

**THE POLITICS OF PREACHING: IMMIGRATION LAWS, TRAVEL BARRIERS,
AND THE STRUGGLES OF NIGERIAN GOSPEL MINISTERS IN THE
INTERNATIONAL ARENA**

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Abstract

Travelling to other parts of the world is challenging presently due to the alarming rate of global migration and socioeconomic issues, particularly in developing countries. Nigerian pastors keep experiencing unique travel barriers that limit their international gospel ministry engagements. This paper explores how immigration laws in key regions like Russia, China, Australia, the UK, Ireland, the United States of America, Scandinavian countries, Arab countries, and Caribbean nations impact Nigerian gospel ministers and others. The article relies on immigration data, visa rejection trends, and policy shifts. The paper, however, highlights how administrative restrictions intersect with religious freedom and global gospel mission work in the 21st century.

Keywords: Gospel Ministers, Migration, Greener Pasture, Ministry, Nigeria

Introduction

Research shows that the work of a religious leader extends beyond the boundaries of their country of origin. Over the years, it has increasingly become a defining feature of global Christianity. Adogame (2013) and Levitt (2007) believe that the international movement of faith leaders for gospel mission, theological education, conferences, and pastoral support is now deeply intertwined with modern immigration systems.

However, in countries like Nigeria, where Pentecostal and evangelical movements are rapidly expanding, churches are actively engaged in global outreach and transnational ministry (Kalu, 2008; Marshall, 2009). Researchers believe that some rich churches sometimes rely on the purchase of private jets, and less financially buoyant churches maintain close contact with the embassy to issue a longer visa duration for the pastors of the congregation who might travel frequently on the mission. Many ministers save personal income to embark on a trip that warrants lots of money.

Nevertheless, ministers and pastors often confront administrative challenges that rival geopolitical constraints. Hagan & Ebaugh (2003), Fiddian- Qasmiyeh et al. (2014) consider that these barriers are evident in visa requirements, interview scrutiny, documentation demands, and diplomatic reciprocity policies, all of which continuously shape where and how ministers can preach internationally.

Visa Barriers Experienced by Nigerian Gospel Ministers

Nigerian ministers of the gospel, by virtue of holding a Nigerian passport, face systemic travel barriers that extend beyond their religious vocation and are rooted in broader global migration control mechanisms. Scholars like Neumayer (2006), Czaika & de Haas (2013), note that visa regimes often subject applicants from countries perceived to have higher risks of irregular migration to intensified scrutiny, including detailed assessment of documentation, financial capacity, and intent to return. These patterns are not religion-specific but are shaped by geopolitical perceptions, historical migration trends, and policy-driven risk categorisation.

As a result, even when Nigerian applicants meet formal visa requirements, they may still encounter disproportionately high rejection rates due to reputational concerns about overstays and non-compliance with immigration conditions (Mau et al., 2015).

In practice, Carling & Collins (2018) specify that these structural barriers manifest in several procedural ways, including highly rigorous visa interviews that focus extensively on applicants' financial evidence and travel intent, as well as the frequent issuance of visa refusals with minimal explanatory detail.

Additionally, Bakewell (2014) explains that Nigerian religious leaders applying for a visa are often required to provide stronger proof of socio-economic ties to their home country, such as employment, property ownership, or family commitments, alongside meeting elevated financial thresholds designed to demonstrate self-sufficiency.

Scholars argue that such practices reinforce global inequalities in mobility, where passport nationality significantly determines access to international travel, thereby constraining the transnational activities of groups such as Nigerian religious ministers despite legitimate purposes for travel (Czaika & de Haas, 2013).

Legal and Immigration Case Contexts

While specific case law involving Nigerian pastors abroad remains limited in public legal databases, related examples illustrate how immigration enforcement intersects with visa compliance (Neumayer, 2006; Czaika & de Haas, 2013). Domestic Nigerian immigration statutes emphasise procedural compliance; failure to adhere to visa conditions abroad may affect bilateral access negotiations (Afolayan, 2015). More so, security, diplomatic reciprocity, and resource pressure narratives increasingly inform immigration policy, further shaping travel restrictions for Nigerians generally, including religious workers (Mau et al., 2015). Similarly, legal reporting has documented deportations and visa cancellations for pastors in foreign jurisdictions due to alleged overstay or misclassification of visa length, underlining how immigration law prioritises statutory compliance over vocational calling (Carling & Collins, 2018).

Policy Frameworks and Immigration Regimes for Religious Workers

United States

In many Western systems, for example, the United States of America, which issues R-1 religious visas, has historically offered categories like the R-1 visa for religious workers. However, recent policy changes have introduced single-entry three-month validity periods for Nigerian Bible Ministers' passport holders, replacing earlier multiple-entry provisions. Scholars have considered this a shift publicised as a *reciprocity measure reflecting diplomatic visa policy* rather than direct hostility to missionaries. Such changes create uncertainty for Nigerian pastors arranging extended ministry engagements. Anecdotal reports also suggest intensified secondary inspection procedures at ports of entry for Nigerians, even with valid visas, adding practical challenges to entry. The cumulative effect is an entrenched perception of restricted mobility even for faith-based purposes.

Bakewell (2014) and Carling & Collins (2018) have published reports and migration studies that further indicate that visa authorities tend to intensify documentation requirements for Nigerian nationals due to perceived risks of visa overstays and irregular migration, even in cases involving legitimate religious missions. This process may inadvertently diminish the perceived social and moral standing of ministers within the migration system, shifting attention away from their religious identity and role. As a result, affected applicants may experience diminished self-worth and face implicit questioning of their personal integrity within highly securitised immigration procedures. Most destination countries do maintain categories for religious workers or temporary entries for clergy. These policies are framed within broader immigration objectives tied to national security, bilateral reciprocity, and economic planning.

Researchers like Hagan & Ebaugh (2003) and Levitt (2007) observed that applicants for religious visas are typically required to demonstrate institutional sponsorship and a clearly defined missionary purpose. However, such visa categories are not insulated from broader global migration trends and regulatory frameworks.

Nigerian ministers of the gospel are often assessed not only based on their religious vocation but also in relation to the nationality they represent. Consequently, Czaika & de Haas (2013) said the cultural reverence traditionally accorded to clergy is frequently set aside in favour of stricter scrutiny applied to applicants from countries with high visa refusal rates, including Nigeria.

Regional Perspectives on Nigerian Pastors and Visa Challenges in Australia, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and other Countries

It has been noted that Nigerian ministers and pastors travelling to Australia must be prepared for a stringent immigration system, which requires substantial documentation and evidence of sponsorship support for religious and work visas. Scholars have evaluated the reason for the strict immigration policy of Australia, and all appear to agree that Australia cannot be straightforwardly classified as a “Christian country” in a strict constitutional or political sense, although Christianity has historically played a dominant role in shaping its cultural and social institutions.

The Australian Constitution establishes the nation as a secular state, explicitly prohibiting the establishment of any official religion (Bouma, 2006). Nevertheless, Singleton (2018) posits that Christianity has long been the majority faith tradition, influencing public holidays, education systems, and moral discourse. Census data over time show that while a significant proportion of Australians continue to identify as Christian, this identification is increasingly nominal rather than indicative of regular religious practice. Scholars like Hogan (2017) argue that Australia is better understood as a post-Christian or religiously plural society, where Christian heritage persists alongside growing secularism and religious diversity.

In contemporary analysis, Bouma & Hughes (2012) are of the view that Australia is often described as a secular liberal democracy with a Christian cultural legacy rather than a confessional Christian state. The decline in church attendance, coupled with the rise of individuals identifying with “no religion,” reflects broader global trends of secularisation. At the same time, Markus (2020) explains that immigration has contributed to increasing religious diversity, introducing Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other faiths into the national religious landscape. As a result, Singleton (2018) maintains that while Christianity remains symbolically significant, it no longer defines the national identity in an exclusive or institutional sense. Therefore, describing Australia as a “Christian country” requires careful qualification, recognising both its historical foundations and its contemporary pluralistic reality.

Similarly, the United Kingdom, which visa type for ministers of the gospel is Tier 5 (T-5) operate as a temporary Religious Visa. The United Kingdom’s digital eVisa rollout and biometric requirements complicate access for Nigerian missionaries without robust institutional backing. The United Kingdom played a pivotal role in spreading Christianity in Nigeria through the mechanism of the slave trade. While Muslims increasingly dominate the country, the United Kingdom remain a Christian country.

Scholars like McLean & McMillan (2009) argue that the United Kingdom can be described as a historically Christian country with enduring institutional ties to Christianity, though it functions in practice as a religiously plural and increasingly secular society. The constitutional position of the Church of England is that of the established church. The monarch serves as its Supreme Governor and bishops sit in the House of Lords, reflecting a formal link between church and state.

Bruce (2011) indicates a steady decline in religious affiliation and participation, with a growing proportion of the population identifying as having no religion. Davie (2015) added that while Christian institutions retain symbolic and ceremonial significance, the United Kingdom no longer operates as a confessional Christian society in terms of everyday belief and practice. Thus, it is more accurately understood as a secular democracy with a Christian constitutional heritage.

The Republic of Ireland visa for Nigerian Ministers still operates at a moderate level. While it remains a catholic nation, it is embedded within European Union entry regulations and applies a unified immigration law with little or no difference from its European counterparts. Scholars like Quinn (2010) explain that the Stamp 3 visa or permission is Ireland’s immigration framework. It provides a structured pathway through which non-European Economic Area (EEA) religious ministers, including Nigerian gospel ministers, are allowed to reside in the country for missionary

or pastoral purposes without permitting them to work while on a pastoral mission or study a higher academic degree. This permission is typically issued based on sponsorship by a recognised religious body, which must demonstrate the bona fide nature of the ministry, financial support, and the non-remunerative character of the role.

Ní Ghráinne (2014) noted that Ireland's approach reflects a broader European model that distinguishes between economic migration and faith-based service, thereby permitting religious engagement while maintaining strict labour controls. While *Stamp 3* (visa for religious minister to evangelise in Ireland) promotes religious Migration, it simultaneously underscores the regulatory boundaries within which missionary activity must operate in contemporary Ireland. The European Migration Network (2019), however, noted that the system also imposes significant administrative requirements, including proof of institutional legitimacy, documentation, and compliance with immigration conditions. This can pose challenges for ministers from countries such as Nigeria, where visa checks are often intensified.

European Commission (2020) writings state that within **Schengen member states**, Nigerian passport holders are required to provide substantial documentation demonstrating the purpose of travel, proof of sufficient financial means, and strong ties to their country of residence as part of the short-stay visa application process.

Scholars like Mau (2015) argue that such measures, while legally grounded in migration control, often result in extended processing times ranging from several weeks to months, thereby creating administrative barriers that can limit the global mobility of certain groups, including religious ministers seeking to engage in transnational missions. According to Neumayer (2006), this requirement reflects the harmonised visa regime under the Schengen framework, which applies uniform standards of scrutiny to applicants from countries considered to present higher risks of irregular migration.

Consequently, the procedural demands of Schengen visa systems reinforce broader patterns of unequal mobility shaped by nationality and perceived migration risk for Nigerian Ministers of the gospel.

Ministers of the Gospel in Nigeria in Relation to Visa Application: The Study of Russia and China

In the analysis of Wanner (2012) and Yang (2012), Nigerian pastors and ministers of the gospel encounter significant structural and regulatory challenges when seeking visas to countries such as Russia and China, where religious activity is closely monitored and often restricted to state-approved institutions. In both contexts, the legal framework governing religion requires that any formal religious engagement be conducted under the supervision or recognition of officially registered bodies, thereby limiting the scope for independent missionary work.

As a result, while short-term visas for conferences, academic exchange, or cultural visits may be obtainable, these categories typically exclude overt evangelistic or pastoral functions. Scholars like Froese (2008) argue that such restrictions are rooted in broader state concerns about social

stability, national security, and ideological control, which shape the regulation of foreign religious actors. Furthermore, the bureaucratic complexity of visa acquisition for Nigerian applicants is compounded by geopolitical and migration-related considerations.

Neumayer (2006) indicates that applicants from countries perceived to have higher risks of irregular migration, such as Nigeria, are often subjected to heightened scrutiny, including rigorous documentation requirements, proof of intent to return and background checks. In restrictive environments like Russia and China, this scrutiny intersects with religious regulation, creating a dual barrier: one based on the nature of religious activity and another based on nationality. This often results in visa refusals or the issuance of visas that legally constrain ministers from fully performing their pastoral duties.

In addition, Yang (2012) and Wanner (2012) highlight that the ambiguity surrounding permissible religious activities under short-term visa categories creates uncertainty for visiting ministers. Even when entry is granted, engaging in unsanctioned preaching or missionary outreach may lead to legal consequences, including deportation or visa cancellation. This environment not only limits the practical expression of transnational ministry but also discourages Nigerian pastors from pursuing legitimate international engagements. As a result, the combination of restrictive religious policies and stringent immigration controls significantly curtails the global mobility of gospel ministers, reinforcing broader inequalities in access to international religious spaces.

Arab Nations, Scandinavia, and the Caribbean

The tendency for countries to have a higher threshold of visa challenges for Nigerian missionaries is foreseeable, especially in Islamic countries. In Muslim-majority states, the legal frameworks governing religious expression and proselytisation are often restrictive, with many countries imposing severe penalties for individuals attempting to spread non-Islamic faiths. Scholars explain that Nigeria's pastors and missionaries frequently navigate these restrictions by travelling under the guise of diplomatic channels or tourism. These challenges highlight the tension between global religious mobility and the sovereignty of states to control religious practice within their borders, raising questions about the balance between freedom of religion and national security.

Wanner (2012) noted the risk assessment in adopting this approach, which can expose them to significant legal risks if their activities are interpreted as violating local religious laws. For example, in countries like *Iran and Saudi Arabia*, engaging in missionary activities is not only illegal but also punishable by imprisonment or deportation, creating a high-stakes environment for foreign religious workers.

In contrast, *Scandinavian countries*, such as *Sweden and Denmark*, maintain stringent immigration policies that prioritise clear occupational purposes for entry, requiring applicants to prove their intention to return to their home country after a temporary stay. Mau et al., (2015) statement is in line with noting that this process, which involves thorough vetting and proof of secure return arrangements, can be particularly challenging for independent African ministers who may not have established organisational support or the necessary documentation to meet these criteria.

Additionally, Carling & Collins (2018) explain that Caribbean nations, known for their historical religious diversity, present a mixed landscape; while some countries offer accessible tourist visas, others impose more stringent requirements for religious workers, often requiring official sponsorship or affiliation with recognised religious organisations. This variability underscores the complexities of religious migration in different global regions and the varying levels of support or barriers faced by religious practitioners worldwide.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusively, the Nigerian missionaries are beset by a stringent threshold in the area of tightening global borders and requirements to remain in missionary countries. While many countries formally permit religious workers under specific visa categories, Nigerian pastors frequently encounter barriers rooted less in theology than in immigration pragmatics and diplomatic reciprocity, documentation rigour, and perceptions of overstay risk.

To remedy this situation, these issues require collaborative efforts like enhanced consular support from Nigerian missions abroad, advocacy at international forums emphasising both religious freedom and fair mobility, and strategic global church partnerships. Without such multi-layered engagement, pastors' effort to travel across borders for the sake of the gospel and salvation of souls through preaching and humanitarian support, which are central to Christian mission, will remain circumscribed by the administrative realities of 21st-century migration governance.

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