

MISSIONAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION CHURCH PLANTING EFFORTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the missiological contributions and transformative impact of women within the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC), focusing specifically on church planting and global mission expansion. Grounded in the concept of *missio Dei*, the study traces the historical evolution of the Women's Missionary Union (WMU) from its informal origins as the "Women's League" in 1854 to its formal institutionalization in 1919 and its eventual recognition as an autonomous auxiliary to the NBC in 1925. It evaluates the multi-generational operational framework of the WMU, which systematically cultivates missional engagement across four distinct demographic sub-organizations: the Sunbeam Band, Girls Auxiliary, Lydia Auxiliary, and Women's Missionary Society. The research outlines the core four-fold missional mandate of the Union—praying for missions, giving to support mission enterprises, direct physical involvement in evangelism, and structured mission education. Furthermore, the study highlights concrete historical and contemporary field deployments, documenting direct female participation in both domestic fields (such as Awka/Onitsha, Ilaje, Etche, and Narya) and international mission corridors (including Benin Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso). Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that despite historical socio-cultural constraints, women have served as indispensable agents of Baptist ecclesial growth, concluding with a call for pastors and denominational leaders to prioritize institutional support, financial backing, and strategic inclusion for women's mission initiatives.

Keywords: Women in Mission, Nigerian Baptist Convention, Women's Missionary Union, Church Planting, *Missio Dei*

INTRODUCTION

The mission of God (*missio Dei*) remains the foundational mandate of the Church, a divine assignment rooted not merely in the New Testament Great Commission (Acts 1:8), but in the Old Testament narrative where God first initiated the redemption of fallen humanity. This responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and lead people to repentance is entrusted to the universal body of believers.

Within the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC), women, particularly through the Women's Missionary Union (WMU), have demonstrated remarkable fidelity to this call. Although socio-cultural traditions historically relegated women to passive roles, a significant paradigm shift has

occurred within the NBC. Today, women serve as dynamic agents of mission through strategic intercession, financial stewardship, teaching, cross-cultural deployment, and direct church planting globally. Consequently, women have become indispensable contributors to the growth and vitality of Baptist missions.

This paper examines the missional roles and transformative impact of women in NBC church planting efforts, offering critical insights for missionaries, theological educators, pastors, and denominational leaders.

WOMEN IN NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION

The historical roots of the Women's Missionary Union (WMU) of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) trace back to the foundational era of Baptist missionary labor in Nigeria between 1854 and 1919. Initially operating as the informal "Women's League," the movement underwent a pivotal institutional transformation on March 14, 1919, when it metamorphosed into the Women's Missionary Union under the visionary leadership of Dr. Mojisola and Mrs. Adeotan Agbebi. Presided over by Dr. E. G. MacLean, a Southern Baptist missionary, the inaugural assembly convened beneath the historic "*Idi Isin*" tree within the Baptist Day School compound in Ogbomoso (Akinola, 1992, p. 8). From its inception, the primary *raison d'être* of the Union has been unswervingly missional, a teleological focus anchored on individual and united prayer, systematic Scripture reading, disciplined stewardship, and active evangelistic proclamation.

As Olanisina (2015, p. 25) notes, Baptist women actively participated in missional praxis as early as 1854, long before their formalization in 1919. During this early period, their holistic objectives encompassed:

1. Raising funds to support local congregations
2. Fostering ecclesial peace and unity
3. Engaging in compassionate ministry to the sick
4. Integrating new converts into the church community
5. Educating women regarding their spiritual and practical duties within the church.

A watershed moment occurred in 1925 when the WMU was officially recognized as an autonomous auxiliary to the Nigerian Baptist Convention. Functioning in a synergistic, "helpmeet" capacity, this structural autonomy empowered the WMU to design its own strategic programs, establish four internal sub-organizations for targeted administration, and independently manage its financial resources. Consequently, the Union became fundamentally integrated into the NBC's broader ecclesial vision of worship, proclamation, evangelism, discipleship, education, social ministry, and global missions (Lateju, 2015, p. 386).

The formative years of WMU operations were marked by severe existential and logistical hardships. The Union navigated extreme financial constraints, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and perilous travel conditions. Mobilizing rural communities required grueling days of trekking through rugged terrain and harsh weather, fraught with severe environmental and health hazards. Despite these obstacles, the WMU remained resolutely committed to the holistic spiritual and social empowerment of women, young ladies, and children. Their relentless field evangelism

generated substantial numerical and spiritual growth across local churches. Concurrently, the WMU championed female education and social elevation, sponsoring young women to attend the Girls' College at Idi-Aba, Abeokuta, and the *Iyawo* School at Oyo. This educational initiative sought to equip women not only as supportive partners, as wives of pastors, teachers, and civil servants, but as capable Christian leaders in their own right. Through dedicated field workers, associational camp meetings, spiritual retreats, structured Bible studies, and direct financial grants to churches, the WMU institutionalized a robust culture of personal service and community outreach.

This unwavering missional commitment remains the bedrock of contemporary WMU identity. In an interview reflecting on the ongoing trajectory of the Union, Dr. Lateju, the former Executive Director of the WMU, affirmed that the core theological purpose of the WMU is to express supreme love for the Lord Jesus Christ and imitate His redemptive ministry. She emphasized that the WMU exists to disciple its members to love Christ deeply and emulate Him in the authentic spirit of Christian missions (*The Nigerian Baptist*, 2026, p. 19).

The expansion of Baptist missions in Nigeria cannot be fully understood without recognizing the symbiotic collaboration between foreign Southern Baptist missionaries and pioneering indigenous women. Early Southern Baptist female missionaries mentored and partnered with Nigerian leaders to deepen their understanding of Baptist polity and missional strategy. Notable among these was Miss Neale C. Young, who rendered extraordinary service as a foundational officer and leader from 1919 to 1984. Later, Mama Aduke Akinola succeeded Miss Mary Yancey as Executive Secretary—a role later re-designated as Executive Director (Lateju, 2019).

The essential contributions of pioneer Nigerian women remain foundational to the movement, including key figures such as: Mrs. Adeotan Agbebi, Mrs. Johannah Mobola Ayorinde, Mrs. Grace Gbaden Ajani, Dns. Rachael Boluwade, Mrs. Ruth Asati Fagbohun, Dns. Beatrice Otolurin, Mrs. Grace Famuyiwa and Dns. R. B. Famuyiwa, among others (Akinola, 1992, p. 5). Furthermore, the formative years were deeply shaped by the sacrificial labor of foreign missionaries, including Miss Clara Keith, Mrs. S. G. Pinnock, Mrs. George Green, Mrs. B. L. Lockett, Rev. and Mrs. Scott Patterson, Mrs. G. Lumbley, Miss Mary Perry, Dr. and Mrs. E. G. MacLean, Miss Cora Caudle, Miss Susan Anderson, and several others to mention but a few (Oroniran, 2013, p. 325).

PURPOSE OF WOMEN'S MISSIONARY UNION

At its core, the Women's Missionary Union exists for a singular, overarching purpose of the fulfillment of Christian missions. In its foundational phase, the organization's vision was both spiritually grounding and socially transformative, seeking to enlist and integrate women into the fellowship of local churches while cultivating lives that emulate the character and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Concurrently, recognizing that spiritual maturity cannot be isolated from socio-educational development, the Union prioritized formal education for women and young girls alongside practical skill acquisition for economic self-reliance. Through these efforts, the Union sought to shape women into godly mothers, virtuous homemakers, and exemplary leaders in church and society, while preparing young women to serve as spiritually grounded partners alongside pastors, teachers, and public servants.

Over time, the operational scope of the Union evolved from domestic capacity-building toward aggressive, outward-focused missional deployment. Transitioning its members from passive recipients of instruction into active co-laborers in the Gospel, the Union expanded its mandate to encompass proactive evangelism, soul-winning, and Kingdom expansion. Crucially, this evolution included direct strategic collaboration with the Global Mission Board in pioneer church planting initiatives across unreached territories, alongside the extension of holistic, Christ-like compassion to the marginalized, impoverished, and afflicted.

This multi-dimensional mandate continues to define contemporary operations. As detailed in *Enjoy WMU Work* (2023, p. 14), the Union's work rests upon enduring spiritual disciplines, including disciplined private and communal intercession for global evangelization, systematic Bible study to cultivate scriptural literacy, and strategic, sacrificial financial stewardship. Ultimately, the Union fulfills its purpose through a tripartite commitment to praying, giving, and going, serving as an indispensable pillar of support for the overarching vision and ministries of the Nigerian Baptist Convention at large (*Enjoy WMU Work*, 2023, p. 14).

MISSIOLOGICAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION

The Women's missionary union of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (WMS) plays a major role in the Convention's mission achievement. This union promote mission study, prayer, community mission, stewardship and missionary education of youths. Though so many programmes have been introduced to allow for the growth of the organization however, the focus of the organization for the work of missions has remained unchanged. Infact, Ayeboyin adverse that the heartbeat of this union is missions (1998, p.35). The zeal and enthusiasm for missions have made women to continuously work thus outnumbering the men in all Baptist churches of the convention.

Over the years, the WMU have carried out programmes on mission designed to inform, motivate, and involve women in the work of mission in Baptist churches. Women are involved in teaching mission, engaging in mission activities and direct evangelism, support of mission through prayer, giving and personal services, and provide organization and leadership for special projects, interpreting information regarding the work of the church (Oroniran, 2013, p. 334). Similarly, Illufoye classified and explained the roles of the WMU of the Nigerian Baptist Convention into four namely; pray for mission, give to mission, do mission, teach and learn about mission. According to Illufoye, (2011, p.36) the missionary movement was born in prayer. The early apostles depended on prayers for the growth and expansion of the church. Except for prayer, the work of the mission will die.

Prayer is the means by which the power of God is brought to bear upon the mission work. Through prayer, untrained hands can perform operations in the hospital. Through prayers, Christians can partner side by side with missionaries around the world. And through prayers, all Christians are empowered to witness and minister every day. Thus, prayer is essential for the work of mission to be effective. This assertion aligns with (Olonade 1988, p. 30) where the author asserts that prayer is important for the work of missions. The church must consider this for there to be success in mission work. Similarly, Coggins (1963, 100) posits that when a church has a powerful intercessory prayer grown out of compassion for the lost and perishing, such prayer will bring about the outpouring of the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the conclusion of Coggins is that the greatest

spiritual support for missions is powerful intercessory prayer. Missionaries on the field need the prayer support of Christians just as Paul in 2Thes. 3:1-2 needed it.

WMU of the Nigerian Baptist Convention motivates people to render support to missionaries and mission work through prayer, since no church can individually minister and witness to the whole world. Through corporate prayers for missions, individuals can be involved in missions all around the world. Their prayers make it easy for missionaries to boldly share the word of God with the lost world. Therefore, individuals, groups, families, mission groups, and the entire church must pray for missions as well as missions work.

The next role of the WMU in the work of missions in the Nigerian Baptist Convention is to give to missions. Illufoye calls it “missionary means”. This means that giving is one way through which the work of missions can be carried out. WMU encourages people to give through their various churches, individually, as well as families within and outside the church, towards missions. The importance of giving for missions cannot be overemphasized. Crawley believes that the going for mission depends mostly on giving (Crawley, 1968, 191). Marie and Elaine posit that giving to support the work of missions is an act of worship. Thus, the onus lies with Christians to understand that whatever they have belongs to God and should be used for his glory.

Ayanrinola listed various ways through which money for mission work can be realized, some of which include: the giving of tithes, grace giving through home and international emphases, offering and project giving by members who are led to give to a certain mission field or missionary. Green way, identifies basic principles that should be considered when raising support for mission work. Support for missions should be carried out in a well-organized manner. Such should be collected in all churches and delivered to the missionaries. When such is raised in the church, members should be allowed to give voluntarily and not out of coercion. Therefore, it is important to conclude that giving for the work of the mission is a task that God desires every believer to participate in. Involvement in missions attracts the blessings of God for all who are faithful.

The next role of WMU in mission work is through direct physical involvement. By this, the researcher means for Christians and churches to visit or support at least one mission field. WMU believes that the task of missions is all-inclusive. It involves everybody and must not be segregated for only a few. Thus, mission work should not be an optional part of the church programme, or based on choice, rather it should be central for every believer and the church at large. Further, to make involvement in mission work easier, Ayanlola highlighted various ways by which the church or individuals can be involved in the work of missions. The first is through career mission, allowing for a full involvement in mission work. People in this category are those who have determined to give themselves for mission service, whether at home or in an international mission field.

Next are the volunteers and short-term missionaries. These categories of people are professionals who are willing to use their training to meet the needs of missionaries on the field and are willing to expand the work of the mission in the field. Some go to the height of becoming responsible for the education of missionaries’ children, particularly for those who are in remote villages or areas, or perhaps missionaries who’s take-home cannot accommodate the education of their children. There are others involved in mission work who are called the mobilizers. These categories of individuals are those who mobilize churches and individuals to partner in mission

work. They encourage churches and individuals to participate in this through prayers, giving, counselling, and organizing programmes. For this to be effective, the WMU and the global mission board of the Nigerian Baptist Convention must be carried along.

Again, the WMU is involved in the work of missions through the various organizations in the WMU. These include the Sunbeam, Girls Auxiliary, Lydia, and WMS. These four organizations make up the WMU of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, and mission work is carried out through each organization. The sunbeam, for instance consist of young boys and girls from birth to 9 years. From birth to age 3 years, they are called the nursery sunbeam band; ages 4-6 are called the beginners sunbeam band; and ages 7-9 are called the primary sunbeam band. This organization provides early education in missions for both young boys and girls within this age bracket. It is designed to catch children from a young age to the point where they grow old and will not depart from those Bible teachings (Lateju, 2019, p. 387). This group was organized by Rev. Scott Patterson, an American Southern Baptist missionary. It was initially called *Egbe Irawo* and was later changed to the Sunbeam Band.

Lateju (2019, 389) opines that the WMU involves children in mission work through mission study, an avenue given to children to learn about missions and missionary activities. They study could be from either the Bible or contemporary times. Also, through prayers for missionaries and their families, they participate in mission week alongside their mothers. The children are equally encouraged to write letters of love to missionaries who are on the field. This will serve as a means of encouragement to them, particularly to those who are on the verge of giving up. Also, it is a means of showing love and identifying with missionaries' children. The children are involved in giving out of their substance to assist missionaries and their families in the field. They are encouraged to visit a mission field with their mothers and be involved in mission projects such as building houses for missionaries, meeting specific needs on the mission field, among others.

Similarly, the Girls Auxiliary is another organization through which the WMU carries out its work on missions. This is a group of young girls within the age bracket of 10 and 16 years who love Christ and want to serve him and be part of his great mission work around the world. The girls' auxiliary group aims at ministering to the spiritual, mental, physical, and social needs of girls who are not in the category of the sunbeam. This group was established in 1922 and recognized in 1925 as a part of the WMU family. These categories engage in mission, prayer, evangelism, and stewardship. These activities have helped to produce godly young girls and future leaders in the Nigerian Baptist Convention. This group is divided into two: the junior G. As from ages 10-12 and the intermediate G. As of 13 and 16 years. The girls are usually guided through their five-star ideals; abiding in God through prayer, advancing in wisdom and bible study, acknowledging my stewardship of time, money, and personality, adorning myself with good works, and accepting the challenge of the great commission. Lateju avers that the Girls Auxiliary are involved in mission work through their annual mission study. This is a booklet that teaches young girls about the challenges, assignments, and support for missionaries on different mission fields in and out of Nigeria. They are equally challenged about the lives of young girls in the Bible who were missionaries for Jesus and how they can also live as one. Additionally, the GAs are also involved in mission through the week of prayer where they are encouraged to gather together to intercede for missionaries, give their substance to them, visit the aged, sick, and pastors' families with gifts and

assist them in doing domestic chores. They are equally involved in evangelism, where they organize rallies within and outside the church community.

Similarly, through the Lydia Auxiliary, the WMU carries out its mission work. These are a group of young unmarried ladies who have never had a child from the age of 17 till marriage. This group was established to stir up mission interest and the spirit of giving among young women. Further, the group was established to train ladies in the art of soul-winning. Lateju opines that this group was established in the year 1952 by late Miss Mary Yancey, an American missionary (2019, p.387). Its emphasis is to stimulate interest in mission, godly Christian living, chastity, prayers, Bible reading, visiting missionaries on the field, soul winning, basic knowledge, and skills before marriage. The Lydias are guided by four ideals, namely: thoughtful study of the missionary messages of the Bible; prayers for mission and missionaries; devoted personal service to the needy both physically and spiritually; and regular giving to mission across the globe.

The Lydias are involved in mission work by praying for missionaries and their families, giving generously to support missionaries and mission activities, sponsoring themselves to mission fields to join in preaching the gospel both in person, with cash, and with materials (Lateju, 2019, p. 391).

In addition, through the Women's missionary society, equally known as the WMS the work of missions is carried out. The Women's Missionary Union (WMS) is a group of Baptist married women who are empowered for kingdom growth through in-depth Bible study, prayer, evangelism, stewardship, and service, impacting leadership qualities in members with the review of influencing their home, church, places of work, and the society at large. The WMS gives for the work of the mission, visits at least one mission field, and prays for missionaries and their mission fields. They also observe programmes in line with missions once a year as an organization. Equally, through the four fundamentals, the WMU helps women to participate in mission work. Through prayers, all Baptist women across the world get connected and united to God. It serves as a means of bringing their challenges to him in prayer. They pray for missionaries in various mission fields.

Through Bible and mission study, the WMU guides, guards, directs, instructs, and corrects her members. Members are encouraged to read their Bible on a yearly basis and participate in the act of missions. Through stewardship and service, members of the WMU are encouraged to be involved in stewardship activities such as supporting pastors and missionaries in the field, showing love to others around them, particularly the homeless and motherless, among others, and beautifying the church premises. Additionally, through evangelism and missions, they preach the gospel through house-to-house evangelism, street evangelism, village outreaches, prison ministries, hospital ministries, hotel ministries, and bus station ministries. Again, their support to various mission fields cannot be overemphasised. The WMU has extended its hands in giving to missions through sacrificial giving of money and material support to African countries such as Benin Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso, and some others.

Consequently, the WMU has also visited various mission fields in person. For example, in 2009, they visited the Awka/Onitsha mission field. Additionally, the members of WMS in Ogun Baptist Conference, along with her Lydias, were on mission outreach to Ilaje Mission Field in 2009. Also, the WMS together with the WMU president of Osun Baptist Conference with the support of

the Global Missions Board visited Etche home mission field for an outreach in 2009. Equally, the WMU director alongside the Baptist WMU evangelism and mission Director visited Narya in 2010. WMU has since then visited several other mission fields to date.

Additionally, WMU has been involved in mission work through teaching and learning about missions. It is said that knowledge is power, and to getting knowledge about mission work can be done through teaching. It will be difficult for the church to carry out mission work without proper knowledge of what they are doing. The in-depth knowledge of mission work helps the church to be actively involved in mission. Through knowledge, church members know their responsibility towards missions. Again, Crowdley (1968, p. 95), posits that knowledge is an active weapon for effective intercession for mission work. Thus, when church members are kept abreast of what is going on in various mission fields, they can also make contributions towards such. One of the ways through which churches educate their members on mission activities in the church is by creating an intentional program on mission. Through such programmes, the members are enlightened about the nature and implications of mission and response as appropriate.

Rack (1961, p. 45) identifies the importance of organizing mission education programmes in the church, some of which are guiding members of the church to understand the various transitions occurring in the mission work, helping church members to respond affirmatively both in attitude and actions to the work of mission, among others. According to Illufoye (2011, p. 32), the WMU usually carry out mission education by organizing mission study classes through which at least two mission study books will be taught during the year to a large number of people.

Further, WMU have in the past carried out its mission work both in home and foreign mission fields. They have walked together with the global mission board of the Nigerian Baptist Convention to realise their goal. Whenever the convention opens a new mission field, the WMU are there to organize women for their church activities by establishing the four arms of the union and rendering support to various mission projects on the mission fields. Their support and encouragement have brought progress to the convention in soul-winning and in spreading the gospel (Lateju, 2019, 30). The pioneer women laboured at a time when culture did not permit women to play any role in the church except to listen and obey instructions without question. However, WMU's work thrived and became successful.

CONCLUSION

Women can practice and be involved in the work of missions, particularly when churches recognize their values. This has been proven by the history of the women's missionary union of the Nigerian Baptist Convention that women can help advance the church when they are involved in mission work. Thus, women in various churches should be given opportunities to advance the church through missions and evangelism. Similarly, pastors should support the work of missions by funding the women missionary group of their various churches.

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