritual practices can act as coping mechanisms that help individuals manage fear, uncertainty, and emotional pain. Positive religious coping mechanisms like prayer and fellowship can enhance resilience, and religious beliefs and practices also help to deal with life's difficulties (Omomia, Omomia & Enamudu, 2025). Religious rituals, such as prayer, meditation, and worship, provide opportunities for spiritual reflection and connection with the sacred, fostering a sense of existential fulfilment and wholeness (Sofi, Adede, & Wakiliah, 2024).

However, the influence of churches and prayer houses on mental health is not entirely positive. Sometimes, excessive dependence on spiritual solutions may delay or prevent individuals from seeking professional mental health care. Some prayer houses promote beliefs that frame every mental health issue as purely spiritual, leading to stigmatisation of mental illness or discouraging the use of medical treatment. Religion significantly affect an individual's beliefs and the stigma attitudes they have toward mental disorders and religious beliefs have a significant effect on attitude toward people with mental illnesses (Abuhammad, & Al-Natour 2021; Freire et al., 2016; Lyons et al., 2015). In extreme cases, certain unregulated prayer houses engage in practices that create fear, guilt, or psychological manipulation, which can worsen mental health conditions rather than improve them.

Noise pollution from constant night vigils, loudspeakers, and extended prayer sessions in congested neighbourhoods can also contribute to stress, sleep disruption, and irritability among residents nearby. Urbanisation affects mental health through the influence of increased stressors and factors such as overcrowded and polluted environments, such as noise pollution and reduced social support mechanisms (Srivastava, 2009). This environmental disturbance is a growing concern in many Nigerian cities. In many of these urban areas, there is the observance of longer and many night vigils. There is the placement of outdoor horn speakers. There is the noise of crying and yelling and speaking in strange tongues by the members of these churches. This makes the environment uninhabitable by those living around there. Unfortunately, this noise pollution disturbs children a

lot (Uroko, 2024). Unfortunately, noise pollution is one of the most challenging environmental hazards facing Nigerian cities and rural areas but is often overlooked compared to other forms of pollution. It is a significant environmental issue with profound impacts on human health, wildlife, and overall ecosystem integrity (Uroko, 2025).

Recommendation and Conclusion

Churches and prayer houses occupy a central place in the social and spiritual landscape of Nigeria's urban areas. In rapidly growing cities where residents face stressors such as unemployment, overcrowding, insecurity, rising living costs, and weakened family networks, these religious centres serve as important sources of emotional support, spiritual hope, and social belonging. They function as informal counselling centres, safe spaces for expression, and communities that help individuals cope with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and uncertainty. Through prayer, fellowship, worship, and shared faith, many urban residents find relief, resilience, and psychological stability. However, the influence of these religious institutions on mental health is not entirely positive. Unregulated prayer houses, exploitative spiritual practices, noise pollution from night vigils, and over-dependence on spiritual intervention can worsen mental health challenges or discourage individuals from seeking professional care. Some teachings that stigmatise mental illness as demon possession or purely spiritual issues create additional barriers to treatment. The overall impact, therefore, is mixed—powerfully supportive for many urban dwellers, yet potentially harmful when spiritual practices replace or undermine professional mental health services. There is the urgent need to have a collaborative framework between churches and mental health advocates and psychologists. These mental health experts could help to educate churches on how they can leverage more of their role in mental health development in urban centres, with lesser contribution to the destructive roles of churches and prayer houses on mental health. There is the need for training in mental health awareness and counselling ethics to be offered to religious and faith-based workers so they can better identify symptoms of mental illness and avoid harmful or stigmatising practices. Urban planning authorities in the different states in Nigeria should begin the enforcement of noise-control regulations during vigils and outdoor services to protect mental health.

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