

# **The Establishment and Socio-Religious Impact of Living Faith Church Goshen in Auta-Balefi, Karu L.G.A. of Nasarawa State, Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

*The rise of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria represents one of the most significant religious transformations in modern African history. Among the leading movements that shaped this development is the Living Faith Church Worldwide, popularly known as Winners' Chapel. This study investigates the establishment and socio-religious impact of the Living Faith Church Goshen in Auta-Balefi, Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, Nigeria. Drawing on historical, oral, and documentary sources, the paper situates the church's emergence within the broader trajectory of Nigerian Pentecostal expansion from the late twentieth century onward. It explores how the establishment of the Goshen branch reflects not only the theological vision of its founder, Bishop David Oyedepo, but also the transformation of Auta-Balefi from a rural settlement into a vibrant religious and socio-economic hub. The study argues that Living Faith Church Goshen functions as both a spiritual and developmental institution—providing education, employment, and infrastructure while reinforcing faith-based social order. Its establishment is thus examined as part of the larger narrative of Pentecostal modernity and community-building in postcolonial Nigeria. The paper concludes that the Goshen project exemplifies the convergence of faith, modernization, and nation-building in contemporary African Christianity.*

**Keywords:** Social-Religious Impact, Living Faith Church, Auta-Balefi.

## **1. Introduction**

The history of Christianity in Nigeria has undergone remarkable transformation since its introduction in the nineteenth century. While early missionary efforts by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist missions laid the foundation for Christian expansion, the late twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented rise in indigenous Pentecostal movements. These movements emphasized personal salvation, prosperity, healing, and divine empowerment, reshaping Nigeria's religious, cultural, and socio-political landscape. Among these, the Living Faith Church Worldwide—founded in 1981 by Bishop David Oyedepo—has emerged as a dominant force in the Pentecostal sphere, with its influence extending beyond Nigeria to the global stage.

The establishment of the Living Faith Church Goshen, located in Auta-Balefi of Karu Local Government Area, represents a significant milestone in the institutional evolution of

Pentecostal Christianity in northern Nigeria. Historically, the area was a quiet agrarian community on the outskirts of Abuja, characterized by low population density and limited infrastructure. However, the creation of Abuja as Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory in 1976, and the subsequent urban expansion into neighboring Nasarawa State, spurred rapid demographic and economic transformation in Auta-Balefi. The emergence of Goshen City—a vast church complex encompassing worship centers, administrative offices, educational institutions, and residential facilities—symbolizes the intersection of faith, urbanization, and modern development.

The choice of the name “Goshen” draws from the biblical narrative of Genesis, where the land of Goshen was a place of refuge, abundance, and divine favor for the Israelites in Egypt. For the Living Faith Church, this symbolism was deliberate: Goshen was envisioned as a sanctuary of divine presence, economic self-reliance, and national transformation. Thus, the establishment of Goshen in Auta-Balefi represents not only the geographical expansion of the church but also the materialization of its theological mandate of “liberating the world from all oppression of the devil through the preaching of the Word of Faith.”

Pentecostal expansion in Nigeria cannot be understood outside its historical context of socio-political change. The economic crises of the 1980s, coupled with structural adjustment programs and widespread disillusionment with the state, created fertile ground for the rise of prosperity-oriented churches that promised divine solutions to human suffering. Living Faith Church emerged during this period, offering a message that combined spiritual power with economic empowerment. Through its institutions—such as Covenant University, Faith Academy, and the Dominion Publishing House—the church sought to merge faith with education, technology, and social progress.

The decision to establish a major national headquarters in Auta-Balefi reflected both strategic vision and divine conviction. Proximity to Abuja, availability of land, and the state government's supportive stance provided ideal conditions for constructing a new ecclesiastical city. The Goshen complex was conceived not merely as a place of worship but as a multi-dimensional religious and developmental space—integrating education, media, and agricultural initiatives.

This paper thus examines the historical context, institutional dynamics, and socio-religious impact of the Living Faith Church Goshen in Nasarawa State. It explores how the church's establishment has transformed the socio-economic landscape of Auta-Balefi and contributed to the diffusion of Pentecostal culture in northern Nigeria. The study also highlights the dialectical relationship between faith and development, arguing that Goshen serves as both a symbol and an instrument of Pentecostal modernity.

Ultimately, the research situates Goshen within Nigeria's broader narrative of religious urbanism, where large-scale Pentecostal infrastructures serve as catalysts for regional growth and identity formation. By analyzing its history and influence, the paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship on African Christianity, Pentecostalism, and the sociology of religion in postcolonial Africa.

### **Historical Background: Pentecostalism and Religious Transformation in Nigeria**

The history of Pentecostalism in Nigeria dates back to the early twentieth century with the emergence of the Faith Tabernacle Movement and the Apostolic Church, both influenced by global revivalist currents from North America and Europe. However, the postcolonial era—especially the period from the 1970s to the 1990s marked a new phase of rapid Pentecostal expansion, as indigenous charismatic churches began to assert greater theological and

organizational independence. This period coincided with Nigeria's social and economic upheavals, including the oil boom of the 1970s, military rule, and economic crises of the 1980s. These events eroded confidence in state institutions, leading many Nigerians to seek alternative sources of meaning and empowerment in religion. Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on personal salvation, divine healing, and material prosperity, resonated powerfully with this historical context.

In Northern Nigeria—long dominated by Islam and mainline missionary denominations—Pentecostalism's growth was initially slow but steady. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a surge in new congregations and revival meetings across the region. The rise of the Living Faith Church (Winners' Chapel) in this context represents a turning point: it demonstrated that Pentecostal Christianity could transcend ethnic, regional, and religious boundaries through an appeal to spiritual empowerment and economic hope.

### **The Vision and Expansion of Living Faith Church Worldwide**

The Living Faith Church Worldwide (LFCWW) was founded in 1981 following what its founder, Bishop David Oyedepo, described as a divine encounter in which he received the mandate "to liberate the world from all oppression of the devil through the preaching of the Word of Faith."<sup>18</sup> Initially established in Kaduna, the church rapidly expanded, establishing branches across major Nigerian cities. In 1989, its headquarters moved to Lagos, where the massive Faith Tabernacle (Canaanland) was constructed in Ota, Ogun State, inaugurated in 1999 with a 50,000-seat auditorium—then the largest church auditorium in the world.

From this Lagos base, Living Faith Church extended its reach nationally and internationally, building educational, media, and publishing institutions. Its theology emphasized four pillars: faith, the Word, prosperity, and the Holy Spirit. The church's leadership cultivated a culture of excellence and self-reliance, positioning it as a symbol of Pentecostal modernity and Nigerian religious entrepreneurship.

The decision to establish another monumental center near Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory was both strategic and spiritual. Abuja represented political centrality, administrative order, and cosmopolitanism—qualities that aligned with the church's vision of influencing national transformation through faith. The emergence of Goshen in Auta-Balefi thus mirrored the movement's broader mission: to plant centers of divine power and socio-economic influence across the nation.

### **Auta-Balefi: From Agrarian Settlement to Religious Hub**

Historically, Auta-Balefi was a small agrarian community located within Karu Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, on the periphery of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Before the late 1990s, its population consisted mainly of the Gbagyi, Eggon, and Bassa peoples, whose livelihoods revolved around subsistence farming and petty trade. The transformation of the community began with the expansion of Abuja and the influx of migrants seeking affordable housing outside the FCT boundaries.

By the early 2000s, Auta-Balefi had become a rapidly urbanizing area, with improved road access through the Abuja–Keffi expressway. This geographical proximity to Abuja made it an attractive site for institutional investments, including schools, housing estates, and religious centers. The availability of large tracts of land also made it ideal for a project of the magnitude envisioned by the Living Faith Church leadership.

The acquisition of land for the Goshen City Project began in the mid-2000s after a series of consultations between the church and local traditional authorities. According to oral

interviews conducted with residents and church officials, the local chiefs welcomed the project, anticipating economic benefits, employment, and infrastructural development. The groundbreaking ceremony was held under the supervision of Bishop David Oyedepo, who declared the site a “spiritual headquarters for the northern region of Nigeria.”

### **The Establishment of Goshen City: Structure and Purpose**

The Goshen City Project officially commenced construction in the late 2000s and was completed around 2010. The complex covers several hectares of land and includes the Goshen Worship Sanctuary, administrative buildings, the Faith Academy Goshen, Kingdom Heritage Model School, residential quarters for staff, a guest house, agricultural facilities, and vast parking spaces capable of accommodating tens of thousands of worshippers.

Architecturally, Goshen reflects the church’s vision of grandeur, order, and divine excellence. The main sanctuary, with its sweeping dome and modern sound systems, symbolizes both spiritual majesty and technological progress. The landscape design integrates nature and faith—trees, gardens, and water features combine to create a serene atmosphere conducive to worship and meditation.

Beyond its physical beauty, Goshen functions as a spiritual headquarters for Northern Nigeria, hosting major conventions, retreats, and leadership conferences. The annual Shiloh Convention—originally held at Canaanland, Ota—has also been streamed and sometimes hosted at Goshen, drawing worshippers from across the North-Central region and beyond.

The church’s institutional design ensures that Goshen operates not only as a worship center but also as an educational and administrative hub. Faith Academy and Kingdom Heritage schools provide Christian-based education from primary to secondary levels, emphasizing discipline, academic excellence, and moral instruction. These institutions embody the church’s belief that education is central to spiritual liberation and societal progress.

### **Socio-Economic Impact on Auta-Balefi**

The establishment of Goshen has had profound socio-economic implications for Auta-Balefi and its environs. First, it transformed the physical landscape through infrastructural development. Roads were upgraded, electricity supply improved, and local businesses emerged to serve the growing population of worshippers, staff, and residents. The once-rural settlement evolved into a peri-urban community linked to the Abuja metropolis.

Second, the church created employment opportunities for local artisans, security personnel, teachers, and service providers. During the construction phase, hundreds of laborers were recruited from nearby villages, stimulating the local economy. Subsequently, the schools and maintenance departments offered permanent jobs to both church members and non-members. Third, Goshen has contributed to religious tourism, drawing visitors for events, conferences, and worship services. This influx of people has led to the growth of hospitality and transport services within the region. Local traders benefit from increased demand for goods and services, while the area’s real estate value has risen significantly.

At the spiritual and cultural level, Goshen has become a center for moral renewal and faith-based community engagement. The church runs social outreach programs, including scholarship schemes, food drives, and medical aid for indigent residents. In so doing, it has established a model of faith-driven social responsibility in a region often marked by poverty and underdevelopment.

### **Goshen and the Broader Trajectory of Nigerian Pentecostalism**

The establishment of Goshen aligns with a broader trend in African Pentecostal urbanism, where religious institutions shape the social and spatial organization of cities. Large-scale projects such as Canaanland (Ota), Redemption Camp (Lagos–Ibadan Expressway), and Glory Dome (Abuja) illustrate how churches have become major urban actors influencing architecture, land use, and economic life. Goshen, as the northern counterpart of Canaanland, extends this phenomenon into the heart of northern Nigeria.

In this sense, Goshen embodies the fusion of faith, entrepreneurship, and modernity characteristic of twenty-first-century Pentecostalism. The church's model of development—anchored on spiritual discipline, education, and productivity—reflects a distinctly Nigerian theology of prosperity that merges religious conviction with pragmatic socio-economic engagement.

Goshen thus stands as both a symbol of Pentecostal confidence and an instrument of socio-spiritual transformation. It demonstrates how religious institutions in Africa are not merely centers of worship but agents of modernization, contributing to infrastructure, education, and moral reconstruction in societies struggling with governance challenges.

### **Theological Vision and the Idea of “Goshen”**

The choice of the name Goshen encapsulates the Living Faith Church's theology of covenant prosperity and divine exemption. In the biblical narrative, Goshen was the territory in Egypt where the Israelites thrived amid famine and plague; it symbolized divine favour and separation from hardship. Bishop David Oyedepo's application of this motif to the Nigerian context reflects the broader Pentecostal hermeneutic that spiritualizes socio-economic survival.<sup>51</sup> Goshen, therefore, operates as both metaphor and mission—an earthly enclave of heavenly order where believers live above the nation's economic turbulence.

The theology underpinning the Goshen project merges charismatic spirituality with developmental rationality. Faith is portrayed not only as a means of salvation but also as a technology of progress. In sermons and church publications, prosperity is framed as evidence of covenant obedience, aligning with the Pentecostal ethic of productivity and excellence. Thus, Goshen functions as a pedagogical space where theology is materialized through architecture, organization, and daily discipline.

### **Pentecostal Urbanism and Spatial Transformation**

Goshen exemplifies what scholars describe as Pentecostal urbanism—the creation of religious cities that reconfigure peri-urban landscapes.<sup>54</sup> The relocation of vast congregations from crowded urban centers to purpose-built “faith cities” has become a hallmark of Nigerian megachurches since the 1990s. Canaanland in Ota and Redemption Camp along the Lagos–Ibadan Expressway are leading examples. Goshen extends this phenomenon northward, transforming Auta-Balefi from a peripheral agrarian zone into a spiritually branded suburb of Abuja.

This transformation illustrates how Pentecostal institutions assume quasi-municipal functions: they construct roads, provide electricity, run schools, and regulate moral conduct within their precincts. The church's governance model mirrors a miniature city-state, combining spiritual authority with administrative efficiency. In effect, Goshen's physical and managerial order becomes an argument for the moral superiority of the born-again community over the perceived disorder of secular governance.

### **Education, Work Ethic, and Social Mobility**

Education occupies a central place in the Living Faith Church's liberation theology. Faith Academy Goshen and Kingdom Heritage Model School inculcate academic discipline and spiritual formation simultaneously. The schools' curricula emphasize diligence, entrepreneurship, and moral rectitude—values resonant with Max Weber's Protestant ethic but contextualized within African Pentecostalism. For many families in Nasarawa State, enrollment in these institutions represents a pathway to social mobility and an alternative to overstretched public education.

The church's emphasis on vocational training and small-business development also nurtures a distinctive Pentecostal work ethic. Members are encouraged to translate faith confessions into productive labour, linking divine favour with measurable achievement. Such practices contribute to the emergence of a new Pentecostal middle class whose prosperity reinforces the credibility of the movement's theology.

### **Community Engagement and Social Responsibility**

Beyond evangelism, Goshen engages in humanitarian activities—scholarships, free medical outreaches, food relief, and skill-acquisition programs for youths. These initiatives respond to local poverty while projecting the church as a moral benefactor. The social ministry arm, Welfare Department and Education Commission, channels resources toward community upliftment, blurring the boundary between religious mission and development work.

Historically, such philanthropy echoes the social vision of earlier missionary Christianity but re-interpreted through indigenous agency and prosperity theology. Whereas colonial missions linked charity to evangelization and Western civilization, Goshen situates it within covenant stewardship and national transformation. The result is a hybrid model of Christian social action that merges revivalism with modernization.

### **Socio-Cultural Influence and Inter-Religious Relations**

The rapid expansion of Goshen has also reshaped the cultural identity of Auta-Balefi. Weekly services attract congregants from across Nasarawa State and the FCT, fostering new networks of interaction that transcend ethnic divisions. The influx of worshippers has introduced cosmopolitan lifestyles—housing estates, retail outlets, and transportation services—altering local consumption patterns.

Relations with Muslim and traditional communities have remained largely peaceful, sustained by economic interdependence and the church's deliberate policy of non-confrontation. However, the prominence of Goshen has intensified religious competition, prompting other denominations to expand their own facilities nearby. In this sense, Goshen contributes to the pluralization of Nigeria's northern religious landscape.

### **Symbolism, Authority, and National Vision**

At a symbolic level, Goshen operates as a northern "altar" of national renewal. From its pulpit, Bishop Oyedepo and other leaders articulate a theology of nation-building that frames Nigeria's challenges—corruption, poverty, insecurity—as spiritual pathologies curable through righteousness and productivity. The church's emphasis on leadership integrity and excellence resonates with the aspirations of a generation disillusioned with political elites.

Thus, Goshen's significance transcends religion: it functions as an ideological space where faith, governance, and modern identity intersect. Its meticulous organization, architectural grandeur, and economic self-sufficiency dramatize the possibility of an alternative moral order rooted in Pentecostal rationality.

### **Policy Implications**

The historical and socio-religious development of the Living Faith Church Goshen provides critical insights for scholars and policymakers concerned with religion and national development in Africa. Three major implications emerge from this study.

First, religious institutions as development partners: the history of Goshen reveals how faith-based organizations can complement state capacity in areas such as education, infrastructure, and moral reorientation. The Nigerian government should therefore engage Pentecostal mega-churches not merely as spiritual entities but as socio-economic actors capable of shaping public values and providing community services.

Second, urban planning and religious urbanism: the rise of Goshen underscores the need for integrated spatial policies that account for the growth of large religious cities on the outskirts of major capitals. These faith-based developments generate both opportunities and challenges—such as traffic congestion, real-estate inflation, and shifts in land use—which require proactive governance frameworks.

Third, interfaith harmony and civic engagement: Goshen's peaceful coexistence with neighbouring communities demonstrates how religious expansion can occur without confrontation when coupled with community-oriented programs.<sup>76</sup> Policymakers can draw lessons from this approach to mitigate sectarian tensions through dialogue, inclusion, and shared development projects.

## 2. Conclusion

The establishment of the Living Faith Church Goshen in Auta-Balefi represents far more than a local religious event; it is part of a larger historical narrative of Pentecostal ascendancy, urban transformation, and faith-driven modernization in Nigeria. From its biblical inspiration to its architectural realization, Goshen embodies a theology of prosperity intertwined with praxis of development. Its emergence illustrates how Pentecostal institutions have adapted to, and reshaped, Nigeria's socio-economic realities.

Historically, the church's expansion into northern Nigeria marks a new chapter in Christian indigenization—one that situates faith not only as a matter of salvation but as a framework for nation-building. Goshen's integration of education, commerce, and community outreach reaffirms the historical continuity between religious enterprise and social transformation in Africa.

In a nation grappling with corruption, unemployment, and infrastructural deficits, Goshen offers a model of disciplined leadership, organizational efficiency, and visionary faith. Yet it also raises questions about power, wealth, and religious authority in an age of spiritual capitalism. Thus, the story of Goshen calls for balanced reflection: it celebrates the dynamism of African Pentecostalism while inviting critical engagement with its socio-political consequences.

Ultimately, the Living Faith Church Goshen stands as a microcosm of contemporary Nigerian Christianity—innovative, entrepreneurial, and transformative. Its history affirms that religion, when harnessed responsibly, can serve as an engine of moral renewal and socio-economic progress in postcolonial Africa.

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