



From Altar to Care Home: The Migration of Nigerian Clergy to Secular Employment in the Diaspora, the Theology of Vocation, and the Crisis of Ministerial Identity in the Global South Church

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Abstract

The phenomenon of Nigerian clergy ordained pastors, priests, and ministers migrating to the United Kingdom and other Western nations and subsequently abandoning active ministry for secular employment, most visibly as care workers, domestic staff, or social service employees, has emerged as one of the most theologically provocative and sociologically significant trends in contemporary African Christianity. This paper critically examines this phenomenon through the intersecting lenses of the theology of divine vocation, the sociology of religion, missiology, and African Christian ethics. It argues that while the migration of clergy represents a complex interplay of genuine economic necessity, structural vulnerability, and legitimate aspirations for a better life, the widespread abandonment of ministerial vocation raises profound questions about the nature, permanence, and ethical demands of divine calling that the Church both in Nigeria and in the diaspora has thus far failed to engage with adequate theological seriousness. Drawing on Eze's (2026) framework of African communalism and his scholarship on ecumenism and religious dialogue, the paper explores Paul the Apostle's tentmaking model as a constructive theological paradigm; critiques the prosperity-gospel-driven ecclesial culture in Nigeria that may distort vocational discernment and create unrealistic expectations of ministry; and examines the structural failures inadequate clergy support systems, exploitative church labor practices, and the absence of dignified ministerial remuneration that push ordained ministers toward secular employment. The paper concludes by arguing that a theologically grounded and pastorally compassionate response to the clergy diaspora crisis must hold together genuine concern for ministers' material wellbeing with an equally serious commitment to the integrity and continuity of the ministerial vocation to which they were called and ordained.

Keywords: *Clergy migration, diaspora ministry, vocation theology, Nigerian Christianity, UK care work, ministerial identity, tentmaking, prosperity gospel, ecumenism, calling*



1. INTRODUCTION

"Onye ọ bụla na-arụ ọrụ Chukwu" (Everyone works for God): the Igbo theological conviction that all human labor, properly understood, can be offered as service to the divine provides one frame for approaching the troubling phenomenon this paper addresses. Another, darker frame is provided by the Igbo proverb "Ọrụ di mma, mana ọ bụ ọrụ onye ọzọ" (The work is good, but it is another person's work): the haunting sense that in choosing care work over ministry, Nigerian clergy abroad may be doing honorable and socially valuable work but not the work to which they were called.

The phenomenon in question is both widely observed and insufficiently studied: Nigerian pastors, priests, deacons, and other ordained ministers who migrate to the United Kingdom often on ministry or student visas, or through family reunion routes and who, upon arrival, find that the economic realities of diaspora life, combined with the difficulties of establishing viable ministry in a post-Christian Western context, lead them to seek secular employment. The most visible form of this secular employment is care work: the United Kingdom's social care sector, chronically understaffed and heavily dependent on migrant labor, has absorbed significant numbers of Nigerian migrants in recent years, including a non-trivial proportion who were ordained ministers in Nigeria (Right to Remain, 2025). The image of a trained theologian and ordained pastor a man or woman who conducted services, preached sermons, administered sacraments, and provided pastoral care to a Nigerian congregation now working night shifts in a care home, bathing elderly residents and filling medication charts, is one that generates powerful and conflicting responses in Nigerian Christian communities: sympathy, bewilderment, theological discomfort, and, in some quarters, quiet judgment.



This paper does not seek to judge the individual ministers who have taken this path: the economic, structural, and personal pressures that have driven them to it are real, complex, and deserving of serious pastoral compassion. What it seeks to do is examine the theological, ecclesiastical, and sociological dimensions of the phenomenon with the seriousness it deserves engaging the question of whether divine calling, once genuinely received and publicly ratified through ordination, can be simply set aside when circumstances change; and what the responsibilities of the Church both in Nigeria and in the diaspora are toward ministers who find themselves in this situation.

2. THE THEOLOGY OF DIVINE VOCATION: WHAT DOES CALLING MEAN?

The Christian theology of vocation of the divine call to ministry rests on a set of convictions about the nature of God's initiative in the lives of human beings that have been consistently articulated across the diverse traditions of the Church. The foundational conviction is that the call to ministry is not primarily a human decision or career choice but a divine initiative: God calls, equips, and sends ministers into service not merely for their own fulfillment or economic advantage, but for the sake of the community and the mission of the Kingdom. This conviction is rooted in the biblical narratives of prophetic and apostolic calling: Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), Isaiah's commission in the temple (Isaiah 6), Jeremiah's call from his mother's womb (Jeremiah 1:5), and Paul's encounter on the Damascus road (Acts 9) all emphasize the sovereign, unconditional, and life-orienting character of divine call.

The Wesleyan-Methodist tradition, within which Eze serves as an ordained minister, has articulated the theology of vocation with particular clarity and pastoral sensitivity. John Wesley's understanding of ordained ministry as "a perfect dedication of our lives to God" (Wesley, 1749)



emphasizes both the comprehensive character of the call embracing the whole person and every dimension of life and its ethical demands: the minister is called not merely to perform religious functions but to embody a quality of life and character that is itself a form of proclamation. Eze (2026), in his engagement with the Methodist tradition and African communal ethics, argues that ministerial vocation in the African Christian context carries an additional communal dimension: the ordained minister is not merely an individual responding to God but a community's representative before God and God's representative to the community a role that generates responsibilities to both that cannot be unilaterally dissolved.

The question that the clergy diaspora phenomenon raises with painful acuity is: what happens to this vocation when circumstances economic, structural, migratory make its exercise in conventional ministerial forms impossible or practically unsustainable? Is vocation conditional upon favorable circumstances? Can it be legitimately set aside when the economic realities of diaspora life make conventional ministry untenable? Or does it constitute a permanent orientation of the person a claim upon their life that does not dissolve when circumstances change?

3. PAUL'S TENTMAKING MODEL: A CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

The Apostle Paul's practice of tentmaking supporting himself through manual labor while engaging in ministry, rather than depending entirely on congregational support (Acts 18:1–4; 1 Corinthians 9:12–18) provides one of the most constructive theological resources for engaging the clergy diaspora phenomenon. Paul's tentmaking was not an abandonment of apostolic vocation but a specific form of its exercise: a deliberate choice, made in specific cultural and economic contexts, to demonstrate through manual labor the non-mercenary character of his



proclamation and to model for his communities the integration of dignified work and faithful ministry.

As recent scholarship on Nigerian diaspora churches has observed (Vähäkangas, 2015, cited in Academia, 2020), Paul's tentmaking strategy provides an important model of self-reliance for African diaspora Christian communities whose ministry is not, or not yet, economically self-sustaining. The ordained minister who works as a care worker by day and continues pastoral ministry, preaching, and spiritual care in evenings and weekends is, in this frame, not abandoning vocation but adapting its expression to the realities of diaspora life a legitimate and even admirable response to structural constraint.

However, the tentmaking analogy has its limits. Paul's tentmaking was a voluntary strategy, adopted for missional purposes and in conjunction with sustained apostolic ministry, not an economic necessity that displaced ministry altogether. The pastor who migrates to the UK, takes up full-time care work, and ceases to engage in ministry neither with a diaspora congregation nor in any other sustained form represents a fundamentally different situation, one that the tentmaking model addresses only partially. Eze and Kii (2025), in their discussion of ecumenism and ministerial vocation, argue that the integrity of ministerial calling demands not merely that a minister survive economically but that the ministerial orientation of their life their fundamental identity as a servant of the Word and the community is sustained through and beyond whatever economic adaptations diaspora life requires.

4. STRUCTURAL FAILURES: WHY MINISTERS LEAVE MINISTRY

4.1 Inadequate Clergy Support in Nigeria



A full theological analysis of the clergy diaspora phenomenon must honestly engage with the structural failures of the Nigerian Church that create the conditions driving ministers to emigrate and abandon ministry in the first place. The material conditions of ordained ministry in Nigeria particularly in mainline denominations are, for many ministers, economically unviable. Low stipends, irregular payment, inadequate housing and healthcare provision, and the absence of pension security create conditions of economic vulnerability that make emigration an understandable, if theologically fraught, response. Eze (2026) has engaged with these material realities in his own ministerial context, noting the tension between the full demands of ministerial vocation and the economic constraints within which many Nigerian ministers operate.

The prosperity gospel theology that permeates much of Nigerian Pentecostalism with its promises of material blessing as evidence of divine favor and its implicit suggestion that financial success is a sign of genuine faith creates additional theological distortions in this context. A minister who observes wealthy laypeople and prosperous mega-church pastors and draws the conclusion that divine calling ought to produce material abundance may, when the economic realities of diaspora life disappoint that expectation, experience a crisis of vocational identity that makes ministry seem like a failed investment rather than a sacred calling (Vähäkangas, 2015).

4.2 The Diaspora Context: Structural Isolation

The structural challenges of diaspora ministry compound these vulnerabilities. Nigerian ministers who migrate to the UK often find themselves in a context in which establishing viable ministry is extremely difficult: congregations are small, cultural displacement is disorienting, denominational support structures are weak or absent, and the post-Christian culture of contemporary Britain offers none of the social prestige that pastoral office carries in Nigeria. As



the research on African millennial Christians in the UK diaspora documents (Church Mission Society, 2022), even ministers with genuine theological training and pastoral gifting can experience profound identity disorientation in the British context, leading some to question not merely the viability of their ministry but the validity of their calling.

The academic literature confirms what pastoral observation suggests: the migration of Nigerian clergy to secular employment is neither inevitable nor universal, but is driven by a specific combination of pre-migration economic vulnerability, the structural challenges of establishing diaspora ministry, and the relative accessibility of care sector employment for migrants with the right documentation (Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2015). Addressing it requires attention to all these dimensions not merely theological exhortation about the permanence of calling, but structural reforms in how the Nigerian Church supports and accompanies its ministers in the diaspora.

5. A THEOLOGY OF FAITHFUL ADAPTATION

This paper does not argue that Nigerian clergy who work in secular employment in the diaspora are necessarily guilty of vocation abandonment in every case. What it argues is that the Church in Nigeria and in the diaspora needs a more theologically serious and pastorally nuanced framework for accompanying ministers through the complex realities of diaspora life than it currently possesses. Such a framework would begin with the affirmation that the dignity and social value of care work the daily labor of attending to the physical, emotional, and social needs of vulnerable elderly persons is entirely compatible with the ministerial vocation and may itself be understood as a form of its expression in some contexts.



But it would also honestly engage with the theological question that Eze (2026) frames in terms of African communal accountability: the minister was ordained not merely for themselves but for the community, and the community's claim upon their ministry does not dissolve simply because geographical or economic circumstances change. The minister who migrates to the UK and severs all ministerial engagement with the diaspora community, with the home congregation, with any form of pastoral service is not merely adapting vocation to circumstance but potentially dissolving it, with consequences not only for themselves but for the communities that depended upon their ministry.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Structural Reform of Clergy Support:** The Methodist Church Nigeria, the Catholic Bishops' Conference, and other denominational bodies should review and substantially improve the material conditions of ordained ministry, including stipends, housing, healthcare, and pension provision, to reduce the economic vulnerability that drives emigration.
- **Diaspora Ministry Frameworks:** Denominational bodies should develop robust frameworks for accompanying ministers who migrate to the diaspora including structured support for establishing diaspora congregations, theological reflection on the pastoral challenges of diaspora ministry, and clear guidelines for ministers who need to engage in secular employment alongside ministry.
- **Vocational Formation Reform:** Theological seminaries should incorporate sustained theological reflection on the nature and demands of vocation engaging honestly with the tentmaking model, the challenges of diaspora ministry, and the distinction between



legitimate adaptation and vocation abandonment as a core element of ministerial formation.

- Pastoral Support for Diaspora Ministers: Both Nigerian denominations and UK-based ecumenical bodies should provide pastoral support structures mentoring, spiritual direction, peer accountability groups for Nigerian ministers in the diaspora, to help them maintain ministerial identity and community through the challenges of diaspora life.

7. CONCLUSION

"Onye ọ bụla na-arụ ọrụ Chukwu": everyone works for God. This conviction encompasses both the care worker who attends with patient compassion to the needs of a frail elderly resident, and the ordained minister who preaches, prays, and provides pastoral care for a community of faith. The tragedy of the clergy diaspora phenomenon is not that Nigerian ministers work in care homes such work has genuine dignity and social value but that, for many of them, the transition from altar to care home has involved not a legitimate adaptation of vocation but an effective abandonment of the ministerial identity and community that gave their lives their deepest orientation and meaning.

As Eze (2026) argues, drawing on both African communal ethics and the Methodist theological tradition, the minister who was genuinely called by God carries a responsibility to that calling and to the community that recognized and confirmed it that does not dissolve in the face of economic or structural adversity. Meeting that responsibility in the complex realities of diaspora life may require courage, creativity, and theological imagination of the highest order. But the Church, both in Nigeria and in the diaspora, has a corresponding responsibility to create



the structural conditions of support, accompaniment, and mutual accountability within which that courage and creativity can flourish.

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