



THE CHURCH AS A HISTORICAL AGENT OF PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper is on the church as a historical agent of peace-building and conflict resolution in Nigeria. The Nigerian nation, being a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation, is often ridden with various conflicts, divisions and violence, in which one religious group is pitted against the other and one ethnic group against another. The church by her nature, is a veritable instrument for peace-building and conflict resolution, which it has pursued world-wide and has also been evident from the time of her entry into Nigeria. Considering the ongoing crisis, disagreements and conflicts in Nigeria, both in the political, socio-economic, security and religious spheres, the church has to step up her peace-building and conflict resolution roles by re-strategizing and re-awaking herself to the task at hand and ahead. This paper is therefore a wake-up and stand-firm call on the church in Nigeria and her leaders, to maintain the path of peace-building and conflict resolution in order to ensure the attainment of the much-needed sustainable development of the nation. It is already obvious that peace is always a sine qua non for development of any nation or region – without peace there will be no development. The church thus has to play both mediatory and reconciliatory roles while also being ready to engage in negotiations, arbitration and diplomatic roles to ensure and achieve the much-needed peace in the land. Historical and phenomenological methodologies were utilized in this investigation. It was found that the Nigerian nation, though in dire need of sustainable development, is often ridden and plagued with conflicts, divisions and insecurity, which have been long-running problems even from the period of the country's independence. In the midst of these problems and conflicts, the nation is faced with the task of searching for solutions to its multiple problems, as well as seeking for possible partners who will serve as agents of peace-building and conflict resolution. One of such partners is the church. The Church should therefore maintain and even increase her momentum of the task of peace-building and conflict resolution in the face of increasing threats to life and property and multiple security challenges in the land, the paper recommends.

Keywords: Church, Agent, Peacebuilding, Conflict Resolution, Nigeria.

Introduction

The contemporary Nigerian society is in dire need of sustainable development for the good of the citizenry and the teeming population. At the same time, the nation is riddled with conflicts, divisions and insecurity, and these have been long-running problems even from the time of the country's independence. The problems of conflict and divisions in the land have resulted from various factors, including ethnic and tribal differences, religious differences and struggle for resource control, and also the quest for power and domination.

In the midst of these problems, conflicts and divisions, the nation is faced with the task of searching for solution to its multiple problems, as well as seeking possible partners who will serve



as veritable agents of peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the land. There is no doubt and no gainsaying the fact that one of such veritable agents of peacebuilding and conflict resolution is the church. The church is the foremost Christian organization and gathering of the believers in Jesus Christ for worship, fellowship and doing the work of God. This paper intends to examine how the church serves as a veritable agent for peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Nigeria. Ekpenyong & Ibiang (2020) agree that the church has an important role to play in building peace and resolving conflicts in Nigeria. According to them, "... the church and her leaders in Nigeria have the potential to manage and resolve conflicts with their religious values and principles which involve love, forgiveness, justice, peace and tolerance."

Definition of Terms

The Church: According to the *New Dictionary of Theology* (1991: 140): "Scripture presents the church as the people of God, the community and body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." It further explains that the biblical word 'church' (Gk. *ekklesia*, Heb. *qahal*) means 'assembly.' It describes the covenant-making assembly at Mount Sinai (in the Old Testament). Israel later assembled before God for covenant renewal and at the feast. Christ came to gather God's assembly. The church is the body of Christ on earth.

Agent: An 'agent' is defined as a person or thing that exerts power or produces an effect (*Oxford Modern English Dictionary*). In this paper, the church is described as an agent of peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Peacebuilding: According to Ohajanwa (2013: 136), peace-building are activities geared towards putting in place facilities that serve as de-escalators of violent conflicts in a society. Pre-conflict peace-building requires the establishing of incentives that forestall the outbreak of violent conflicts while post-conflict peace-building refers to the undertaking of rehabilitation, reconstruction and reintegration projects in bid to restore damages wrought on a society by war, in order to stop further outbreak of violent conflicts in that society.

Conflict Resolution: Ohajanwa (2013: 32-33) points out that conflict resolution is one of the conflict management approaches among which included – Conflict Transformation and Multi-track diplomacy. On conflict resolution specifically, he notes that it is a conflict-solving approach, where causes of conflict are probed and addressed so as to build new and lasting relationship between aggressive parties.

Lund (1997:3) on his side, perceives conflict resolution as efforts to increase co-operation among parties to a dispute, and to deepen their relationship by addressing the conditions that led to the dispute, fostering positive attitude and allaying distrust, and promoting reconciliatory initiatives and processes through which parties interact.

Fisher, et al (2000:8), in a more explicit form, conceive conflict resolution as comprising of stages that are applied to tackle open conflicts in a bid to find, not only a common ground to end the violence (as in conflict settlement), but also to resolve the inconsistent goals beneath it. Conflict resolution is thus the measures taken to bring a violent conflict to an end by bringing the conflicting parties to an understanding of themselves and also to a state of enduring peace.

Nigeria as a base of many intractable conflicts and violence

A cursory look at the nation Nigeria shows that it is a hot-bed and base for many intractable conflicts and problems seeking solution and resolution. In a previous article, the present author, (Dimobika, (2018: .243-244) had pointed out that "Though Nigeria has experienced various forms of conflicts arising from various causative factors, ranging from ethnic to political and to economic, yet religiously motivated violence and conflicts have far outweighed all others among the causative factors." The writeup by Dimobika further observes that:



A review of the history of religiously motivated conflicts and violence in Nigeria shows that incidences have increasingly grown in magnitude and scale over the years to the present day; from the scattered skirmishes of the early 1980s, to the launch of the Boko Haram terror outfit in the present day, with which the government and people are presently contending.

It should also be observed that the problem did not end with the launch of the Boko Haram terror outfit, but also had metamorphosed into the launch of other deadlier terror groups, thereby worsening the security situation in the country. Such other terror groups as ISWAP, the Bandits, the Fulani Herdsmen terror group, among others, which have turned to kidnapping gangs and Islamic jihadist outfits.

Iwuoha in an article, traced the history of conflicts and violence in Nigeria, which often take religious coloration. According to Iwuoha (2020: 121):

Several political problems assume religious dimensions; manipulated by politics, poverty, illiteracy and ignorance in Nigeria. Violence predicated on religious affiliation and religious policies has indeed caused physical and psychological damages to several people, thereby legitimizing religious schism among Nigerians who simply have different religious affiliations. It is therefore paramount that we look at factors responsible for religious violence in Nigeria since the inception of democracy in 1999 and to find out how religion can bring about peaceful co-existence.

An online article from researchclue.com elaborated on the causes and occurrence of incidents of hostilities, conflicts and violence in Nigeria. The article points out that due to differences in tribes and religious beliefs, there are several incidences of hostilities, resulting in destruction of lives and properties. Hostilities are recorded along the line of tribes and religions. Referring to Higazi (2011), it was noted that the various elements that underline conflict are ethnicity, politics and religion. The hostilities have turned out to be so pronounced that the peace and unity of the country is under threat. A number of these threats can be attributed to political crisis, militancy, land disputes, trade disputes, and religious crisis, among others. It has turned out to be very challenging for a person of a culture to live in another different culture or religion in Nigeria without the fear of being killed. This is probably the reason Olawale, (2013) tagged Nigeria a “security risk nation” to which many international communities have given warning to their citizens not to live or even travel to Nigeria.

The researchclue.com article referred above points out that:

Nigeria as a country has been experiencing several crises, social vices, and lack of cordial relationship among her citizens since independence, (Ajayi, 2015). In a good number of states in Nigeria, one will always hear various stories of violent conflict involving individuals or groups. For example, Odi Massacre in Bayelsa state, Urhobo - Iteskiri crisis in Warri, Jimeta clash in Jos, the Baddo crisis in Ikorodu, (Egwu, 2018), Boko Haram unrest in the northern states, among others. In all these conflicts, many individuals are displaced, properties are destroyed and lives are lost, (Orude, 2015). According to Obuseh (2016), Nigeria cannot live in peace because “of selfishness”. Corroborating the view of Obuseh (2016), Oluwaseun (2016) opined that, religion is as a threat to Nigeria’s peaceful co-existence. According to Oluwaseun (2016), it is easy for a Yoruba to marry an Efik than for a Muslim to marry a Christian and vice versa. This as well shows religious intolerance as a threat to unity.



The above narration goes a long way to prove that Nigeria is surely a theatre of conflicts, disputes and acrimonies which therefore require the contributions of various groups and individuals of goodwill including the church to work together with the government to achieve the much-desired peace and resolve arising conflicts among the various discordant groups.

From review of scholarly opinion, it becomes increasingly clear and obvious that though the conflicts and resultant violence are often attributed to religious factors, yet, facts on ground point to other factors other than religious as already noted above. For instance, according to Bakaki cited in Dimobika (2017; 244) on the role of religion in leadership for conflict resolution and peace-building, that religion have unjustly but undeniably been victimized as a cause of conflict and violence in the world today. According to the Bakaki (2015: 1) in the web article: "Ethnicity, nationalism, colonialism, economic struggles, terrorism, political insurgencies have put religion at the front-doors of violence and sometimes conflict theories may not thoroughly be able to analyse these factors." Be that as it may, it is still very obvious that conflicts and violence are prevalent in the Nigerian nation and this write-up goes ahead to investigate the role of the Church as a historical agent of peace-building and conflict resolution in Nigeria.

The Church's role in peace-building and conflict resolution

The church being a faith-based institution with overriding interest in the spiritual, socio-economic and wholistic well-being of the people and the society in general, therefore undertakes roles and activities geared toward the general good of the people and the society. However, at the national level, the church endeavours to play its role as an agent of peace-building and conflict resolution by forming relevant groups and engaging in various intra-faith and inter-faith discussions and negotiations for the purpose of achieving peace and resolving conflicts in the country. The church in Nigeria has historically functioned as vital pillar of peace-building, national integration, and conflict resolution. By bridging deep ethnic divides, advocating for social justice, and providing critical humanitarian support, the church serves as a non-partisan peacemaker in Nigeria's complex, multi-religious landscape. This is according to an online article in the *Global Journal of Human-social science*.

On its part, an article from researchclue.com on the role of the Church in ensuring peace and harmony in the society, first traced the history of the church's entrance into Nigeria and the ground work done in laying the foundation for a peaceful and development-oriented society. The article opines that:

The successful expansion of the Christian missions in Nigeria started in the 19th century through the activities of freed slaves from Sierra Leone, (Anene, 2013). Missionaries' activities carried with it the building of schools, churches, roads, hospitals and of course other institutions of government. It should be borne in mind that social reforms came with Christianity-commitment to national, moral and political advancement. Christianity featured prominently in the series of events that led to the development of Nigerian nation, and were able to bring about certain political, economic and technological changes in the region, (Ajayi, 2015). Their activities helped to break down ethnic prejudices and to bring their converts in loyalty transcending ethnicities. Hence, patriotic Nigerians came to believe that by practicing Christianity they were paving the way for the creation of the Nigerian nation, (Anene, 2013). The Nigeria state of their dream was one in which Christianity would blossom, inter-ethnic wars would come to an end, and the industrial, technological and



intellectual revolutions which had occurred in Europe would repeat themselves in Nigeria. By encouraging a common consciousness, Christianity would reduce to a minimum all other sectional loyalties such as the many incipient tribal/crisis groups that divided Nigeria, (Okwueze, 2013).

The researchclue.com article further points out that the role of the church in peacemaking and harmony is strengthened by the fact that the social and political crisis in the society questions radically the message of the gospel. Referring to Sindole (2010), it notes that peace is the tranquility that flows from right order. When we put right order into the structures of our society, the tranquility that results is peace, referring to Lederach, 2013.

Researchclue.com also notes that;

A number of people see peace as the absence of war or violence. In peace building efforts by the church, peace is seen as the transformation of contextual and destructive interactions into more co-operative and constructive existence, (Ejikeme, 2016). The above brings us to the role that church can play in ensuring peace and harmony in the Nigerian society. A number of scholars are of the opinion that, Christianity cannot play any role towards peace building because religion itself is arguably one of the single most significant causes of war and turmoil in human history, (Abu-Nimer 2014, Gopin 2016). So much malevolence have been done in the name of religion, (Ayer 1976, Cited in Collins et al. 2012). However, so much good has as well been done in the name of religion.

Thus, overwhelming scholarly opinion supports the view that the church plays commendable and outstanding roles in peace-building and conflict resolution in Nigeria and elsewhere. The church's contributions to peace and national stability are realized through several key historical and practical roles:

1. Post-Civil War Reconciliation (1970s onwards)

Following the devastating Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the Church stepped into a fractured society lacking formal truth-and-reconciliation mechanisms and played vital roles in putting the nation and people back together and on their feet through playing key and vital roles:

Humanitarian Aid: Denominations like the Roman Catholic Church and the Christian Council of Nigeria coordinated relief efforts for displaced and starving populations, transcending tribal affiliations.

Trauma Healing: Clergy used sermons, joint prayer sessions and community rebuilding to process grief, discourage vengeance, and foster forgiveness among communities on both sides of the conflict.

2. Interfaith Dialogue and Mediation

In regions prone to ethno-religious tension such as the Middle Belt and parts of Northern Nigeria (e.g., Jos, Kaduna and Taraba states) – the Church actively mediates disputes.

- **Ecumenical Initiatives:** Bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN founded in 1976) worked to establish frameworks for cooperation, not only among Christian denominations but also across the religious divide.
- **Peace Committees:** Church leaders frequently participate in local arbitration panels and interfaith peace councils to de-escalate violence and negotiate truces between conflicting ethnic groups and communities.



3. Advocacy and truth to power

The church has consistently served as the conscience of the nation, denouncing bad governance, corruption, and systemic injustice – root causes of unrest:

- **Policy Advocacy:** Church leaders and bishops regularly issue public statements condemning human rights violations and challenging the government to uphold democratic principles, protect vulnerable citizens, and decentralize security structures, to curb kidnapping and insurgency. For instance, in a Communique issued at the end of the 2025 Diocesan Synod of Orlu Anglican Diocese, the following statements were issued on the state of the nation and policy advocacy to the Government:
Synod condemns in strong terms, the level of insecurity in the Nation and calls on the Government to secure life and property. Synod urges all communities to be conscious of the security situation in the State by enforcing an effective vigilante operation. Synod also calls on our community leaders and traditional rulers to ensure that our bushes/forests are properly guarded to avoid it being a hiding place for miscreants (Orlu Diocesan Synod report 2025: 184).
- **Representation:** By standing up to marginalized communities, the church has historically given a voice to the oppressed in socio-political matters. On this regard, the Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Orlu in his Presidential Address to the 2025 Orlu Diocesan Synod spoke on behalf of the marginalized, pointing out that:
Marginalization is still marching like a giant in our nation Nigeria. There is an Aircraft in Nigeria called “United Nigeria.” Marginalization in Nigeria to date is multifaceted including ethnicity, gender, class, intergenerational conflicts, labour relation and religious polarization to mention a few. But any time I see that name, I begin to wonder whether marginalization has become the order of the day in the country, (Orlu Diocesan Synod Report 2025: 101).

The above portrays the fact that the Church is surely standing up for the marginalized and giving voice to the voiceless and the oppressed in the land.

4. Grassroots reorientation and youth engagements

The Church directly targets the drivers of conflict by moulding the moral and socio-economic character of its congregations.

Youth Mentorship: Churches implement programs focused on instilling values of non-violence, tolerance, and self-reliance, preventing youth from being radicalized or drawn into gang and militant activities.

Social Gospel: By emphasizing biblical teachings of Shalom (peace), the Church promotes reconciliation, empathy, and peaceful coexistence as essential tenets of the Christian faith.

Findings:

The following findings were made from this research:

- The Church by its nature, origin and function is a veritable instrument for peace-building and conflict resolution both in Nigeria and elsewhere
- The Nigerian nation, though in dire need of sustainable development is often riddled and plagued with conflicts, divisions and insecurity, which have been long-running problems even from the period of the country’s independence.
- The problems of conflict and divisions in the land have resulted from various factors, including ethnic and tribal differences, religious differences and struggle for resource control, and also the quest for power and domination.



- Thus, there has been political crisis, militancy, land disputes, trade disputes, and religious crisis, among others in Nigeria.
- In the midst of these problems, conflicts and divisions, the nation is faced with the task of searching for solutions to its multiple problems, as well as seeking possible partners who will serve as agents of peace-building and conflict resolution. One of such partners is the church.
- The Church and her leaders in Nigeria have the potential to manage and resolve conflicts with their religious values and principles, which involve love, forgiveness, justice, peace and tolerance.
- The church endeavours to play her role as an agent of peace-building and conflict resolution by forming relevant arms and groups charged with the task of engaging in both intra-faith and inter-faith discussions and negotiations for the purpose of achieving peace and resolving conflicts in the country.
- Thus, the church in Nigeria has historically functioned as vital pillar of peace-building, national integration, and conflict resolution by bridging deep ethnic divides, advocating for social justice, and providing critical humanitarian support, thereby serving as a non-partisan peacemaker in Nigeria's complex, multi-religious landscape.
- The church's contribution to peace and national stability are realized through several historical and practical roles, such as Post-Civil War reconciliation (1970s onwards), through providing humanitarian aid and trauma healing. The church also engages in interfaith dialogue and mediation in regions prone to ethno-religious tensions.
- Church bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), work to establish frameworks for cooperation not only among Christian denominations but also across the religious divide. Church leaders participate in local arbitration panels and interfaith peace councils to de-escalate violence and negotiate truces between conflicting ethnic groups and communities.
- The church also serves as the conscience of the nation, denouncing bad governance, corruption and systemic injustice which are the root causes of unrest.
- The church as well directly targets the drivers of conflicts by moulding the moral and socio-economic character of its congregation through youth mentorship and social gospel programs.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The church should maintain and even increase its momentum of the task of peace-building and conflict resolution in the face of increasing threats to life and property and security challenges in the land.

The government should encourage the church and other religious bodies in the works they do for the good of the society and the nation by collaborating with them when necessary and by giving ear to their recommendations on the burning issues and arising conflicts in the land.

The government should periodically provide sponsorship to the church and other religious organizations to assist them carry out their planned programs, which are aimed at building peace, curbing youth restiveness and providing empowerment for youths, resolving conflicts and maintaining stability in the land.

The government should also play its own roles with sincerity of purpose, fairness, justice and a level-playing ground for the entire citizenry to reduce conflicts and frictions and discourage the citizenry from resorting to violence and confrontation to receive their due rights and privileges as bona fide citizens of the land. By so doing, the land will be peaceful and the citizens will go



about their lawful duties without fear of harassment, marginalization, intimidation or infringement of their rights.

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