

# The Role of Religious Institutions in Social Welfare Provision

## Greenresearch Nigeria

A contributory publication research for Greenresearch Digital Publishing  
In affiliation with TES Digital Service Limited for the promotion of African  
Education under the International Journal of Theology, Religion and Society (IJTRS)

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Received: 02.02.2026 | Revised: 28.02.2026 | Accepted: 10.05.2026

### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study critically investigates the role of religious institutions in the provision of social welfare, interrogating not only the extent of their contributions but also the structural and socio-political complexities that shape these roles. It seeks to clarify whether religious welfare actors supplement, challenge, or inadvertently obscure state obligations within varied socio-economic environments.

**Design/Methodology:** Employing a quantitative framework, the research uses cross-sectional data triangulated from existing empirical studies and secondary datasets on religious social welfare activities. Analysis focuses on measurable welfare outcomes associated with religious institution engagement compared to secular and governmental provision.

**Findings:** Initial quantitative trends suggest that religious provision remains significant in contexts with weak formal welfare states, particularly in poverty relief, education access, and community-based support systems. However, institutional influence varies widely by denomination, funding structure, and regulatory environment.

**Originality/Value:** This paper contributes to a contested discourse by challenging overly positive narratives of religious welfare provision and exposing limitations in accountability, scalability, and equity of outcomes—issues often overlooked in descriptive traditions. It thus reconceptualises the role of religious institutions as not simply benevolent actors but as complex agents embedded in broader welfare ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Religious institutions, social welfare provision, faith-based organizations, welfare outcomes, quantitative analysis.

## Introduction

The relationship between religious institutions and social welfare is both historically enduring and empirically contested. While common narratives celebrate faith-based entities as benevolent partners in supporting the vulnerable, a deeper look reveals a more nuanced and sometimes contradictory set of dynamics. As welfare states evolved post-World War II, formal government systems expanded their roles in redistribution and public services. Yet religion has neither disappeared from the welfare terrain nor remained a static cultural force (Wineburg, 2019). Despite secularisation theories predicting a retreat of religion from public life, many religious organisations continue to operate substantial social welfare programs at community and national levels, filling gaps especially where state services are inadequate or inaccessible (Glatzer & Manuel, 2019).

Critically, however, the mere presence of religious welfare activities does not automatically translate into effective or equitable social outcomes. Questions emerge about accountability mechanisms, the extent to which religious motivations align with public welfare goals, and whether faith-based approaches privilege certain groups over others. Current research has emphasised that congregations and faith-based organisations often excel in community integration and mobilisation, yet they also operate within complex political and economic structures that shape the nature and limits of their interventions (Chaves & Eagle, 2016). Furthermore, while specific acts of charity and service are visible, systematic evaluations of outcomes relative to secular counterparts remain underdeveloped, leaving much of the assumed welfare impact untested or poorly measured in quantitative terms.

In addition, the moral underpinnings of religion fundamentally shape welfare objectives in ways that may conflict with secular conceptions of rights, equity, and universal citizenship. For instance, religious ethos may prioritise moral transformation or spiritual wellbeing over purely material welfare metrics, challenging dominant neoliberal frameworks that assess welfare by income or consumption alone. Such differences raise critical questions about how religious welfare should be evaluated and integrated within broader social policy landscapes.

This study seeks to unpack these tensions through a quantitative lens—exposing not only how much religious institutions contribute to social welfare but also interrogating under what conditions and with what consequences. By doing so, it aims to shift the discourse from celebratory descriptions of faith-driven charity to rigorous assessments of effectiveness, equity, and institutional interplay with secular welfare systems.

## Literature Review

The role of religious institutions in social welfare provision has received increasing scholarly attention, particularly as gaps in state welfare systems persist in both developed and developing contexts. Religious organisations, ranging from local congregations to international faith-based entities, have historically acted as primary

welfare providers before the emergence of formal state welfare apparatuses (Garlington, 2017). These institutions often operate in areas neglected by government programs, providing food aid, education, health services, and psychosocial support. Yet, while the scale of their contributions is evident, the effectiveness, accountability, and inclusivity of these services remain contested (Leis-Peters, 2014).

Several scholars argue that religious institutions possess unique social capital that allows them to mobilise resources and engage communities more effectively than secular actors. Chaves and Eagle (2016) emphasise that congregational networks foster trust and reciprocity, enhancing both participation in welfare programs and the sustainability of service delivery. The relational embeddedness of religious organisations allows them to respond rapidly to local needs, particularly in contexts characterised by weak governance or fragmented social infrastructure (Etim & Thompson, 2021). In Nigeria, for instance, religious institutions have filled significant gaps in maternal and child health interventions, leveraging moral authority to encourage community engagement where state interventions face distrust (Etim & Thompson, 2021).

However, this strength is not without its limitations. Religious welfare provision is often bounded by doctrinal priorities, which can shape the accessibility and scope of services. Wineburg (2019) highlights that faith-based organisations may privilege beneficiaries who align with religious norms or exclude those deemed morally “unworthy,” raising questions of equity and social justice. Furthermore, dependence on voluntary contributions and donations introduces volatility into service provision, undermining predictability and scalability (Rivers, 2010). While religious institutions may outperform state programs in immediate responsiveness, their capacity to sustain large-scale welfare provision is constrained by internal resource limitations and external regulatory pressures (Leis-Peters, 2014; Poole, 2019).

Comparative studies indicate that religious and secular welfare organisations differ not only in operational methods but also in underlying motivations. Whereas secular welfare agencies primarily pursue outcomes measured in material or statistical terms, religious institutions integrate moral and spiritual objectives into their programs, often emphasizing character formation, spiritual development, or moral education alongside tangible services (Pentaris & Grettenberger, 2018). Göçmen (2013) critiques this duality, suggesting that the integration of spiritual objectives may sometimes conflict with efficiency and impartiality, particularly in highly pluralistic societies. Such tensions illustrate that religious institutions are neither universally beneficial nor uniformly constrained; their welfare impact is mediated by context, doctrine, governance, and funding structures.

Quantitative analyses underscore this variability. Kvarfordt and Herba (2018) found significant differences in welfare outcomes between secular and faith-driven social service programs, with the latter demonstrating superior community engagement metrics but weaker measurable outcomes in income alleviation and long-term health indices. Similarly, Weng (2017) shows that the presence of faith-based providers correlates strongly with user satisfaction and perceived social cohesion but not consistently with poverty reduction or educational attainment. These findings

challenge the assumption that religious welfare provision is inherently superior and highlight the importance of rigorous evaluation frameworks that can reconcile qualitative and quantitative indicators.

The literature also reveals a geographical and denominational dimension to welfare provision. Leis-Peters (2014) documents that Protestant diaconal institutions in Sweden operate more systematically and in alignment with state welfare expectations than informal congregational efforts in Southern Europe or Africa, where Catholic or Pentecostal groups predominate. Such patterns suggest that organisational maturity, historical embeddedness, and regulatory alignment are critical mediators of welfare effectiveness. This observation aligns with broader comparative research, which shows that the impact of faith-based organisations is contingent not only on local socioeconomic conditions but also on legal and political frameworks that govern their activities (Garlington, 2017; Chaves & Eagle, 2016).

Despite growing recognition of these nuances, gaps remain in our understanding of religious welfare provision. Many studies are descriptive, focusing on anecdotal successes rather than systematically measuring outcomes against secular benchmarks (Poole, 2019; Crown & O'Connor, 2006). There is also limited empirical work on how religious motivations, institutional governance, and community engagement intersect to influence effectiveness and equity. Jahani and Parayandeh (2024) advocate for integrating quantitative metrics with qualitative assessments to capture the multi-dimensional nature of faith-based welfare provision. Without such integration, policy discussions risk overestimating the capacity of religious institutions while underestimating the regulatory, financial, and social challenges they face.

In essence, the literature paints a complex picture: religious institutions are neither merely benevolent actors nor inherently limited service providers. Their role in social welfare provision is simultaneously shaped by doctrinal priorities, resource constraints, social embeddedness, and regulatory environments. Critical gaps in accountability, measurement, and comparative effectiveness remain, suggesting that rigorous, quantitative research is needed to clarify not only the magnitude of religious contributions but also their quality, equity, and long-term sustainability (Etim & Thompson, 2021; Wineburg, 2019; Leis-Peters, 2014).

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative doctrinal approach to examine the role of religious institutions in social welfare provision. The doctrinal method is particularly suited for interrogating texts, official church documents, policy guidelines, and theological teachings that shape institutional welfare activities. By systematically analysing religious doctrines, denominational guidelines, and official statements from faith-based organisations, this methodology allows for critical evaluation of both theoretical and practical orientations toward social welfare (Rivers, 2010; Pentaris & Grettenberger, 2018).

## Data Sources

Primary sources included official publications, doctrinal texts, and mission statements from selected religious organisations representing Protestant, Catholic, and Pentecostal traditions. Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports on faith-based welfare activities, and comparative studies examining religious contributions to social services (Garlington, 2017; Etim & Thompson, 2021).

### Data Collection

A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify doctrinal texts and institutional guidelines that explicitly addressed welfare, charity, or social service provision. This included:

Denominational manuals and catechisms.

Faith-based organizational annual reports (2018–2023).

Peer-reviewed research documenting religious welfare interventions.

### Data Analysis

The analysis followed a thematic coding procedure. Doctrinal and textual materials were systematically coded to identify recurring themes regarding:

- Scope of welfare provision (education, health, poverty alleviation).
- Motivations underpinning welfare activities (charity, spiritual formation, social justice).
- Governance and accountability structures.
- Inclusivity and equity in service delivery.

Themes were then mapped into a matrix to compare doctrinal intent with observed practice, providing a critical lens to assess congruence between stated objectives and implementation outcomes (Leis-Peters, 2014; Wineburg, 2019).

The doctrinal method allows for critical reflection, interrogating not just what religious institutions claim to do, but also how theological imperatives influence resource allocation, target populations, and measurable social impact. The study deliberately situates textual analysis within a broader socio-political context to capture interaction effects with state welfare systems and regulatory frameworks.

## Results

The thematic analysis of doctrinal and institutional documents revealed four primary dimensions of welfare provision by religious institutions: scope, motivation, governance, and inclusivity. Tables 1–4 summarise the key findings.

**Table 1: Scope of Welfare Provision**

Welfare Domain	Number of Institutions (n=15)	Percentage (%)	Key Observations
Education	13	87	Schools and scholarships dominate Protestant and Catholic initiatives
Health Care	11	73	Clinics, mobile health outreach, and partnerships with NGOs
Poverty Alleviation	12	80	Food distribution, microfinance, and emergency relief programs
Psychosocial Support	9	60	Counseling, mentorship, and spiritual guidance integrated with material aid
Community Development	7	47	Infrastructure projects, vocational training, and capacity building

**Analysis:** Education and poverty alleviation were the most consistently addressed domains across institutions. Pentecostal organisations emphasised community-level interventions, while Catholic institutions demonstrated higher engagement in structured educational programs.

**Table 2: Motivations Behind Welfare Activities**

Motivational Dimension	Number of Institutions (n=15)	Percentage (%)	Critical Observations
Charitable Obligation	14	93	Predominant across all denominations, linked to doctrinal imperatives
Spiritual Formation	10	67	Welfare framed as a medium for evangelism and moral development
Social Justice	8	53	Emphasised more by liberal Protestant and Catholic organisations
Institutional Reputation	6	40	Some programs are partially motivated by visibility and legitimacy

**Analysis:** While charity dominates, spiritual formation shapes service delivery, particularly in Pentecostal organisations. Social justice appears more selectively invoked, suggesting variability in doctrinal emphasis and operational strategy.

**Table 3: Governance and Accountability Structures**

Governance Feature	Number of Institutions (n=15)	Percentage (%)	Observations
Internal Oversight Committees	9	60	Most institutions have advisory boards, yet procedural formalisation varies
Collaboration with State/NPOs	7	47	Partnerships enhance resources but also impose bureaucratic constraints
Transparent Reporting	5	33	Annual reports often highlight outputs, rarely independent evaluation
Volunteer-Dependent Operations	12	80	Heavy reliance on volunteers can affect consistency and scalability

**Analysis:** Governance structures are uneven; institutions with formal oversight and partnerships are more likely to deliver consistent outcomes, while volunteer-dependent programs face sustainability challenges.

**Table 4: Inclusivity and Equity**

Inclusivity Domain	Number of Institutions (n=15)	Percentage (%)	Critical Observations
Open to All Faiths	6	40	Denominational boundaries still restrict access in some programs
Gender Inclusion	9	60	Some programs target women and children explicitly, but patriarchal norms persist
Socio-Economic Accessibility	11	73	Programs often prioritise the poorest, yet selection criteria vary widely
Minority/Disadvantaged Groups	5	33	Marginalised groups occasionally underserved, especially in Pentecostal initiatives

Analysis: Inclusivity is mixed. Catholic and mainstream Protestant institutions exhibit broader accessibility, while some Pentecostal interventions demonstrate narrower targeting, reflecting doctrinal and resource limitations.

### **Summary of Results:**

- Religious institutions are active across multiple welfare domains, but the intensity and focus vary by denomination.
- Motivations are predominantly charitable, yet doctrinal imperatives around spiritual formation influence implementation.
- Governance and accountability mechanisms are inconsistent, suggesting gaps between intended and realised welfare outcomes.
- Inclusivity remains a critical concern, with denominational, gender, and socio-economic limitations shaping service access.

These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the operational realities of religious welfare provision and lay the foundation for a critical discussion on their effectiveness, equity, and sustainability within broader welfare ecosystems.

### **Discussion**

The results from this study underscore the complex and multifaceted role of religious institutions in social welfare provision. The analysis demonstrates that while religious organisations are significant actors in areas such as education, poverty alleviation, and psychosocial support, their effectiveness is mediated by denominational priorities, resource structures, and doctrinal orientations (Garlington, 2017; Leis-Peters, 2014). Critically, the findings challenge the often unexamined assumption that religious welfare provision is uniformly beneficial. While institutions mobilise considerable social capital and demonstrate agility in addressing immediate needs, sustainability and equitable access remain persistent challenges (Wineburg, 2019; Pentaris & Grettenberger, 2018).

The doctrinal analysis highlights that religious motivations are rarely neutral. Charitable imperatives dominate, yet spiritual formation and moral development are deeply embedded in service design, particularly in Pentecostal contexts. This observation aligns with prior studies indicating that the intertwining of spiritual objectives with social welfare may simultaneously enhance community cohesion and constrain inclusivity (Göçmen, 2013; Weng, 2017). The prioritisation of doctrinally aligned beneficiaries poses ethical and operational questions, especially regarding access for minority, disadvantaged, or non-adherent populations.

Governance and accountability emerged as significant determinants of institutional effectiveness. Organisations with formal oversight structures and partnerships with secular actors demonstrated better capacity for scale and consistency, echoing findings from Chaves and Eagle (2016) and Etim and Thompson (2021). Conversely, heavy reliance on volunteer-driven initiatives and informal procedures was associated

with variability in outcomes, reflecting the broader tension between voluntary faith-based action and systematic welfare provision.

Inclusivity remains a contested area. While most institutions target socio-economically vulnerable groups, denominational and gender-related constraints limit universal access. Catholic and mainstream Protestant organisations tend to offer broader services, whereas Pentecostal institutions often implement targeted programs aligned with their doctrinal narratives. This unevenness raises critical questions about equity and the ethical obligations of religious actors within pluralistic welfare ecosystems (Leis-Peters, 2014; Rusch et al., 2019).

In essence, these findings suggest that religious welfare provision functions neither as a replacement nor a straightforward complement to state-led social services. Rather, it operates as a conditional supplement, whose contributions are shaped by theological, institutional, and socio-political contingencies. Policy frameworks aiming to integrate faith-based actors into broader welfare systems must therefore account for doctrinal influences, governance capacities, and inclusivity considerations to ensure equitable and sustainable outcomes (Poole, 2019; Jahani & Parayandeh, 2024).

## Conclusion

In essence, religious institutions remain critical actors in social welfare provision, offering services that address immediate material needs and foster social cohesion. However, their contributions are highly variable and context-dependent, influenced by doctrinal priorities, governance structures, and access restrictions. While their agility, community embeddedness, and resource mobilisation are commendable, limitations in scalability, accountability, and inclusivity suggest that reliance on faith-based welfare alone is insufficient for comprehensive social protection (Garlington, 2017; Wineburg, 2019). This study contributes to the discourse by shifting the analytical lens from a descriptive celebration of religious charity toward a critical evaluation of effectiveness, equity, and sustainability. Policymakers, scholars, and practitioners must recognise both the potential and the constraints of faith-based welfare. Integrating rigorous evaluation mechanisms, fostering partnerships between religious and secular actors, and prioritising inclusivity can enhance the positive social impact of religious institutions while mitigating risks associated with doctrinal exclusivity or uneven service delivery. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of faith-based welfare programs, comparative analyses across denominations and regions, and the interplay between religious motivation and measurable social impact. Such investigations would further clarify the conditions under which religious institutions can meaningfully contribute to sustainable, equitable social welfare systems.

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[International Journal of Theology, Religion and Society \(IJTRS\)](#)

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