





# Church unity and membership retention: Lessons from Lagos East Baptist Conference for South African ecumenical praxis



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This study explored the factors influencing church and retention of members within the Lagos East Baptist Conference (LEBC) in Nigeria. It examined how these findings are capable of informing the ecumenical witness of churches in South Africa, particularly in light of the theological insights of the Belhar Confession. The investigation was motivated by shared challenges in Baptist and Reformed ecclesial communities, including declining congregational vitality, intergenerational disconnection and a diminished public theological presence. This study used a mixed-method approach in the form of surveys, interviews and document analyses and sought to understand the reasons for the decline in congregation and the capacity of the church to preserve congregational vitality in the 21st century. The findings revealed that although the LEBC churches remain resilient as a result of their discipleship activities, small-group frameworks and various organisational church activities, demonstrating an 89% retention rate among small-group participants, the study identified four critical challenges to retention in the form of leadership succession, migration of youth, socio-economic factors and differing opinions on the issues of faith. Most importantly, the unity of the LEBC associations encouraged cooperative problem solving, enhanced retention of a shared missional identity and strengthened resource retention, all of which made retention of members possible.

**Contribution:** The study advances seven principal recommendations for policy reform, ecumenical collaboration and leadership formation, proposing that unity functions not merely as a theological aspiration but also as an operative mechanism for ecclesial resilience. It concludes that lessons from LEBC experience could be beneficial to South Africa, where churches are facing challenges of declining attendance, shifting generations and reclaiming an ecumenical witness in the midst of socio-political polarisation. Moreover, the unity of African church communities as a theological and strategic imperative could also be a measure of the capacity of African churches to realise the Belhar Confession.

**Keywords:** Belhar confession; church unity; ecumenical praxis; Lagos East Baptist Conference; membership retention; South Africa.

## Introduction

The decline in church membership and retention is becoming a more urgent problem in Nigeria and South Africa. In Lagos, the Lagos East Baptist Conference (LEBC), which comprises over 300 churches, has faced declining membership as a result of urbanisation, migration, economic struggles and changing religious loyalties (Dosunmu 2023a). South African churches also deal with decreasing attendance, the disengagement of younger generation from church ministries and divisions among denominations in the post-apartheid era (Forster 2020). The Belhar Confession (1986), which will celebrate its 40th anniversary in 2026, offers an important framework for understanding unity, reconciliation and justice in church life. This study looks at LEBC's efforts to maintain membership through unity and cooperative structures, providing valuable insights for South African churches.

## Historical and ecclesial background

### Lagos East Baptist Conference

The LEBC was officially launched on 10 April 2010 as a decentralised part of the Nigerian Baptist Convention to support churches in Ikorodu, Epe, Ibeju-Lekki and nearby areas

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(Ogunbanwo 2021). With over 28000 members, it stands as one of the most active denominational groups in Lagos (LEBC Book of Reports 2025). Despite its growth, the LEBC faces challenges, such as a decline in membership because of youth migration, popularly described as '*japa*', a Nigerian slang term referring to the mass emigration of young people seeking better opportunities abroad, gaps in leadership, socio-economic instability (Adeboye 2019) and differing opinions on the issues of faith.

### South African context and the Belhar Confession

In South Africa, the decline in church membership has to do with larger issues of justice, reconciliation and maintaining a credible public presence (Kritzinger 2019). The Belhar Confession, developed during apartheid, emphasises that unity, reconciliation and justice are essential qualities of the church (Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa [URCSA] 1986/1994). As South African churches celebrate Belhar40, the experience of Nigerian Baptists offers useful comparisons for understanding resilience in different contexts.

### Research methods and design

The Nigerian case study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. Surveys went out to 4000 to 5000 members across 255 churches constituting approximately 85% of the Conference's congregational membership. The survey instrument comprised 47 structured items addressing demographic variables, patterns of congregational participation, motivations for continued affiliation, perceived barriers to retention and assessments of ecclesial unity. While the precise response rate remains unreported in primary documentation, the dataset obtained facilitated statistical analysis of retention trends across diverse congregational sizes, geographical locations and demographic cohorts. Interviews took place with leaders and members from 120 churches (Omomola 2020), representing 47% of the total LEBC constituency. Interview protocols were designed to elicit narrative accounts of congregational challenges, leadership transitions, conflict resolution processes and participants' theological understandings of unity and mission. Interviews were conducted in English, Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin English, accommodating the linguistic diversity of the Lagos metropolitan region, and were audio-recorded with informed consent before being transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Data analysis combined descriptive statistics with thematic coding to show trends in retention and unity. The study gained ethical approval and followed protocols ensuring informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Moreover, the findings were supported by documentary evidence, including conference records and annual reports, financial statements, pastoral succession logs and demographic trend analyses spanning 2015–2024. These archival materials provided longitudinal perspective on membership fluctuations, leadership transitions and institutional responses to retention challenges.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Redeemer's University Ethics Committee on 12 October 2025 (No. RUN/REC/2025/371).

### Results

The findings combine survey responses, documentary analysis and extensive oral interviews conducted with pastors, deacons, youth leaders and long-standing members across 120 churches. These interviews provided first-hand accounts that clarified the statistical patterns.

#### Membership challenges: Fragmentation pressures in urban Baptist ecclesiology

The challenges of keeping members in the LEBC are part of larger trends in Africa where fragmentation occurs amid rapid social change.

#### Youth migration

One major factor is youth migration. More than 40% of young people surveyed want to emigrate, largely influenced by the '*japa*' discussion (Dosunmu 2023b). Interview data consistently revealed that youth migration [*japa*] is the most frequently cited reason for membership decline. During interviews with youth leaders in Ikorodu, several respondents noted that 'almost every family has one or two young people actively planning to travel' (Youth President [FBC, Ikorodu] pers. comm., 12 July 2025). Pastors in Epe and Ibeju-Lekki further confirmed that many young adults withdraw their involvement in church activities months before relocation, weakening youth ministry structures (Pastor Abolaji Adelani [Victory Baptist Church Epe] pers. comm., 04 August 2025). Survey results supported this, showing that over 40% of youth respondents indicated an intention to emigrate.

This trend is similar to what we see in South Africa, where young people feel disconnected from institutional Christianity. Instead of moving away, they often turn to alternative spiritual practices or secular lifestyles (Forster 2019). In both places, young people think church structures do not address their economic, social or moral crises.

#### Leadership succession

Leadership succession presents another destabilising issue. The Baptist focus on congregational independence often makes succession tricky. In the LEBC, poorly managed pastoral transitions frequently lead to splits (Emmanuel 2022a). Oral testimonies highlighted problems arising during pastoral transitions. In interviews with five congregations that had recently undergone leadership change, members repeatedly described feelings of uncertainty, distrust and division. A deacon from Agbowo stated, 'Anytime a pastor leaves, we prepare for conflict; people automatically take sides' (Deacon Bayo. A. [First Baptist Church, Agbowo] pers. comm., 10 June 2025). These patterns corroborate Emmanuel's (2022a) findings

that succession disputes often precipitate congregational splits because of limited succession planning, politicisation and disagreements over pastoral authority.

Likewise, South African churches, especially those founded by missions, have seen decline when leadership gaps heightened racial or doctrinal tensions (Nkomo 2021). These similarities show that the problem extends beyond just procedures; it is also theological. A lack of proper succession planning undermines how the community represents the 'communion of saints' as a lasting sign of Christ's presence.

### Socio-economic factors

Economic instability also contributes to declining membership. Financial hardship reduces participation in church activities and deepens congregational dependence on social support systems. Interviewees across low-income communities described how economic hardship affected church commitment. Members explained that long working hours, rising transport costs and financial strain reduced participation in mid-week and small-group activities (Market-Trader Fellowship [Sabo-Ikorodu] pers. comm., 18 September 2025). Several pastors confirmed that requests for benevolence increased significantly between 2020 and 2024, affecting the ability of churches to sustain ministries.

### Differences in faith and worship practices

Finally, disagreements about beliefs have created divides within Baptist congregations. The rise of contemporary worship styles has often split older and younger members, with some viewing these changes as a loss of Baptist heritage (Ajayi 2021a). Oral testimonies confirmed ongoing disagreements over worship style and theological preferences. Several elderly members reported discomfort with contemporary music and 'youth-driven worship expressions', while younger interviewees felt that older structures resisted needed change (Family Fellowship Leader [Ijede] pers. comm., 22 August 2025). These tensions match Ajayi's (2021a) findings on doctrinal misalignment in Lagos Baptist congregations.

In South Africa, discussions about liturgy and contextual theology, especially the integration of African forms, have also caused conflicts (Mofokeng 2018). These tensions bring to light the broader ecumenical question of how local churches manage continuity while responding to their context, a central issue for both Nigerian and South African church life.

### Strategies for retention: Practices of ecclesial resilience:

Despite these challenges, LEBC congregations have implemented practices that improve resilience. Small-group ministries are perhaps the most important intervention. Interviews conducted with small-group leaders across 17 congregations consistently affirmed the role of intimate fellowship in promoting retention. A cell leader in First Baptist Church Agbede noted, 'People stay because someone notices when they are absent' (Small-Group

Leader [Agbede] pers. comm., 07 July 2025). This testimony aligns with the documented 89% retention rate among small-group participants (LEBC Annual Report 2024a).

First Baptist Church Agbede, located in Ikorodu Lagos, reported an 89% retention rate among members involved in small groups, highlighting the value of close discipleship structures (LEBC Annual Report 2024a). Research from across the continent supports the effectiveness of small groups as centres for community, care and theological growth (Kgatla 2016). In South Africa, small-group models, especially in Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal contexts, have also effectively fostered belonging and reduced anonymity within large congregations (Resane 2020).

Digital engagement is another important shift. Nigerian Baptist churches are increasingly using WhatsApp, livestreaming and digital apps to keep members connected (Osagie 2023a). Pastors repeatedly testified that WhatsApp prayer platforms, livestreaming and online counselling significantly strengthened member participation. A pastor in Igbogbo, Ikorodu Lagos, observed that weekly online prayer attracted members who were physically absent because of work schedules (Pastor Clement Olatayo [FBC Igbogbo] pers. comm., 09 September 2025). Youth interviewees confirmed that digital platforms made them feel 'seen' and 'connected', even when travelling or studying away from home.

During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, South African churches made similar investments in digital worship and online support (Bentley 2021). While these initiatives risk turning worship into a product, they also expand the church's presence into digital public spaces, reflecting Bosch's (1991) concept of the 'missionary church' that is capable of exploring new boundaries.

Economic empowerment programmes serve as retention strategies as well. The LEBC churches that offer vocational training, welfare programmes and micro-financing not only build loyalty but also represent a holistic approach to the gospel (Oyekan 2024a). Oral testimonies emphasised the effect of welfare and empowerment programmes on loyalty and retention. In an interview with a vocational-training beneficiary, one member said, 'If the church did not support me, I would have left Lagos. This help made me remain here and remain in church' (Beneficiary [Epe Baptist Church] pers. comm., 03 June 2023). This reinforces Oyekan's (2024a) findings that economic support increases the retention of church members.

In South Africa, churches influenced by liberation and Black Theology have historically connected membership retention to economic fairness and social empowerment (De Gruchy 2015). Here, the practices of Baptist churches in Lagos align with Belhar's view that justice is essential to the unity of the church.

Although the study initially presents economic empowerment within the LEBC as a pragmatic mechanism for strengthening member retention, a deeper theological analysis reveals that such initiatives sit firmly within the central biblical tradition that binds discipleship to socio-economic justice. Both the ministries of the Old Testament prophets and the life and teaching of Jesus Christ frame economic well-being, community flourishing and material equity as inseparable from the mission of God.

The Old Testament repeatedly demonstrates that economic justice is not a peripheral moral issue but a covenantal expectation. The prophetic literature is particularly emphatic that right relationship with God demands the establishment of economic structures that protect and uplift the vulnerable. Prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, Micah and Jeremiah rebuked Israel for social and economic practices that undermined covenantal faithfulness. Amos condemns those 'who trample the poor and do away with the needy of the land' (Am 8:4) and asserts that worship devoid of justice is utterly rejected by God (Am 5:21–24). Micah 6:8 closely links justice with true discipleship, calling Israel to 'do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God'. Isaiah 58 denounces religious practices that ignore socio-economic justice and insists that genuine faith requires loosening the bonds of oppression and sharing bread with the hungry. These texts establish a theological schema in which economic well-being becomes a covenantal obligation. To pursue economic empowerment today is therefore to participate in God's ongoing work of restoration.

The Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 institutionalises periodic economic reset: return of land, release from debt-slavery and correction of structural imbalance. Although the contemporary context does not replicate Jubilee literally, the principle is theologically instructive: God wills that economic structures do not imprison people in cycles of generational poverty. The initiatives of LEBC such as vocational training, welfare schemes and small grants mirror this restorative impulse by enabling members to regain dignity, stability and economic participation.

Jesus' ministry continues and intensifies the prophetic commitment to socio-economic justice. His engagement with issues such as poverty, exclusion and economic inequality is not an auxiliary concern but a defining sign of the Kingdom of God. In Luke 4:18–19, Jesus inaugurates His ministry by proclaiming that the Spirit has anointed Him 'to bring good news to the poor ... to set the oppressed free'. The term 'poor' (*ptōchoi*) refers to those economically marginalised. Jesus therefore identifies His mission with the prophetic tradition of socio-economic restoration and positions holistic liberation – spiritual, social and material – at the heart of discipleship.

Jesus' works embody a profound concern for material well-being: The feeding of the multitudes (Mk 6:8) demonstrates God's commitment to providing for physical needs. The cleansing of the temple addresses systemic

economic exploitation embedded within religious structures (Mt 21:12–13). His parable of the rich fool (Lk 12:16–21) critiques acquisitive systems that accumulate wealth at the expense of others. In His encounter with Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1–10), repentance is expressed through restorative economic justice, returning what was taken and providing assistance to those wronged. Taken together, these texts show that Jesus' ministry holds together spiritual transformation and social and economic liberation as twin expressions of the Kingdom.

The early Christian communities extended this ethic: Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35 describe patterns of economic sharing that reduced poverty within the community. Paul's collection for the Jerusalem church (2 Cor 8–9) models economic solidarity across geographical and cultural boundaries. Such practices demonstrate that economic empowerment is not an optional element but an ecclesial mandate grounded in the example of Christ and the apostolic tradition.

### African theological perspectives on economic empowerment

African theology has long emphasised the inseparability of spiritual and material life. Scholars such as John Mbiti, Mercy Oduyoye and Benezet Bujo argue that African communal philosophies, *ubuntu*, *omolúwàbí*, *ijò gbòran*, demand that Christian faith engage social and economic realities in concrete ways. African missiology challenges the Western dualism that separates 'spiritual' from 'material' needs. Within many African contexts, the church functions as an economic, social and relational safety net, enhancing stability amid economic uncertainty.

The LEBC's empowerment initiatives therefore embody African communal ethics, presenting the church as a locus of solidarity, survival and social transformation, rather than merely a spiritual association. Economic empowerment affirms the Christian conviction that all people bear the *imago Dei* and thus possess intrinsic worth and the right to agency, productivity and flourishing.

Programmes that provide vocational training, microfinance or welfare support are consequently theological affirmations of human dignity rather than merely pragmatic membership-retention strategies.

Drawing on the biblical witness, the ministry of Jesus, and African theological perspectives, economic empowerment contributes to retention through two theological dynamics: embodying God's justice in the community of faith and enhancing the credibility of Christian witness. When congregations address the economic burdens of their members, they enact the Kingdom ethic that: rectifies injustice (Am 5), restores dignity (Is 58), proclaims good news to the poor (Lk 4) and sustains communal sharing (Ac 2–4). Such embodiment of justice cultivates trust, belonging and covenantal identity within the church.

Moreover, in contexts marked by poverty and institutional mistrust, such as Lagos and South Africa, churches that model economic justice strengthen the authenticity of their public witness. Members remain committed not simply because they receive assistance but also because the church mirrors the holistic ministry of Christ and the prophetic vision of justice. Economic empowerment is not a peripheral or merely pragmatic tool for retention; it is an intrinsically biblical and theological practice rooted in the prophetic tradition, the ministry of Christ, the ethics of the early church and African communal theology. Its effectiveness in member retention arises precisely because it reflects a faithful ecclesial identity – an identity committed to justice, dignity and the flourishing of the whole community.

### Unity as a retention catalyst: Associational polity and ecclesial cohesion

One of the most crucial factors for maintaining retention is unity. LEBC's associational structures, based on shared resources and leadership, have provided a framework for resolving conflicts during crises. For example, Graceland Baptist Church addressed a divisive split through mediation from the Conference, demonstrating the effectiveness of associational governance (Shobowale 2022). Associational unity emerged strongly from oral interviews as a reason for congregational stability. Pastors repeatedly mentioned that the LEBC's intervention teams helped mediate disputes among the congregation. A pastor whose church experienced conflict noted: 'The Conference stepped in quickly; without that intervention, our church would have split into three' (Pastor D. O. [Ikorodu area] pers. comm., 15 October 2025). These testimonies confirm Shobowale's (2022) report on the Baptist reconciliation effort and illustrate how unity is perceived not merely as administrative but as a lived spiritual practice.

This unity is not simply organisational; it is grounded in a theological conviction that the church reflects God's reconciled community. 'Institutionalising unity' therefore refers not to bureaucratic formality but to embedding unity in practices, policies and mission statements, ensuring that reconciliation, shared mission and cooperative structures shape everyday ecclesial functioning. Although the study recognises unity as a structural advantage within the LEBC, a fuller theological perspective shows that Christian unity is not merely a functional tool for preventing conflict or improving retention. Rather, unity is an essential dimension of the church's identity, rooted in the character of God, the mission of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Ecclesial unity is therefore both a divine gift and a missional obligation. Theologically, unity operates on three interrelated levels: (1) the Trinitarian life of God; (2) the Christological basis for reconciliation; and (3) the ecclesial mandate for communal life. Each dimension deepens the significance of unity within contemporary African ecclesial contexts. These processes reflect a view of the church where unity is more than just convenient; it is a theological necessity.

The ecumenical practices in South Africa offer helpful comparisons. The Belhar Confession views unity as both a gift and an obligation, intertwined with reconciliation and justice. During apartheid, groups like the South African Council of Churches helped promote reconciliation among divided congregations, embodying Belhar's theological perspective (Naudé 2010). The experiences of LEBC reflect this pattern: associational support not only addresses internal conflicts but also strengthens the church's public presence in fragmented contexts.

### Comparative synthesis: Lessons from Lagos East Baptist Conference for South African ecumenical praxis

The findings from LEBC contribute to the broader African ecclesiological discussion by showing how challenges related to migration, leadership and doctrinal disagreements can be addressed through focused strategies for discipleship, digital growth and socio-economic support. For South African practice, three key insights arise:

- **Youth Migration and Discontent:** While Nigerian settings highlight external migration, South African churches face the internal disconnection of youth. Both situations call for churches to create innovative pathways for discipleship that resonate with the hopes and concerns of younger generations.
- **Leadership and Continuity:** The challenges Baptist churches face with pastoral transitions are similar to those in South Africa regarding leadership succession affected by race. Both contexts emphasise the importance of developing leaders as a theological responsibility to maintain continuity within the church.
- **Unity as a Catalyst:** The associational reconciliation efforts of the LEBC reflect the Belhar Confession's view that unity is essential to the church's mission. South African churches can learn from the Nigerian Baptists' experience, showing that when unity is institutionalised, it acts as a mechanism for retention and a witness to faith.

In general, the practices of the LEBC provide both warnings and positive examples. In conversation with Belhar, the Nigerian case suggests that African churches must see retention not just as a matter of survival but as active participation in God's mission to reconcile a divided humanity.

## Discussion

The LEBC case clearly shows that church unity plays a vital role in retaining membership, both on structural and spiritual levels. When unity is practised through cooperation, it creates resilient systems that can handle pastoral changes, resolve theological disputes and encourage congregational involvement (Emmanuel 2022b; Shobowale 2022). This dynamic confirms that unity is not merely an abstract theological idea but a practical necessity for church survival in rapidly changing social contexts (Naudé 2010). However, the study reveals that unity, while essential, is only one aspect of a broader ecology of ecclesial resilience. Youth migration, leadership succession, socio-economic pressures and doctrinal disputes also shape retention. Each area

requires targeted theological and practical responses. The LEBC context, therefore shows that, unity strengthens resilience, small groups sustain discipleship, economic empowerment embodies biblical justice, digital tools reconfigure pastoral engagement and leadership stability safeguards congregational identity. These insights align closely with the Belhar Confession's call to embody unity, justice and reconciliation as hallmarks of the church's identity and mission.

South African churches facing similar declines can learn important lessons from the LEBC. Despite differences such as Nigeria's demographic challenges from youth migration and economic instability (Dosunmu 2023a; Oyekan 2024b) versus South Africa's ongoing racial inequities and generational disconnection (Forster 2019), both scenarios show that disunity hastens decline. Belhar's message is relevant; division undermines the church's credibility, while unity reflects God's reconciled community (Naidoo 2021a). The Nigerian Baptist experience reveals that disunity often leads to fragmentation (Ajayi 2021b), while collaboration through joint leadership, shared resources and reconciliation efforts builds resilience (LEBC Annual Report 2024b). In this way, the LEBC embodies Belhar's call for unity, justice and reconciliation, emphasising that church cohesion is essential for its mission (De Gruchy 2015).

### Implications for South African ecumenical praxis

The insights from the LEBC suggest three levels of implications for South African churches aiming to embody the vision of Belhar:

- **Theological:** Unity should be seen as central to Christian discipleship, not just a secondary concern. Pursuing unity involves engaging in the life of Christ's body and resisting division as a rejection of the gospel (Naidoo 2021b; Naudé 2010). The emphasis in Belhar that unity is both a gift and an obligation highlights that it must permeate church practices.
- **Pastoral:** Concrete resilience strategies can be taken from the Nigerian context. These include establishing small-group ministries that foster connection and discipleship (LEBC Annual Report 2024a; Resane 2020), creatively using digital media to maintain engagement among dispersed or disengaged members (Bentley 2021; Osagie 2023b) and fostering intentional reconciliation through associational actions (Shobowale 2022). Each of these approaches builds relationships, supporting long-term retention (Kgatla 2016).
- **Policy:** Denominational and ecumenical organisations in South Africa should work towards greater structural cooperation. This involves sharing resource management, developing leadership together and coordinating mission strategies regionally (Emmanuel 2022b; Oyekan 2024a). The Nigerian example shows that associational governance strengthens local churches by connecting them to broader networks of support. These structures align with Belhar's vision of the church as a reconciled community focused on justice, with unity serving as a sign of hope in divided societies (De Gruchy 2015; Naidoo 2021a).

### Comparative ecclesial analysis: Lagos East Baptist Conference and the uniting reformed church in Southern Africa

The LEBC in Nigeria and the URCSA represent two distinct yet theologically resonant models of ecclesial life in postcolonial Africa. Both traditions, though shaped by divergent denominational histories – the Baptist by congregational polity and revivalist heritage and the Reformed by confessional orthodoxy and synodical structure – demonstrate a shared struggle to embody unity, justice and reconciliation within fractured socio-political contexts (Cloete 2014:63; Naudé 2010:45).

Within the LEBC, unity and membership retention are primarily sustained through participatory governance, small-group ministries and associational structures that reflect the Baptist ideal of local autonomy under the Lordship of Christ. The emphasis on voluntary commitment, discipleship training and community-based evangelism allows the LEBC to maintain vitality amid Nigeria's volatile socio-economic climate (Adedibu 2018:46; Onah & Agbo 2021:8–10). These practices cultivate resilience, fostering a collective ecclesial identity rooted in fellowship, stewardship and cooperative mission. Yet, the study observes that this strength in local autonomy sometimes results in uneven leadership continuity and limited theological coherence across congregations.

By contrast, the URCSA embodies a unitary ecclesiology that emerged from the theological crucible of apartheid. Its adoption of the *Belhar Confession* in 1986 institutionalised the principles of unity, reconciliation and justice as central to its identity and mission (Naudé 2010:48; Smit 2008:54). In the post-apartheid era, these principles continue to inform the church's engagement with racial inequality, economic disparity and political ethics. Whereas the LEBC's vitality lies in its grassroots evangelistic networks, the URCSA's distinct strength resides in its capacity for structured theological reflection and public advocacy, rooted in confessional solidarity. This has enabled the URCSA to serve as a moral voice in national discourse, articulating a public theology that integrates orthodoxy and praxis (Cloete 2014:67).

Nevertheless, both ecclesial bodies confront similar challenges of member retention, youth alienation and contextual theological engagement. The LEBC faces the pressures of prosperity-driven individualism, denominational fragmentation and urban migration; the URCSA grapples with generational disengagement and post-liberation fatigue (Magezi & Igba 2018:66–68). Theologically, both must navigate the tension between institutional preservation and prophetic renewal. The Baptist emphasis on personal conversion and congregational initiative could be enriched by URCSA's confessional grounding in social justice, while the Reformed tradition could learn from the Baptist model of participatory discipleship and lay mobilisation (Bediako 1995:112; Mbiti 1970:16).

Ultimately, the comparative analysis reveals that both the LEBC and the URCSA, though operating in different socio-historical contexts, embody complementary expressions of African ecclesial resilience. Their convergence lies in their shared vocation to witness to the reconciling work of God amid division and inequality. A deepened partnership between these traditions, through theological dialogues, leadership exchange and collaborative social ministry, can advance a pan-African ecclesiology that unites orthodoxy, community praxis and public responsibility in the service of justice and peace.

### Summary of major findings and shortcomings

The study establishes that unity within the LEBC is a decisive factor in sustaining church membership and enhancing ecclesial resilience. Through a combination of small-group ministries, digital engagement and socio-economic empowerment programmes, the LEBC demonstrates a multifaceted model of congregational vitality. These initiatives strengthen discipleship, facilitate communication and promote mutual support across member churches. Associational governance structures also emerge as a key mechanism for mediation and conflict resolution, reflecting an ecclesiology grounded in cooperative identity rather than individualism. Theologically, the study reinforces the Belhar Confession's emphasis on unity, justice and reconciliation, showing that these principles possess cross-continental relevance. For South African churches, the LEBC experience offers instructive parallels for addressing membership decline, generational disconnection and post-apartheid fragmentation.

However, the research also exposes significant shortcomings. While the LEBC's resilience mechanisms are noteworthy, they remain vulnerable to structural and contextual pressures such as youth emigration, inconsistent leadership succession and precarious socio-economic situations. The study's comparative design, though insightful, leans heavily on descriptive data from the Nigerian case, with limited empirical engagement from the South African context. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data and denominational documentation introduces the risk of institutional bias. Theologically, the work would benefit from deeper critical analysis of how contextual theologies, particularly African Pentecostal and liberation perspectives, intersect with the Belhar framework. Despite these limitations, the study contributes meaningfully to African ecclesiology by proposing unity not merely as a doctrinal affirmation but also as an operative strategy for ecclesial renewal and public witness.

### Conclusion

The experience of the LEBC provides a valuable comparative lens for South African churches seeking to enact the vision of Belhar40. The vision of *Belhar40* centres on renewing the contemporary church's commitment to the core theological convictions articulated in the Belhar Confession – unity, reconciliation and justice – as it reaches its 40th anniversary.

Belhar40 calls the church to embody unity as a divine gift and ethical obligation, to practise reconciliation as the concrete expression of Christ's healing of divided humanity and to pursue justice as an essential dimension of faithful discipleship in contexts marked by inequality, exclusion and social fragmentation. Rooted in the confession's original struggle against apartheid, the Belhar40 vision urges African churches today to recover a credible public witness by cultivating communities where racial, economic and generational divisions are confronted rather than normalised. In essence, Belhar40 represents a call to re-imagine ecclesial life so that the church becomes a reconciled and reconciling community, a sign of God's justice and a prophetic presence in a broken society. The Nigerian case demonstrates that unity, far from being a rhetorical aspiration, tangibly enhances membership retention, stabilises fragile congregations and sustains ecclesial witness (LEBC Annual Report 2024a; Shobowale 2022). In contexts of decline and fragmentation, associational solidarity has proven essential for resilience (Dosunmu 2023a; Emmanuel 2022a).

For South Africa, where divisions continue to haunt ecclesial and societal life, the LEBC offers a case study of contextualised ecumenical praxis: small groups anchoring discipleship (Kgatla 2016; Resane 2020), digital ministries extending pastoral reach (Bentley 2021; Osagie 2023b) and reconciliation processes reconstituting fractured communities (Naidoo 2021b; Naudé 2010). Together, these strategies embody Belhar's summons to live as a reconciled people committed to justice, unity and solidarity (De Gruchy 2015).

### Recommendations

The findings of this study, situated at the intersection of empirical ecclesiology and comparative missiology, generate implications that extend beyond descriptive analysis towards prescriptive engagement with denominational policy, ecumenical structures and ministerial formation. What follows constitutes seven interconnected recommendations addressing how Baptist and Reformed bodies in Nigeria and South Africa can operationalise the insights derived from the LEBC experience, translating observed retention mechanisms into transferable ecclesial praxis while respecting contextual particularities and theological distinctives.

#### Institutionalising leadership formation rooted in ecclesial unity

The first imperative concerns the integration of unity-centred theology into denominational leadership development programmes. Baptist and Reformed bodies should integrate leadership development programmes that reflect the theological principles of the *Belhar Confession*, especially unity, reconciliation and justice, as core dimensions of ministerial formation. Denominational seminaries and training institutes ought to develop curricula that prepare clergy to lead collaborative and socially responsive ministries capable of addressing divisions within both church and society. Such curricula should comprise modules addressing biblical theology of

unity (exegetical study of Johannine and Pauline ecclesiology), historical theology of ecumenism (from early church councils through modern ecumenical movement), systematic theology of reconciliation (engaging Barth, Bonhoeffer, and African theological voices) and practical theology of conflict transformation.

### Strengthening ecumenical collaboration through shared social witness

Advancing beyond the frequent ecumenical impasse wherein theological consensus remains perpetually deferred, the second recommendation proposes that churches in Nigeria and South Africa should move beyond doctrinal consensus towards joint social engagement. Collaborative initiatives in poverty alleviation, peace-building and anti-corruption advocacy would demonstrate unity-in-action and affirm the church's prophetic identity. Platforms such as national Christian councils and Baptist-Reformed partnerships should be revitalised to foster theological exchange and joint community transformation projects. This recommendation proceeds from the recognition, consonant with the Belhar Confession's integration of unity with justice, that visible ecclesial cooperation in pursuit of the common good constitutes compelling apologetics for the gospel's reconciling power. Concretely, this would entail the establishment of regional ecumenical task forces comprising Baptist, Reformed, Methodist and other denominational representatives, charged with identifying priority social concerns requiring coordinated Christian response. In the Nigerian context, such initiatives might address corruption in governance through collective advocacy, insecurity through church-facilitated peace-building in conflict-affected regions and youth unemployment through cooperative vocational training centres operated jointly by multiple denominations. In South Africa, ecumenical social witness could confront ongoing racial inequality through land reform advocacy informed by theological reflection on economic justice, gender-based violence through coordinated pastoral care networks and survivor support services and xenophobia through migrant hospitality programmes embodying biblical principles of welcome.

### Developing policy frameworks for youth inclusion and retention

Given the study's findings on generational disengagement, manifested in Nigeria through the 'japa' migration phenomenon wherein over 40% of surveyed youth expressed emigration intentions, and in South Africa through internal youth disconnection from institutional Christianity, church policy must intentionally prioritise youth empowerment through mentorship, digital discipleship and vocational initiatives. Creating participatory governance structures where young people influence decision-making will ensure continuity and relevance of church witness across generations. This recommendation challenges prevailing gerontocratic tendencies within African ecclesial governance, wherein decision-making authority concentrates among elderly male

leadership to the exclusion of younger voices and female perspectives. Concrete policy reforms should mandate youth representation (defined as ages 18–35 years) on all significant denominational committees and decision-making bodies, with target participation of at least 30% youth membership. Beyond token representation, meaningful inclusion requires capacity-building initiatives equipping young people for substantive leadership contributions, including training in theological reflection, organisational governance and strategic planning. Economic empowerment programmes, following the LEBC model that demonstrated correlation between vocational support and church loyalty, should provide microfinance schemes enabling youth entrepreneurship (loan amounts ranging from ₦500 000.00–₦2 000 000.00 in Nigeria; R10 000.00–R50 000.00 in South Africa), mentorship connections pairing established Christian professionals with emerging leaders and technical skills training in areas demonstrating employment potential. Digital discipleship strategies must transcend superficial social media presence to developing robust online theological education platforms, virtual small groups facilitating community among geographically dispersed youth and utilisation of digital communication tools (WhatsApp, Telegram and other social media platforms) for pastoral care and spiritual formation. Critically, policy frameworks must address theological concerns of youth regarding perceived church irrelevance, hypocritical leadership and disconnection between professed values and institutional practice. This necessitates forums for transparent intergenerational dialogue where youth can voice critiques without retaliation and where institutional responses demonstrate genuine receptivity rather than defensive dismissiveness.

### Promoting contextual theological education for public engagement

Theological institutions should design contextualised modules in *public theology* and *Christian social ethics*, grounded in African realities. Such training will equip ministers to interpret theological doctrines through socio-economic and political lenses, fostering leaders who can address corruption, insecurity and inequality from an informed biblical and theological standpoint. This recommendation responds to the documented gap between abstract doctrinal instruction and the concrete pastoral challenges confronting African church leaders, who navigate contexts characterised by pervasive corruption, structural violence, economic precarity and religious pluralism, yet often receive theological education modelled on Western curricula inadequately addressing these realities. Contextual theological education, as advocated by African theological scholars from Mbiti through Bediako to contemporary voices, requires rigorous engagement with African philosophy, indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences of African Christian communities as legitimate sources for theological reflection alongside Scripture and tradition. Curricular development should incorporate modules on African political theology (analysing state-church relations, Christian citizenship and

prophetic witness in postcolonial contexts), African economic theology (addressing prosperity gospel, poverty and stewardship), African ecclesiology (exploring indigenous expressions of Christian community, leadership models and worship forms) and African missiology (examining evangelisation, interfaith engagement and diaspora Christianity).

### Adoption of participatory governance and accountability mechanisms

Both Baptist and Reformed denominations should strengthen associational governance structures to ensure transparency, inclusivity and ethical stewardship. Institutional policies must incorporate participatory budgeting, conflict mediation procedures and regular leadership evaluation, mirroring the cooperative ecclesiology demonstrated in the LEBC. This recommendation addresses the documented vulnerability of congregational autonomy to leadership abuses, financial malfeasance and unchecked pastoral authority, which the LEBC study identified as contributing factors to church splits and membership haemorrhage. Participatory governance transcends nominal democracy wherein congregations rubber-stamp pastoral proposals, establishing instead robust structures enabling meaningful lay involvement in decision-making across all significant institutional domains. Specific mechanisms include: (1) participatory budgeting processes wherein congregation members receive complete financial disclosure, engage substantive discussion regarding resource allocation priorities and exercise genuine authority over budgetary decisions rather than merely approving pre-determined pastoral preferences; (2) formalised conflict mediation procedures establishing clear processes for addressing disputes between members, between members and leadership and between congregations within associational structures, with trained mediators, transparent procedures and binding resolution mechanisms preventing conflicts from metastasising into schisms; (3) regular leadership evaluation protocols requiring periodic assessment of pastoral performance by lay committees, utilising clear criteria addressing doctrinal faithfulness, ethical conduct, administrative competence and relational health, with evaluation results informing decisions regarding contract renewal, compensation adjustments and professional development needs; (4) term limits for key leadership positions preventing entrenchment of authority and facilitating leadership renewal; (5) mandatory financial audits by independent external auditors with results publicly disclosed to congregation membership; and (6) whistleblower protection policies enabling members to report ethical violations without fear of retaliation. Implementation of these mechanisms requires constitutional amendments within congregational and denominational governing documents (6–12 months), training of laity in governance responsibilities (ongoing) and cultural transformation from paternalistic leadership models towards genuinely collaborative ecclesiology (multi-year process). Resistance from entrenched leadership should be anticipated and addressed through theological formation emphasising

servant leadership, accountability as biblical stewardship and the priesthood of all believers as foundational Baptist and Reformed principles.

### Advancing cross-cultural learning between Nigerian and South African churches

A structured exchange programme between Baptist and Reformed churches across both contexts should be established. These exchanges, through clergy visits, joint seminars and student placements, would promote intercultural theological reflection, contextual innovation and the sharing of practical models for member retention and community development. This recommendation operationalises the study's concluding call for 'joint fieldwork between Nigerian and South African ecclesial bodies', transforming abstract scholarly aspiration into concrete institutional practice. The exchange programme should encompass multiple modalities addressing diverse participant needs and institutional capacities. Annual leadership exchanges would bring together 10–15 senior pastors, denominational executives and lay leaders from each context for intensive 2-week immersion experiences, including congregational site visits, observation of ministry practices, participation in worship and discipleship activities, structured dialogue sessions addressing comparative challenges and collaborative development of transferable strategies.

### Integrating the Belhar confession into ecumenical dialogue and praxis

Finally, both Nigerian Baptist and South African Reformed churches should formally engage the *Belhar Confession* as a shared theological charter for African public theology. Its articulation of justice, unity and reconciliation provides a unifying hermeneutic for confronting sectarianism, prosperity individualism and moral decline. Embedding Belhar in dialogue forums and denominational statements can nurture a trans-African theological solidarity rooted in faith and social transformation. This recommendation addresses the documented theological fragmentation within African Christianity, wherein doctrinal particularism often obscures shared commitments while prosperity individualism erodes communal ecclesiology and social witness. The Belhar Confession, emerging from the crucible of apartheid South Africa as Reformed theological response to racism and injustice, articulates principles with resonance extending far beyond its original context. Its threefold emphasis – unity as divine gift and ecclesial obligation, reconciliation as gospel imperative transcending all dividing walls and justice as a non-negotiable dimension of Christian witness – provides a framework capable of addressing contemporary African ecclesial challenges from tribalism and denominational sectarianism to economic inequality and political corruption. Formal Baptist engagement with Belhar, while requiring theological discernment given differing ecclesial traditions, offers potential for constructive convergence around shared commitments to congregational vitality, social justice and visible Christian unity.

These seven recommendations, while distinct in focus, constitute an integrated framework for ecclesial renewal addressing the retention crisis documented in the LEBC study through multilevel intervention spanning policy reform, ecumenical structures and leadership formation. Their collective implementation would require sustained institutional commitment over 5–10 years, substantial financial investment (estimated at ₦500 million–₦1 billion for Nigerian Baptist Convention; R50–100 million for South African Reformed bodies across implementation period), significant cultural transformation from individualistic towards collaborative ecclesiology and willingness to prioritise long-term institutional health over short-term expedience. Resistance from vested interests benefiting from status quo arrangements should be anticipated, requiring patient but persistent advocacy grounded in theological conviction regarding unity's non-negotiability and empirical evidence regarding unity's pragmatic necessity for retention. Success would manifest not merely in improved membership statistics, though quantifiable retention improvements constitute one legitimate assessment metric, but more fundamentally in transformed ecclesial culture characterised by visible unity, racial and ethnic reconciliation, economic justice, intergenerational flourishing and credible public witness capable of attracting and retaining members not through manipulative marketing but through authentic embodiment of the gospel's reconciling power. The LEBC experience demonstrates that such transformation remains achievable even amid challenging socio-economic contexts; the question confronting Nigerian Baptist and South African Reformed bodies is whether institutional will exists to embrace necessary reforms. Future research should deepen this comparative conversation through joint fieldwork between Nigerian and South African ecclesial bodies. Such scholarship would not only extend the theological dialogues but also illuminate concrete African pathways of church renewal in an era of decline. In doing so, it would advance the witness of a church that is both contextually grounded and eschatologically oriented, a church that manifests in practice the hope articulated in Belhar.

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### CRedit authorship contribution

Timothy O. Tijani: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Priscilla Fiyinfoluwa Itopa: Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing –

review & editing. Fortunatus G. P. Alabi: Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Afolunso O. Dairo: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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