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DYNAMICS OF CHURCH ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE IN THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION (NBC)

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Abstract

The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) is one of the largest and most organized Christian denominations in Nigeria, with a well-structured administrative system that ensures effective governance, spiritual growth, and mission fulfillment. This paper examines the dynamics of the NBC's administrative structure, focusing on its historical formation, hierarchical structure, organizational tiers, dynamics of the NBC's autonomy, and challenges. The study adopted a historical and literature approach to the NBCs, relying on historical documents, denominational records, and scholarly works to analyze the dynamics of the administrative structure. The research reveals that the NBC's administrative structure is a blend of congregational autonomy and centralized authority; however, challenges include autonomy issues, inadequate communications, and a lack of commitment to NBC and inclusivity. Recommendations for doctrinal education promoting democratic principles, establishing a centralized communication platform, and implementing adaptive governance to sustain the Convention's growth and relevance in a changing socio-religious landscape.

Keywords: Administrative, autonomy, Baptist tiers, challenges, dynamic, local church.

Introduction

The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) stands as a prominent and influential religious organization within the diverse tapestry of Nigeria's religious landscape. Established in 1914, the Convention has played a pivotal role in shaping the spiritual and social fabric of the nation. One of the central pillars of NBC's influence lies in its intricate administrative structure, which has far-reaching implications for its local churches. This administrative framework, designed to facilitate coordination, communication, and spiritual growth, has profoundly impacted the local churches under its umbrella, shaping their functioning, growth, and engagement within their communities. At its core, the administrative structure of the Nigerian Baptist Convention embodies a hierarchical arrangement that reflects both the Convention's historical development and its adaptability to the evolving needs of its member churches. The Convention's administrative layers work in harmony to offer support and supervision to local churches, promoting doctrinal unity and preventing theological drift. This oversight helps maintain the theological integrity of member churches, ensuring that their activities align with the Convention's core beliefs and principles. It also serves as a mechanism for conflict resolution, promoting harmony and cohesion among churches facing internal challenges. This participatory approach empowers local churches, giving them a voice in shaping the direction of the Convention and allowing them to contribute to broader initiatives such as missions, education, and social outreach. As a result, the administrative structure fosters a sense of ownership and inclusivity among local church members,

reinforcing their commitment to the Convention's objectives. The Nigerian Baptist Convention continues to progress; its administrative structure will likely remain a vital instrument in shaping the dynamic relationship between the Convention and other tiers of the church, which will serve as an influence on spiritual and physical growth, as well as have an enduring legacy in Nigerian society. It is worth noting that with its extensive network of churches, the administrative structure must be dynamic in its operations in various aspects of the church. Thus, how dynamic is the church administrative structure of the NBC compared to other denominations in Nigeria? Against this background, this research review examines recent and relevant historical literature on the dynamics of the NBC's church administrative structure. This will provide insight into the efficacy of church administrative structures and serve as a paradigm for other religious groups in Nigeria and beyond to make appropriate adjustments to their structures.

History of Nigerian Baptist Convention

The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) has its roots in the missionary activities of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) of the United States. The first Baptist missionaries arrived in Nigeria in 1850 under the leadership of Rev. Thomas Jefferson Bowen, who established the first Baptist mission in Badagry, Lagos (Oduyoye 20). However, due to health challenges, Bowen‘s mission was short-lived. The work was later revitalized in the 1880s with the arrival of missionaries such as Rev. William David ―WD‖ Akers and Rev. Solomon Coles, who expanded Baptist evangelism to Yoruba land (Ogunewu 25). The First Baptist Church in Nigeria, founded in Lagos in 1888, became a cornerstone for Baptist work in the country. By 1914, the Nigerian Baptist Convention was formally organized, bringing together various Baptist churches under one umbrella (Nigerian Baptist Convention 15-21).

The corporate headquarters of the Convention is located on Obafemi Awolowo Road, Oke-Bola, in the heart of Ibadan. Its staff is close to 700 workers, comprising ministerial, administrative, accounting, and technical staff members, among others (Osuigwe 24). The NBC has several ministry outlets through which it carries out its programmes nationwide. These ministries are coordinated by Directors who are the Heads of Departments under the general oversight and supervision of the three Vice Presidents (Ministerial, Administrative, Personnel, Finance, and Investment) to whom they are respectively responsible. These vice presidents, in turn, are responsible to the President and the Chief Executive Officer of the Convention. The Convention has a General Administrative Department that is responsible for the day-to-day running of the convention ministry (Ayokunle 43-48).

The Nigerian Baptist Convention operates under a congregational yet connectional model, with local church autonomy, but cooperates under the Convention. It comprises Associations, which are regional groupings of churches. The Conference and Convention serve as the highest decision-making body, led by the President of the NBC. Additionally, it includes Boards and Agencies. This includes the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), Baptist Press, and Baptist Schools (NBC Annual Report 33-41). The Convention also runs theological institutions, such as the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS), Ogbomoso (founded in 1898). Baptist College of Theology, Lagos, and other places.

The NBC has grown exponentially since its inception, with about 7 million members (World Baptist Alliance 69-76) and more than 14,000 local churches across Nigeria. According to

Adedokun (22), —The NBC believes that there is only one God and beside him, there is no other. This true God reveals himself as the eternal Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Son of God was born into a world with complete divine and human natures, yet without sin. This true God also manifests himself as the Holy Spirit. The NBC accepts the Bible as its authority for faith and practice. It holds that the Bible is composed of thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven books in the New Testament and that it was written by divinely inspired persons over many years. It confesses the deity and lordship of Jesus Christ. It believes in salvation only by grace, through faith. It practices believers‘ baptism, church membership of believers, and the priesthood of all believers. The local community of believers is autonomous. Church polity or government is congregational. It is in favour of religious freedom, the separation of Church and State, and voluntary cooperation between and among churches."

NBC Administrative Structure

NBC practices congregational church leadership structure models, each local congregation is independent and self-governing. The church determines policy, doctrine, and leadership issues in this model. Structures may vary, but most have some form of elder board or board of deacons to handle administrative duties while the pastor is responsible for preaching and teaching. In a congregational model, the pastor is hired by the church board or by a vote of the members. The pastor has no authority over other churches and represents only himself and his congregation. This model allows for significant autonomy but leaves it up to the church to determine its leaders and structure. Even though this model has many different forms, they all share one thing in common. Each church is self-governing, with no outside authority having jurisdiction over them except that granted by its membership (Adeyemi 34).

The congregation can vote on lessons, teachers, and other vital issues (May 8). They are more likely to attend and invite others because the church is run the way they prefer it to be. Church members should not feel compelled to follow the pastor and should be able to vote for what they believe is best for their congregation. The congregation model helps people grow spiritually by delivering precisely what they say they need. A Lutheran church is led by three different positions: pastor, council president, and chairman of the board of elders (8). The pastor is the spiritual leader of a congregation. They oversee worship services and work closely with members to provide community counselling and support. At the same time, these pastors also teach in schools connected to their congregations. The council president leads a higher-level church management team, the board of directors. This team sets the congregation's budget, makes personnel decisions, and is responsible for building maintenance. According to Akintoye (44-50), Baptist churches have a relatively simple model of church leadership. At the top is the pastor, who has ultimate authority and makes final decisions. Deacons are appointed by the congregation to provide spiritual guidance and to serve in an advisory capacity. They also handle the church's business affairs, including property maintenance and budget decisions. The treasurer keeps track of money and books, ensuring bills get paid on time and collecting tithes and donations from members. The success of this model lies mainly in its ability to bring new people into regular contact with members of that local congregation (Adedokun 24).

The administrative structure of NBC is structured based on the key offices: the President, three Vice Presidents (Ministerial, Administration, Finance, and Investment). Others are Directors, Christian Education; Director, Publications; Director, Global Missions; Director, Medical and Health Ministries; Director, Men's Missionary Union; Director, Youth and Students' Ministry; Director,, Social Ministries; Director, Music Ministries, WMU Director, and as many other officers as the Convention (NBC constitution Amended 4). The Convention functions through its National Convention, Conferences, Associations, Churches, Committees, Boards, and Officers. All committees, boards, and officers shall be subject to the National Convention, which shall have full authority concerning all matters about the Convention. Moreover, the Trustees of the Convention shall be the Chairman, the President, the Vice President, (Finance and Investments), and a representative each from the three zones of the Convention, and a representative each of MMU, WMU, Youth, and the Legal Adviser (Afolaranmi 3).

Dynamics of NBC‟s Tiers

The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) has a dynamic administrative structure, known as the Baptist tiers, which is hierarchical. It is a significant religious denomination in Africa, operating through a distinctive multi-tiered administrative structure that balances congregational autonomy with a federated denominational oversight. This intricate system, born from historical Baptist principles and adapted to the Nigerian context, presents a fascinating dynamic of shared governance, resource mobilization, and spiritual oversight (Ogunlana 78). These tiers reflect the organizational and ecclesiastical structure of the Convention from the Local church, Associations, conferences, and the NBC.

Local Church

The local church is the lowest unit in the Baptist church that operates autonomously and remains connected to the broader Baptist family through affiliation with the Nigerian Baptist Convention. The local church is governed by a Board of Deacons and a Pastor, who provide spiritual and administrative leadership. The Pastor is responsible for preaching, teaching, and pastoral care, while the Deacons assist in the administration of the church and the welfare of members (Oshun 23). The local church also has various committees and departments, such as the Sunday School, Women's Missionary Union (WMU), and Baptist Men's Fellowship (BMF). These groups play a vital role in the church's programs and activities, including evangelism, discipleship, and community service. In the local church, decisions are made by the Congregation or its elected representatives. Major decisions, such as the call of a pastor or the approval of the annual budget, are typically made during church business meetings. These meetings provide an opportunity for members to express their views, ask questions, and vote on important issues (Akinade 78).

Associations

Association is the second tier of the Baptist Church, comprising local churches within a geographical area that have at least five Baptist-trained pastors, with at least three being full-time and one ordained. An organized Local Church shall have at least 25 baptized believers, trained pastoral leadership, be self-governing, self-funding, and self-propagating; and must

have functional key ministerial and educational organs of a local Baptist Church (Alawode 7). This refers to at least six organized Baptist Churches in a particular geographical area for fellowship and missions. It is the local church that forms the association. A moderator is usually elected by the churches on a given day, place, and time. The moderator presides over the association's meetings but lacks authority over the pastors or churches (Ayo-Obiremi & Konyehi 37). The appointment is tenured for three years or more, depending on the policy of that association. Associations serve as intermediary bodies between the local churches and the state conferences. They provide a platform for churches to collaborate on joint initiatives, share resources, and address common challenges. Association is led by an Executive Committee, which includes a Moderator, Secretary, and other officers elected by the member churches (Akinade 67). Associations also organize regular meetings, such as annual sessions, where representatives from member churches gather to discuss issues, make decisions, and plan for the future. These meetings foster unity and cooperation among the local churches in Baptist (Graves 188).

Conferences

This tier comprises several associations that form a conference, which is part of NBC's Administrative structure. Conferences are state-level organizations that oversee the activities of associations within their jurisdiction. Conference is governed by an Executive committee, which includes a President, Chairman, Vice President, Secretary, and other officers. The Conference is responsible for coordinating evangelism, missions, and educational programs within its territory (Adedokun 25). This is made up of a minimum of six associations, either within a state, or two states, or within a very big city. Every state in Nigeria can hold a conference. However, if two or three states decide to merge and form a conference, they can do so, provided that associations conforming to the Nigerian Baptist Convention's constitution are involved. The Conference has a nominal chairman, and the apex leadership is called the conference president. While the ceremonial Chairman presides over the executive meeting, the conference president runs the day-to-day administration of the Conference. Decisions are made during annual sessions, with representatives from all the associations under the Conference.

The Conference is a place where local churches come together to share resources and to make decisions that affect the churches within the Conference. It is a place where training can be provided to pastors and other church leaders. It is also a place where mission work is often coordinated (Akinloye 752). The conferences are a place where the work of the larger Convention is done on a localized level. They help to ensure that the work of the Convention is being done in a way that is relevant to the local context (758). Conferences also play a key role in the ordination of ministers, the establishment of new churches, and the resolution of disputes among member churches. They serve as a bridge between the local churches and the national Convention.

Nigerian Baptist Convention

The Nigerian Baptist Convention is the highest administrative body in the NBC. It is composed of representatives from all the conferences and serves as the umbrella organization for Baptist churches in Nigeria. The national Convention is governed by an Executive

Committee, which includes the President, Vice Presidents, Directors, and other officers. The President is the chief administrative officer of the Convention and oversees its day-to-day operations (Oshun 34). The national Convention holds an annual session, where delegates from across the country gather to discuss issues, make policy decisions, and elect officers. The Convention also has various boards and agencies, such as the Baptist Missionary Society, the Baptist Press, and the Baptist College of Theology. These bodies are responsible for specific aspects of the Convention's work, including missions, education, and publishing. The Nigerian Baptist Convention convenes annually at a designated conference, where representatives make decisions from all conferences under the Convention through majority votes (Ayegboyin 29-35). These groups engage in specialized ministries, missions, and leadership training (Adewale 14-18).

The dynamics between these tiers are characterized by a continuous interplay of local independence and collective responsibility. While the local church retains significant autonomy, it benefits from the resources, networking, and broader mission initiatives facilitated by the Association, Conference, and Convention (Ajibade 53). Conversely, the higher tiers derive their authority and legitimacy from the voluntary participation and support of the local churches. Challenges often arise in balancing central coordination with local contextual needs, ensuring efficient communication across all levels, and managing resources effectively within such a distributed system (Musa & Adebayo 250). Despite these complexities, this multi-tiered administrative structure has proven resilient and adaptable, enabling the Nigerian Baptist Convention to grow into one of the largest and most influential Christian denominations in Nigeria, effectively prosecuting its mission of evangelism, education, and community development. The administrative structure of the Nigerian Baptist Convention is a testament to the adaptive capacity of the Baptist polity. From the autonomous local church to the unifying Convention in Session, each tier plays a vital, interconnected role. This dynamic interplay of local decision-making and federated oversight enables the NBC to maintain its theological distinctiveness while effectively coordinating a vast network of ministries, demonstrating a robust model of shared governance within a complex and diverse national context (Babalola-Jacob 47).

Dynamics of Nigerian Baptist Convention‟s Autonomy

At the heart of Baptist identity lies the principle of congregational autonomy, which posits that each local church is self-governing and directly accountable to God, rather than to any external ecclesiastical authority (Adedokun 24). This theological conviction, rooted in the belief in the priesthood of all believers and the direct access to God through Christ, empowers local congregations to determine their affairs, including the election of pastors, management of finances, and development of ministries. For the Nigerian Baptist Convention, this means that individual churches are not mere branches of a central body but are, in theory, independent entities voluntarily associating for shared mission, fellowship, and broader evangelistic efforts (Ayandokun 57). This voluntary association is enshrined in the NBC's constitution, which outlines the parameters of cooperation while ostensibly respecting local church sovereignty.

However, the dynamics of autonomy in the NBC are not static or absolute; they are continually negotiated within a burgeoning denominational structure. As the NBC has grown

into one of the largest Christian bodies in Nigeria, boasting millions of members and thousands of churches, the need for coordinated efforts in mission, education, and social welfare has led to the development of a more centralized administrative framework (NBC 2023 Annual Report). The Convention, through its Executive Council, departments, and agencies, provides services, sets standards, and articulates broader denominational goals that inevitably influence local church practices (Alade115). For instance, while local churches select their pastors, the Convention plays a significant role in ministerial training and accreditation through its theological institutions, effectively shaping the pool of available leaders and influencing pastoral standards (Ojo 92). Financial contributions from local churches to the Convention also represent a shared commitment that, while voluntary, links the prosperity of the centre to the compliance of the periphery.

The tension between congregational autonomy and denominational unity is particularly evident in decision-making processes and doctrinal interpretations (Arotile 5). Theoretically, each church is free to interpret scripture and manage its internal affairs; however, the NBC, through its annual Convention-in-Session, passes resolutions and adopts statements of faith that, while not legally binding on individual churches in a hierarchical sense, carry significant moral and mission authority. Churches that deviate too far from these commonly held positions might find themselves isolated or even, in extreme cases, disfellowshipped, highlighting the limits of autonomy within a shared confessional space (Adedokun 25). This dynamic creates a "persuasive authority" rather than a "coercive authority," where the Convention seeks to lead by consensus and shared vision rather than by decree (Oshun 23).

Furthermore, the expansion of the NBC's mission encompassing a wide array of educational institutions, hospitals, and social welfare programs requires a degree of coordinated effort and resource mobilization that transcends the capabilities of individual autonomous churches. The establishment of conferences and associations as intermediary bodies between the local church and the national Convention also adds layers to the exercise of autonomy. These regional bodies facilitate shared ministries, address local challenges, and serve as platforms for collective decision-making, thereby mediating the relationship between the local church and the broader Convention (Okunlola et al 32). While designed to enhance efficiency and fellowship, these structures can, at times, be perceived as impinging on direct congregational control, prompting ongoing dialogues about the appropriate balance of power.

The dynamics of autonomy in the Nigerian Baptist Convention are a complex interplay of theological principles, historical development, and practical exigencies. While the foundational Baptist commitment to congregational autonomy remains a guiding ideal, the imperative of effective mission, coordinated growth, and unified witness within a large denominational structure necessitates a nuanced interpretation and practical adaptation of this principle (Afolaranmi 11). The NBC strives for a balance where local churches retain significant self-governance, yet voluntarily participate in and contribute to a larger vision, leveraging shared resources and collective wisdom. This ongoing negotiation reflects the living nature of the Convention, demonstrating its capacity to maintain its core identity while evolving to meet the contemporary challenges and opportunities of its expansive ministry in Nigeria.

Challenges of the Dynamics of the Nigerian Baptist Convention. Autonomy Challenge

The autonomy of a local church is one peculiar distinctive of the Baptists that has affected many facets of the life of many local Baptist churches as entities and members of these churches (Ossai-Ugbah 49). According to Babalola-Jacobs (45), the autonomy of a local church means a church that is ―self-governing, self-propagating, [and] self-supporting… based on the principle of congregational self-rule and the absolute independence of the local church from external control.‖(5) In Ishola-Esan (41) words, ―There cannot be autonomy of the local church without the separation of church and state, and we have separation of church and state because of soul liberty.‖ However, to be autonomous does not mean to be isolated. A Baptist church may fellowship with other churches around mutual interests and in an associational or cooperative tie. However, a local Baptist church is expected to voluntarily cooperate with a Baptist Association, a Baptist Conference, the Nigerian Baptist Convention, and other ecumenical bodies (Afolarami 118). However, the principle of autonomy of a local church as believed and practised by the Nigerian Baptist Convention and its churches sometimes renders the Convention and its other bodies powerless to exercise any authority on any uncooperative churches, pastors, and members (121). There is a misconception about the autonomy of a local church. This hinders the Convention, its representatives, or its bodies from interfering in any local church conflict without the concerned church's expressed invitation or permission. Situations of dissociation by local churches from the Convention and its bodies have occurred during conflicts within a church. Osuigwe (26) reiterated that some hindrances to the healthy practice of local church autonomy include the loss of the Baptist vision for regenerated church membership and the loss of emphasis on producing Christ-like believers. In the Book of Report (42, 46), one of the conflicts as a result of autonomy of the Local church is that of Ajegunle Baptist Church and New Glory Baptist Church, they had an internal disagreement that led to the separation of the churches, the intervention of the Nigerian Baptist Convention could not resolve the matter because of the use of local church autonomy. It was observed that the matter was bad for the image of the Convention and that there was a need to address the trend of unruly behaviour among pastors. Another conflict occurred at First Baptist Church Maiduguri between the Yoruba-speaking and English-speaking churches; the Yoruba had instructed the English-speaking church to cease using their premises for worship (48). Because of the autonomy the Yoruba-speaking church exercises, the Convention could not do anything but plead on behalf of the English-speaking church. Another case is the New Estate Baptist Church, in Lag, which had a crisis with the NBC to the extent that New Estate Baptist was in the process of withdrawing its fellowship with the NBC (60). The local church has abused issues of autonomy privilege, causing the Nigerian Baptist Convention difficulties in resolving them.

Leadership Challenge

The leadership position in the Convention presents a challenge because the President's office is open to election from qualified Pastors of the Baptist Church. This brings a searching exercise that always precipitates disaffection, mistrust, resistance, and tribal or regional suspicions (Ayokunle 490). This trend may persist until NBC considers the possibility of filling some positions by promotion or hierarchy. Due to the open election process for

leadership positions, seniority is not a factor in filling certain roles. Consequently, some leaders struggle to gain immediate acceptance from their seniors and face resistance in specific areas of the Convention's administration. In the same manner, since the inception of Nigerians became indigenous leaders of the NBC, the President of the Convention was from the western parts of the country, the northern, southern and eastern parts have never held the position of the President of the NBC, which is bringing the leadership position of the NBC to tribalism or sectionalism in the administration of the NBC (491).

Inadequate Communications

A largely unnoticed but significant challenge of the NBC is inadequate communications. The ability to communicate the appropriate amount of information to the correct group of people within the church is a very delicate and ambiguous job (Afolabi 183). When the NBC fails to recognize the large number of cross-segments of members, their particular or peculiar sensitivities, and the history of how information has been communicated, there will be questions about every statement or instruction given. Inadequate communication can break fellowship, evoke mixed feelings, and lead to incorrect responses to poor communication received. Trust is shattered, discouraging association, and attrition sets in, particularly if the conflict revolves around leadership. If it is around the decision-making process, attrition reveals itself in the church's organizational structures. Due to inadequate communication, the church's image is marred and tarnished, its mission is easily put on hold, and the vision is lost.

Non-commitment to the Nigerian Baptist Convention

The Baptist Cooperative Programme is a voluntary association of independent churches that aims to promote friendship and love with God through Christ. It involves each church member giving their tithes and offerings to their local Congregation, which then sends a portion of their undesignated revenue to the Nigerian Baptist Convention. This cooperative effort aims to achieve what a single church cannot. However, many local churches, associations, and conferences do not show commitment to the cooperative programme, leading to irregular payments. Another area of non-commitment is the acquisition of properties and investments; some local churches re-registered independently rather than using the NBC registration. Moreover, according to Ayokunle in a book ―Century of Nigerian Baptist Conversion‖ (492), the challenges to NBC are a lack of commitment to cooperative programmes, drift of members to new generation churches, pastorless churches without pastors, neglect of rural areas, leadership orientation, and internal crises. Others include an unclear definition of the relationship between theological institutions and the church, the impartial distribution of the Convention's investment across all parts of Nigeria, and the unhealthy importation of doctrines from other churches.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) is a body built on congregational organization and cooperative fellowship, with a dynamic administrative structure that presents peculiar challenges to its operational efficiency. NBC's administrative structure in the research is centered on the history of the church, Baptist tiers, and a hallmark of autonomy and
dynamism that stands as an identity of the Baptist church in Nigeria. However, the same church autonomy became a challenge that is often misinterpreted as ecclesiastical independence. This misapplication limits the Convention's ability to mediate and resolve internal crises within local churches, which can result in fragmentation and tarnish the Convention's image. The strength of the Convention lies in its unity and shared vision; however, growing individualism among local churches has contributed to administrative inefficiencies and loss of momentum in mission execution. For NBC to thrive in the 21st century, it must revisit its foundational principles with practical reforms. By addressing these systemic challenges thoughtfully and strategically, the NBC can reestablish itself as a spiritually vibrant and structurally sound denomination that remains faithful to its calling and relevant in the contemporary religious landscape of Nigeria. Therefore, these recommendations:

i. The Nigerian Baptist Convention must intensify doctrinal education at all levels: seminaries, local churches, conferences, and associations, to correct misconceptions surrounding the autonomy of the local church.
ii. The idea of open elections promotes democratic principles, and the NBC should consider adopting a hybrid system that includes elections based on zoning and promotion-based leadership succession.
iii. The NBC should establish a centralized, digital communication platform for all member churches, conferences, and associations. This should include timely updates on policies, financial statements, elections, theological decisions, and programs.
iv. The NBC should launch a Convention-wide sensitization campaign to re-emphasize the theological and practical importance of the Cooperative Programme. This should involve church leaders, financial officers, and lay members.
v. To tackle doctrinal confusion and unhealthy importation of external ideologies, the NBC should develop an annual theological orientation curriculum for pastors, lay leaders, and church councils.

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