



Research Paper

From Pulpit to Pavement: A Journey Through Religious Dialogue and Nation-Building in Nigeria

Clement Usen Eton Ph.D

*Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts.
University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State Nigeria,*

Mbosowo Bassey Udok Ph.D

*Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts.
University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State Nigeria,*

Imaobong Michael Utip

*Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts.
University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State Nigeria*

Abstract

This paper explores the significance of interreligious dialogue as a means of fostering sustainable peace and nation-building amidst the diverse religious landscape of Nigeria. Although religion has played an important part in moral development, educational and political progress, the misuse of religion through such practices as exclusivism and fundamentalism has resulted in violence, insecurity, and socio-economic decline. This paper will pay particular attention to Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous Religion as it considers the effects of religion as a beneficial and detrimental force in the social order. Through the use of historical, documentary, and socio-theological approaches, this paper will explore religious conflict in Nigeria from the time of the Maitatsine insurrection right through to the recent activities of the Boko Haram terrorist group and farmer/herder conflicts. Such conflict has been responsible for the erosion of societal harmony and development and this paper suggests that the reason behind continued intolerance lies in the notion of absolute truths and inability to tolerate religious pluralism. It proposes that interreligious dialogue based on mutual respect and theological openness between religions could turn such conflict into nation-building.

Keywords: Religious Dialogue; Peacebuilding; Interfaith Relations; Public Theology; Nigeria; Social Cohesion.

Received 06 July., 2026; Revised 15 July, 2026; Accepted 17 July, 2026 © The author(s) 2026.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

Religion is one of the strongest social institutions that influences social behaviour, values and collective identity. Faith is a force that cannot be matched in shaping Nigeria's public life, politics and community relations, a society that is deeply Christian, Islamic and African Indigenous Religious. While religious institutions have played significant roles in education, moral development, and social development, they have also been found to be responsible for violent conflicts, social divisions, and political instability (Falola 1998).

The double face of the religion in Nigeria, its building and its destruction, poses critical questions on its role in national development. Religious violence has been caused by fundamentalism and exclusivist ideology, resulting in loss of life, destruction of infrastructure and loss of national unity. The Maitatsine uprising of 1980s, Kaduna crises that have occurred several times over the years, Boko Haram insurgency, and the frequent farmer-herder conflict show the extent of this challenge (Adesoji 2011; Brottem 2021).

This paper suggests that interreligious dialogue is a viable option for changing the Nigerian religious diversity from a conflict-ridden to a conflict-laden resource for peace and development. It builds on three theoretical foundations, namely: Conflict Theory (Marxian/ Neo-Marxist) to examine the social effects of

economic deprivation and manipulative elite behavior that generate religious power struggles; Durkheimian Functionalism to analyse the integrative and disruptive social roles of religion; and Religious Pluralism Theory, which provides the basis for a position that is willing to accept a variety of legitimate religious views in order to facilitate genuine dialogue. These frameworks are not used separately, but are invoked as the paper progresses to shed light on various aspects of Nigeria's religious context.

The Nature of Religion: A Dualistic Perspective

Religion holds both a unifying and dividing quality, thus in order to evaluate the current circumstances of Nigeria, one must first look at this dual role of religion. Using Durkheim's Functionalism as a foundation, religion creates social cohesion, in that it provides symbols and rituals that allow "groups" to come together and create their own identity as group members (Durkheim 1912; Thompson 2018). The effectiveness of this organization can be seen in how faith-based communities organize social services, mediate community disputes, and provide citizens with a moral framework for dealing with the political system.

Conversely, using the same Durkheimian framework helps demonstrate and explain how religion has the capacity for division: communities can define themselves by their boundaries and use those boundaries to exclude others; thus, a religious group emphasizing their cohesion can cause its members to be hostile towards members of other groups. Here, Conflict Theory becomes an essential lens. Religion, according to the Marxian tradition, is much more than spiritual in nature; it is a social institution based upon structures of power and inequality. Nigerian political elites have often utilized religious identification as a means of mobilizing constituents, reprieving economic grievances, and maintaining patronage networks (Falola 1998; Brottem 2021). As a result, when people establish religious violence, it should be seen not from an exclusively theological position, but as a function of poverty, exclusion, and governmental inadequacy at distributing wealth in an equitable manner.

Throughout history, religion has played a significant role in the development of Nigerian society. Missionary efforts associated with Christianity set up the foundations for westernized education in southern regions, while the traditions of Islam provided a framework for literacy and government structures in northern areas (Murthy 2016). Religion has brought healthcare, community social services, and professional groups into being. On the other hand, exclusivism, which consists of belief that a particular tradition is exclusive in its possession of the Truth and is fundamentally wrong in comparison with any other religious tradition, has led to prejudice, ethnocentrism, and social disintegration (Ajibola 2023). The contradictory nature of religion cannot be explained by accident; it is inherent to its very essence.

Religious Fundamentalism and Conflict in Nigeria

Nigeria's history of religiously-coded conflict is long and complex, but the pattern it shows is consistent with the above Conflict Theory; in Nigeria, religious identity is most volatile when meeting with economic deprivation, ethnic grievance and political manipulation. The Maitatsine uprising of the early 1980s that claimed the lives of thousands in Kano, Maiduguri, Kaduna and Yola was a turning point. Adesoji (2011) contends that Maitatsine was the first significant example of a charismatic Islamic preacher who took advantage of marginalization and poverty in the urban setting to incite mass violence against the Nigerian state and the already existing Muslim institutions. The fault lines between Christians and Muslims in Kaduna State were further deepened by the subsequent Kafanchan riots in 1987 and the Zangon-Kataf conflict in 1992, each of which engendered new grievances that made the next more likely to happen (Ibrahim 1989; Wikipedia 2025). The Jos' recurrent crises, since the early 2000s, are emblematic of how historical grievances are exacerbated by electoral contestation and land conflicts to create an unabated cycle of communal violence (Abdullahi, Abdullahi, and Igbashangev 2024).

Boko Haram was a qualitative escalation in 2009. The group came from a situation of extreme poverty and neglect by the state in the northeast Nigeria where the youth unemployment rate was one of the highest in the country and where the formal state had basically withdrawn from service delivery. The vacuum created by this insurgency was exploited by the insurgents and as reported by Okwara (2023), the insurgency made religious extremism a full-blown armed conflict that threatened the territorial integrity of Nigeria and created one of the largest IDPs crisis in the world. The Boko Haram insurgency and related violence have displaced over two million people in the north-east of Nigeria. Tens of thousands have been killed in the battle, and violence is expected to persist up to 2026, because of both Boko Haram and its splinter group ISWAP. (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2026). The Conflict Theory lens is helpful here, because Boko Haram is not simply a product of religion. As a result of a certain political economy of exclusion, the religious ideology served as the language for articulating discontent with a government that appeared to be corrupt, apathetic, and culturally different.

The farmer-herder conflict is another facet of religious-fuelled violence, albeit one that is different. The conflict is concentrated in the Middle Belt, but has been spreading southward, with herders mostly of the Fulani ethnic group and farms mostly of the farming community clashing over land and water resources increasingly limited by climate change and demographic pressures. The farmer-herder conflicts, which were documented by Brottem (2021), resulted in the deaths of between 15,000 and 19,000 persons from the late 1990s to 2020, and nearly 2,500 persons were killed during the farmer-herder clashes in 2016 alone; more than Boko Haram claimed in that year. They have displaced hundreds of thousands of people, especially in the plateau, Benue and Taraba States. Nigeria's agricultural belt, known as the 'Food Basket of Nigeria', has been ravaged by the violence, causing food insecurity and humanitarian crises as a result of the structural disadvantages already facing the affected communities. The environmental and economic causes of the conflict are clear, but the religious aspects have been, and are, being deliberately overemphasized by political actors on both sides, complicating the process of resolving it and increasing the need for dialogue.

Religion and National Development

Human development is a complex idea that includes economics, social support, politics, and human quality of life. Wosu (2016) provides a broad definition of this term as providing a constant enhancement of human quality of life through the application of the full scope of resources. The connection between religion and development in Nigeria also has two sides.

Throughout the colonial era and through independence, both Christian and Islamic missions provided the majority of formal education to Nigerians. They also provided most of the professionals needed to fill the positions of the new post-colonial Nigerian government and thus helped spur economic growth. Religious healthcare programmes still provide health services to rural communities where there are few or no other health services available.

The teachings of the three major religions have provided a foundation for developing moral values that are fundamental for both social development and economic success (i.e., honouring values of non-violence, integrity, compassion, and social unity). Social trust is the primary mechanism by which market economies, democratic governments, and all forms of social organization and support function.

Weber's (1930) controversial theory regarding the relationship between Protestant ethics and capitalist development notwithstanding, it is an undisputed fact that religion influences economic behaviour in many societies around the world. In Nigeria, for instance, the focus on hard work, saving and societal obligations in the teachings of both Christianity and Islam has had considerable effects on the development of entrepreneurship as well as community welfare structures in the country. Politically too, religion has played a critical part in ideological movements as well as the development of governance systems, from the integration of Sharia law into the administration of the Sokoto Caliphate to the involvement of Christians in the pro-democracy struggles of the 1990s.

It goes without saying that the politicization of religion continues to undermine development efforts in the region. Religious violence leads to the destruction of property, displacement of productive members of the society and even diversion of government resources meant for development investments. This not only creates problems for the market system but undermines the social capital necessary for the smooth running of such a system.

African Indigenous Religion and Peacebuilding

The contribution of AIRs to the peace-building discourse is often marginalized and neglected in Nigeria. In African traditional belief systems, Mbiti (1990) points out, communal life and social regulation have always been deeply influenced and shaped by these beliefs, affecting ethical behavior, problem solving, and social harmony, even in the presence of nominal conversion to Christianity or Islam. This is where the functionalist paradigm can be of great value: the stress on communal belonging, ancestral responsibility and social rupture's spiritual impact provides a social integrative function of AIR systems.

African Indigenous Religions can generally be seen from a relational and communal perspective that sees social conflict as not merely the disruption of interpersonal relations but rather as a disruption within a more encompassing spiritual and social context. This worldview embraces restorative not punitive responses to justice, centering on repairing the relationship, not punishing the individual. Empirical evidence exists of the mediation functions of elders, traditional leaders, and ritual restorations in the community level in all Yoruba-Igbo Valley and Benue Valley societies (Meyer 2006).

It is however cautioned in contemporary scholarship that these systems should not be romanticized. They are effective in different contexts and have been undermined in many areas by modernization,

centralization of justice and social pressures of religious pluralization. The more fruitful framing is the one that sees AIR-based mechanisms as complementary tools that can be used to work alongside existing, formal peace-building processes, especially in rural and semi-formal governance contexts where they have local legitimacy and availability and therefore reach that other formal processes do not. (Meyer 2006)

Religious Dialogue as a Framework for Peace

Religion in Nigeria has both potential to help propel national development and potential to undermine efforts towards national development due to being a source of division amongst people. Utilizing Durkheim's Functionalist and Conflict Theory perspectives highlights how religion has both the ability to integrate groups of people as well as being used as a tool to separate them when governments fail and inequality is widespread. This raises the practical question, 'What mechanisms can help to move the centre on this issue?' This paper argues that the best way to answer this question is through structured inter-religious dialogue as endorsed by the Religious Pluralism Theory.

Inter-religious dialogue is defined as the constructive engagement (or communication) between individuals representing different religious traditions working toward the positive development of mutual understanding and common cooperation. A significant turning point related to interfaith engagement occurred with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) marking an institutional recognition of the Catholic Church's theological and pastoral commitment to interfaith initiatives (Shaffer 2017). Therefore, as Hans Küng stated, "there will never be peace between nations, unless there will be peace between religions". This quote helps emphasize that, in multicultural societies, the nature of the relationships between different faiths is a matter of public interest (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs 2021). In addition, dialogue can address the root causes of religious conflict by combating stereotypes and prejudices that create obstacles for people to relate to each other and develop a relational framework for working together when tensions rise.

Models of Religious Engagement

Three models that are discussed by comparative religions scholars, with regard to how faith groups interact with other faith groups, include exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. These models are important, since they bear implications on dialogue and coexistence in countries like Nigeria.

Exclusivism entails the belief that only one religion has the saving truth while all other religions suffer from fundamental error. There are distinct boundaries between religious insiders and outsiders and mission is usually regarded as a duty involving boundary-crossing conversion of others. When it takes its strongest form, it leads to the sort of religious animosity that hinders sustained dialogue, and if it is politicized, it may escalate into overt hostility. Exclusivist stances taken by the Maitatsine and some allies of Boko Haram movements are the strongest forms of exclusivism.

However, inclusivism is midway through these two options, because it acknowledges that other religions may provide some form of truth or knowledge about the ultimate reality, yet the individual's own religion gives him/her the fullest knowledge about the same ultimate reality. Inclusivism is related to the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council and can foster both discussion and cooperation while holding fast to one's doctrinal belief. It is also referred to as the type of theology practiced by religious leaders in Nigeria, participating in interfaith forums without abandoning their own religion (Shaffer 2017).

The pluralistic stance that involves people such as John Hick who are followers of different religions believes that there are a number of religious beliefs that are true and provide culturally unique answers to the ultimate reality and that none of them has access to the truth or salvation. (Hick 2004). The pluralistic stance is the most theoretical foundation on which a profound dialogue can be established among Nigerians since it addresses the issue of asymmetry that prevents a dialogue from being an equal one. Those critics who say that if pluralism is understood as 'all are equal' irrespective of any implication or content will find a relativistic interpretation of it. This problem can be solved by avoiding giving up pluralism and distinguishing epistemic humility about the question of ultimate meaning and being accountable for coexisting.

Benefits of Religious Dialogue

There is a theoretical argument for structured interreligious dialogue in Nigeria, but there is also evidence of the results of structured interreligious dialogue that is well-designed and well-resourced. Evidence shows there are a number of specific advantages.

The one that stands out as the simplest is the decrease of stereotyping and inter-community mistrust. Religious leaders and community members meet in structured dialogue settings and find one another as persons not as threatening abstractions. The findings from the studies of dialogue programmes in conflict contexts are consistent with the general contact hypothesis in social psychology (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006)

that prejudice can be significantly decreased through direct contact between two groups when there is mutual equality of status and shared purpose. In the context of Nigeria, this means the type of interpersonal relationships between imams and pastors that have been recorded as a factor that mitigates violence when political actors were trying to incite violence in communities.

Dialogue also provides an opportunity to discover common values which are not doctrinally defined. In all three traditions, principles of justice, family integrity, community welfare, and sanctity of human life offer common ground for shared action across the three traditions across Nigeria and beyond. In Nigeria, interfaith coalitions have been assembled around health promotion initiatives, educational services, anti-corruption efforts, and disaster relief, and shared action on practical issues has helped to establish the trust in relationships that facilitates subsequent dialogue and action (Appleby and Carlson 2001).

Religious leaders have a certain moral authority that non-secular politicians sometimes do not possess, especially in communities with low trust in the state. But when these leaders speak together in favor of peace, their message goes to the constituencies that formal political communication cannot reach. This is the principle behind NIREC's deployment during the Jos crises, and the IDFP's network of community-level mediators: Faith leaders as first responders to social tension.

Institutionalizing Religious Dialogue in Nigeria

It is important to understand that interreligious dialogue cannot just happen accidentally. There has to be a certain infrastructure which will provide opportunities for discussion despite any pressures that may exist politically to discourage it. Over the years since 1999, Nigeria has made a number of efforts toward such an infrastructure, making it one of the best developed in sub-Saharan Africa.

The oldest and most well-known platform of these is the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC). Established on September 11, 1999, with an inauguration date of September 29, 1999, it was supported by then-President Olusegun Obasanjo, who viewed it as a creation stemming from authentic religious leaders rather than being created through government. (Odumosu, Olaniyi & Alonge, 2009). Initially there were 50 members identified equally from Christian and Muslim communities, however, this was changed by expanding to 60 members in March 2019 to ensure that women and young people were represented on the council. NIREC is jointly led by the Sultan of Sokoto and the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria which gives the council a unique stature among all Religious Councils existing within the country; thus setting up a level of symbolic authority that is unmatched by any other representative body. The mandate of NIREC includes advising government agencies on matters relating to ethnically-derived inter-religious conflict, promoting greater access and dialogue among ethnic groups, and encouraging appropriate responses to inter-religious tensions, crises and strife in Nigeria.

In September 2016, a KAICIID convened conference marked the inception of the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP), which was fully operational in 2017 after consultations with over eighty stakeholders and local partners (KAICIID 2023). The IDFP is a locally owned, legally registered body with a General Assembly of some 110 religious and community leaders, a Central Coordination Council of 40 and a ten member Executive Council, while NIREC works predominantly at the national leadership level. Its areas of work include social cohesion, interfaith education, sacred site protection, countering hate speech and media engagement. The IDFP has set up interfaith early warning and mediation centres in Taraba, Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Zamfara, Niger and Rivers States, which provide a common mechanism for resolving tensions and conflicts between Christians and Muslims before they escalate into violence.

The Interfaith Code of Conduct (ICoC) was co-developed by Christian Association of Nigeria, Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and IDFP. It was launched in August 2023, in Abuja, Nigeria, and is based on Biblical and Quranic teachings, providing religious leaders with a common ground with shared respect, dignity, truth, and transparency (KAICIID 2023). The ICoC is not binding, but offers a normative benchmark with a common language for religious leaders in the entire country to use in their public responsibilities. At the governmental level, President Bola Tinubu in 2024 directed NIREC to encourage congregations to engage in peaceful coexistence and consensus-building in Nigeria; and KAICIID and Nigeria's Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution have formed a partnership specifically aimed at translating outcomes of dialogue into Nigeria's national peacebuilding policy (This Day Newspaper 2025; KAICIID 2025).

Importance of Institutionalization

A peace summit is different from a peace institution. While summits create short-term communiqués as a result of an event, institutions create ongoing relationships and habits between people that last beyond just one event. Because the IDFP meets every three months and every six months, the communication amongst IDFP members continues even if there is no active crisis that would bring them together. This is important because

conflicts do not start as explosions, they start as rumors, misunderstandings, and grievances that build over weeks before someone finally commits an act of violence. Through the partnership between KAICIID and IPCR, religious leaders address issues at the community level and provide feedback to civil servants in Abuja who are responsible for making decisions related to these issues. The inclusion of local ownership in IDFP's structure and in the Interfaith Code of Conduct (ICoC), both of which are designed and led by Nigerians, increases both the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacebuilding. In addition, in high-risk states, mechanisms have been created that provide early warning of and response to tensions before they escalate into violence, which will allow for more timeliness and prevention of violence (WANEP 2021).

Challenges to Full Institutionalization

While building institutions can be done quite easily, making such institutions work effectively is an entirely different story. For instance, while Nigeria's institutional structure for interfaith cooperation certainly shows great promise, there are certain problems it must overcome besides its successes. One such problem is elitism. According to Conflict Theory, the lack of equal opportunities to exercise power and acquire resources might cause the peacebuilding process to reinforce the social hierarchy that exists in society. Researchers of interreligious relations in Nigeria point out that elitism is particularly prevalent among interreligious dialogues, with only religious elites, scholars, and politicians participating in these activities. It has been criticized for being detached from the reality on the ground, especially when addressing issues of local communities affected by religious violence, recruitment into radical groups, and everyday dynamics of interreligious conflict (Ojieabu and Oyinloye 2026).

Secondly, quality can be an issue when engaging in conversation. In order for there to be productive dialogue there needs to be adequate listening during this exchange of ideas, as well as a genuine desire to find common ground. Research shows that when interfaith meetings occur in a conflictual situation and are poorly facilitated, the group can move from an open dialogue into a closed debate, thus reinforcing their original position rather than expanding on any of the ideas presented. Thirdly, when a community experiences violence at the hands of the security forces and has experienced or is experiencing governmental support, that support can actually decrease the level of legitimacy in a process or initiative; this is one of the reasons why community driven, interfaith security arrangements have developed in many areas as alternatives to existing state security arrangements. The final challenge arises from the missionary nature (or message) of both Christianity and Islam in relation to what is required for proper dialogue between faiths. Addressing this challenge does not require communities to reject their beliefs but will necessitate leaders who are able to hold on to their belief while at the same time having sufficient intellectual humility to listen properly (Ayankojo, 2026).

Educational Curricula

Education forms citizens who will either make use of the structures created by institutions for dialogue or bypass them. The working of religious education in public schools in Nigeria is based on the Nigerian Policy on Education and is managed by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, NERDC. It's confessional and parallel, with Christian students studying Christian Religious Knowledge and the Muslim students studying Islamic Studies, both of which are required in their respective stream. These subjects are part of a broader category of subjects called Religion and National Values, which were last comprehensively approved in 2013 and started to be implemented in September 2014 (Vanguard 2017).

This is a model of the confessional, with historical roots. During colonial times, Islamic and Christian education were provided in different schools in the north and south respectively, and the federal curriculum framework received this split between Islamic and Christian schools. Thus pupils with various religious backgrounds pass through over a decade of schooling with little planned contact with the religious perspective of neighbours. With the framework of Pluralism Theory, this is the type of learning environment that results in citizens who are ready to live exclusivism but not ready to live in pluralism. It is argued that the syllabi have more doctrinal content than critical thinking, thereby producing graduates oriented towards religious instruction and not the diverse society (Ayankojo 2026).

There has been some controversy that has been heated about the curriculum. In 2017, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) protested against the subordination of the Christian Religious Knowledge in the broader subject grouping on the part of NERDC. In response, Professor Ismail Junaidu, Executive Secretary of NERDC explained that CRK would continue to be part of the school curriculum and no pupil would be compelled to study beyond their faith system (Awojulgbe 2017). In more recent years, in 2025, there were concerns raised about content in some Primary School resources, alleging some pages promoted one faith tradition as superior to other traditions, which conflicts with the Constitution (This Day 2025). The trend consistently pointed to by researchers is towards a more pluralistic pedagogical model, one which does not ask the student to give up their beliefs, but to be given opportunities to learn of other traditions and to gain the

critical engagement that is essential for genuine coexistence. The recent curriculum changes in Ghana at junior secondary level, especially the implementation of competency-based and standards-based curriculum, have been a point of interest to education policymakers in Africa and could have implications for curriculum development in Nigeria (Abubakari, Abudu, and Quansah 2025).

Government and Religious Partnerships in Nigeria

In Nigeria, there is a constitutional ban on the federal and state governments adopting any religion as a state religion. But in reality, successive governments have developed relationships with religious figures and organizations to form partnerships to enhance governance, especially with regard to social cohesion and dispute resolution ((Jurist.ng 2026). NIREC is an interfaith organization and not a government body, but has served as a key advisory and mediation body on religious affairs. NIREC has tried to alleviate interreligious tensions and foster reconciliation between Muslim and Christian communities through dialogue initiatives, peace missions and interactions with stakeholders in conflict areas like Jos, Bauchi, and Maiduguri (Faseke 2022; Paden 2015).

The ambivalence of the sacred, as Appleby and Carlson (2001) have described it, is inherent in the nature of religion and means that there are strong practical reasons for involving religious leaders in the social order, given that religion can produce violence and peace. The Conflict Theory framework and more recent empirical research have all pointed to poverty, political manipulation and governance failure as the main roots of the violence that is justified by religious sentiments and has been consistently pointed to by NIREC's co-chairs. Studies on ethno-religious conflict that have studied the situation in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023 indicated that religious tension has been consistently worsened by political manipulation, economic deprivation, and the absence of good governance system in Nigeria, where the political elite have manipulated religion for their own selfish interests (Nwachukwu 2025). In addition to NIREC, the KAICIID-supported Network of Policymakers and Religious Leaders is a forum for government officials and high-ranking religious leaders to meet in a specific manner to create preventive measures rather than just gathering when violence has already occurred.

In its religious freedom reports, the U.S. government has regularly reported that the Nigerian government has been engaging with religious leaders and promoting interfaith peacebuilding efforts as part of its efforts to decrease violence in the country (U.S. Mission Nigeria 2024). But experts have pointed out that the partnership modality has its limits. Dialogue meetings are not enough to solve the structural issues like mass unemployment, unequal resource distribution and the governance gap that gives the room to powerful interests to play with religious sentiment. In Nigeria, religious leaders and dialogue practitioners have underscored the importance of enhancing institutional capacities for interfaith dialogue and the need to strengthen interfaith dialogue through the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP), regional peace committees, and interfaith partnerships between religious institutions and government peacebuilding institutions. (International Dialogue Center KAICIID 2023). If these ideas haven't yet been embraced, they are a sign of a new awareness that to achieve peace, you need to invest in it, both institutionally and publicly.

Community-Based Dialogue Initiatives in Nigeria

National institutions and government partnerships set the framework, but the actual work of rebuilding trust between communities that have experienced violence happens at the community level. This is where Nigeria's community-based dialogue initiatives operate, and where some of the country's most carefully evaluated peacebuilding evidence has been generated.

Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) was a five-year program running from 2021 through 2025 and was funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In Nigeria, the JISRA program was implemented by Tearfund in collaboration with about fifty civil society organizations in Plateau and Kaduna States (Tearfund 2021). The JISRA initiative aimed at addressing religious violence and discrimination, reconciliation of communities, and building peaceful and inclusive societies through joint faith-community efforts. This program particularly paid attention to empowering women and youth as proactive actors involved in prevention of conflicts, promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts and development of freedom of religion/belief (Tearfund 2023). Participants of the close-out ceremonies conducted in 2025 claimed that there were positive changes in their attitude towards each other and increased cooperation among people with different religious affiliations. People who benefited from the project held by Tearfund in Plateau and Kaduna States confirmed the improvement of inter-faith as well as intra-faith relations with an increased role of women and youth in peacebuilding activities. (Okogba 2025; Plateau Reports 2025).

Mercy Corps and its partners implemented the USAID-supported Community Initiatives to Promote Peace program, CIPP, from 2017 to 2022 with a USD 15 million investment; training 46,000+ community members, including traditional leaders, women, men, and youth living in six Nigerian States (Benue, Kaduna,

Kano, Katsina, Kogi, and Plateau) during this period (U.S. Mission Nigeria 2024). The program's evaluation used a randomised controlled trial to compare post-intervention outcomes in CIPP communities to similar non-intervention communities. Notably, 29% of CIPP treatment communities had reported a violent incident, compared to 55% of control communities at the same time, despite there being a general increase in violence across the entire region (U.S. Mission Nigeria 2024). As such, this data represents some of the best available quantitative evidence for the efficacy of community/interfaith-based peacebuilding in Nigeria.

The Global Peace Foundation Nigeria adopted a complementary model through its One Family Under God model, whereby people from various faith groups engage in joint action in symbols. In the month of February 2025 during the World Interfaith Harmony week, the Global Peace Foundation Nigeria organized an advocacy visit to the Kaduna State Peace Commission involving members of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. In this regard, they were able to expand the interfaith framework beyond the existing model that only involves two religions (Mwangi 2025). All these community interventions focus on the process rather than prescription. The environment is set up in a manner that enables those who have reasons to distrust each other to engage in restoring relationships. Studies have shown that faith-based interventions could play a key role in transforming masculinity and addressing violent behavior within households and the wider society as well (Tearfund Learn 2021)

II. Conclusion

Much of Nigeria's experience of interaction with interreligious dialogue since 1999 is neither a success story to be uncritically celebrated nor a failure to be dismissed. It is an authentic, current and imperfect attempt to work for peace in one of the world's most religiously complex nations. All three theoretical frameworks presented in this paper converge to the same conclusion: that religion's integrative potential is real and can be brought to life through structured dialogue; that conflict theory asserts that dialogue cannot replace the "addressing of the structural conditions of poverty and political manipulation which generate violence" and that pluralistic theory gives the normative foundation on which a genuine dialogue between different traditions becomes possible.

The institutionalization structures that Nigeria has developed are real and are a great achievement. NIREC actively engages religious leaders at a high level; IDFP is co-ordinating early warning activities with the local ownership of the programme; ICoC is providing a normative reference for religious leaders; and community programmes, including CIPP, have resulted in measurable, independently evaluated decreases in violence. All the while, conversation will continue to be criticized as elitist as long as it does not reach those who are directly affected by the costs of conflict but those who are already at ease with one another. Faith based curricula during all of schooling can only help create a generation that is not well prepared to handle pluralism in all other aspects of their lives.

The way forward is to strengthen not just expand what is already there: linking the outcomes of religious dialogue into government policy; investing in local mediation centers to make early warning early response; ensure women and youth are partners in all aspects of the dialogue; reforming the educational curriculum so that the next generation is raised with an understanding of the benefits of religious diversity. Nigeria has the structures. The next ingredient is the political determination and investment required to get them to function where peace is either won or sacrificed: the community.

III. Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented in this paper, the following recommendations are made to religious leaders, policymakers, and other civil society actors:

1. Intensify the policy connection: The KAICIID-IPCR collaboration must receive more guidance in terms of translating dialogue outcomes into tangible policy proposals that reach the cabinets. A dialogue process that fails to influence policies will always remain confined within the four walls of a conference hall.
2. Invest in local mediation infrastructure: The interfaith early warning centers and mediations that have been set up by the IDFP in states vulnerable to conflicts must be supported financially to ensure that they continue their important roles as early responders. Governments should invest in establishing dialogue and mediation centers at the Local Government Area level as a means of creating permanent venues for resolving conflicts through interfaith dialogues, as suggested by Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama (KAICIID 2020).
3. Reform the curriculum of religious education: NERDC should lead an open, multi-partner review of the Religion and National Values curriculum with the specific goal of creating structured, age-appropriate

instructional content on multiple religious traditions at the high school level while continuing to include current content based on specific faith. The intended outcome is religious literacy, not secular uniformity.

4. Increase the advisory capacity of NIREC: The addition of more women and youth members to NIREC in 2019 was a positive step towards increasing the inclusion of diverse perspectives in decision-making. A logical next step would be to ensure that NIREC's recommendations are formally integrated into the decision-making process of the National Security Council, allowing NIREC to serve a genuine advisory function, as opposed to a ceremonial role.
5. Address structural drivers of conflict: Efforts to encourage religious dialogue cannot replace the governance reforms, economic investments, and anti-corruption steps required to relieve the political exploitation of religious identities among the vulnerability of the people of Nigeria. The focus on poverty alleviation and inclusive governance as the preconditions for peace must be recognised for more than just development of financial expenditure in these areas.
6. Sustain and scale community programmes: The findings of the USAID CIPP programme indicate that effective community peacebuilding is associated with substantial reductions in violence. As such, future financial commitments by both the Nigerian government and its international development partners should make a priority of sustained community-level infrastructure beyond the lifecycle of individual funding initiatives.

Bibliography

- [1]. Abdullahi, Shuaibu Haruna , Hussaina Abaji Abdullahi, and Paul Aondover Igbashangev. 2024. "Reporting Ethno Religious Conflict: The Jos Crises in the Nigerian Press." *International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies* 10 (1). <https://ejournals.org/ijirmmcs/vol10-issue-1-2024/reporting-ethno-religious-conflict-the-jos-crises-in-the-nigerian-press/>.
- [2]. Abubakari, Ibrahim, Amadu Musah Abudu, and Joseph Yaw Dwamena Quansah. 2025. "Determinants of the Effective Implementation of Common Core Curriculum in Ghanaian Junior High Schools." *International Journal of Changes in Education*, February. <https://doi.org/10.47852/bonviewijce52023992>.
- [3]. Adesoji, Abimbola. 2011. "Between Maitatsine and Boko Haram: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Response of the Nigerian State." *Africa Today* 57 (4): 99. <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.57.4.99>.
- [4]. Ajibola, Ilesanmi. 2023. "A Deconstruction of the Cross and the Crescent for Inclusive Religious Pluralism between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria." *Religions* 14 (6): 782–82. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060782>.
- [5]. Allport., Gordon W. 1954. "The Nature of Prejudice." 1954. https://faculty.washington.edu/caporaso/courses/203/readings/allport_Nature_of_prejudice.pdf.
- [6]. Appleby, R. Scott, and John Carlson. 2001. "The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation." *Journal of Law and Religion* 16 (2): 975. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1051762>.
- [7]. Awojugbe, Oluseyi . 2017. "It's an Ungodly Time Bomb -- CAN Rejects New Curriculum." *TheCable*. June 22, 2017. <https://www.thecable.ng/ungodly-time-bomb-can-rejects-new-curriculum/>.
- [8]. Ayankoji, Sulaiman Timilehin. 2026. "A Conceptual Framework for Mitigating Religious Conflict in Nigeria Using an AI-Driven Consensus Model." *International Journal of Religion and Societal Development* 3 (1): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.46654/gbzctm80>.
- [9]. Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs. 2021. "Keeping Faith in Interfaith Dialogue: Hans Küng and Global Religious Collaboration for Positive Peace." *Berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/keeping-faith-in-interfaith-dialogue-hans-kung-and-global-religious-collaboration-for-positive-peace*.
- [10]. Brottem, Leif . 2021. "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa." *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*. July 12, 2021. <https://africacenter.org/publication/growing-complexity-farmer-herder-conflict-west-central-africa/>.
- [11]. Durkheim, Emile. 1912. "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life." Translated by Karen Fields. New York: Free Press, 1995. 1912. https://monoskop.org/images/a/a2/Durkheim_Emile_The_Elementary_Forms_of_Religious_life_1995.pdf.
- [12]. Falola, Toyin. 1998. "Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies." Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press. 1998.
- [13]. Faseke, Babajimi Oladipo. 2022. "Forging an Interfaith Cooperation in a Multi-Religious Society: The Case of Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), 1999-2015." March 13, 2022. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359199692_Forging_an_interfaith_cooperation_in_a_multi-religious_society_The_case_of_Nigeria_Inter-religious_Council_NIREC_1999-2015.
- [14]. Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. 2026. "Nigeria." *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect*. August 6, 2026. <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/nigeria/>.
- [15]. Hick, John. 2004. "An Interpretation of Religion : Human Responses to the Transcendent." Internet Archive 2021. New Haven : Yale University Press. 2004. <https://archive.org/details/interpretationof000hick>.
- [16]. Ibrahim, Jibrin. 1989. "The Politics of Religion in Nigeria: The Parameters of the 1987 Crisis in Kaduna State." *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 45/46: 65–82. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4006011>.
- [17]. International Dialogue Center KAICIID. 2023. "Peace and Reconciliation through Interreligious Dialogue in Nigeria." March 2023. <https://www.kaiciid.org/what-we-do/we-work-regionally/africa/peace-and-reconciliation-through-interreligious-dialogue-nigeria>.
- [18]. Jurist.ng. 2026. "Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria." 2026. <https://jurist.ng/constitution/sec-10>.
- [19]. KAICIID. 2020. "Archbishop Kaigama: 'You Are Leaders Beginning from Today' ." KAICIID. May 19, 2020. <https://www.kaiciid.org/stories/features/archbishop-kaigama-%E2%80%9CYou-are-leaders-beginning-today%E2%80%9D>.
- [20]. KAICIID. 2023. "Bridging the Divide: Nigeria's Interfaith Code of Conduct Ushers in a New Era of Religious Harmony ." KAICIID. September 22, 2023. <https://www.kaiciid.org/stories/features/bridging-divide-nigeria%E2%80%99s-interfaith-code-conduct-ushers-new-era-religious-harmony>.
- [21]. KAICIID. 2025. "KAICIID and IPCR Strengthen Partnership to Advance Peace and Interreligious Dialogue in Nigeria." KAICIID. July 2025. <https://www.kaiciid.org/stories/news/kaiciid-and-ipcr-strengthen-partnership-advance-peace-and-interreligious-dialogue>.

- [22]. Mbiti, John S. 1990. African Religions & Philosophy. Google Books. Heinemann. <https://books.google.com.ng/books?id=eTUpo9IH-fYC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.
- [23]. Meyer, Birgit. 2006. "Religious Sensations. Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion." ResearchGate. unknown. 2006. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241889837_Religious_Sensations_Why_Media_Aesthetics_and_Power_Matter_in_the_Study_of_Contemporary_Religion.
- [24]. Murthy, M. N. 2016. "The Role of Religion in Shaping Political Beliefs and Practices." International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR) 3 (2). <https://www.ijrar.org/papers/IJAR19D6031.pdf>.
- [25]. Mwangi, Wairimu. 2025. "Commemorating World Interfaith Harmony Week 2025: GPF Nigeria Promotes Unity and Belonging through Interfaith Collaboration - Global Peace Foundation." Global Peace Foundation. February 19, 2025. <https://globalpeace.org/articles/commemorating-world-interfaith-harmony-week-2025-gpf-nigeria-promotes-unity-and-belonging-through-interfaith-collaboration/>.
- [26]. Nwachukwu, Okechukwu Felix. 2025. "The Impact Of Ethno-Religious Affiliations on National Security in Nigeria, 2015 and 2023." Multidisciplinary Journal of Law, Education and Humanities 2 (1). <https://www.nigerianjournalsonline.com/index.php/MJLEH/article/view/6115>.
- [27]. Odumosu, Olakunle, Rasheed Olaniyi, and Sunday Alonge. 2009. "Religions and Development Research Programme Mapping the Activities of Faith-Based Organizations in Development in Nigeria." <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08b6740f0b64974000b20/wp38.pdf>.
- [28]. Ojieabu, Stanley, and Muyiwa A Oyinloye. 2026. "Theology of Interreligious Dialogue in Nigeria: Foundations, Challenges, and Implications for Religious..." ResearchGate, April, 147–56. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/404464665_Theology_of_Interreligious_Dialogue_in_Nigeria_Foundations_Challenges_and_Implications_for_Religious_Education.
- [29]. Okogba, Emmanuel. 2025. "Plateau: JISRA's Peacebuilding Programme Leaves Legacy of Unity, Inclusion." Vanguard News. August 23, 2025. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/08/plateau-jisras-peacebuilding-programme-leaves-legacy-of-unity-inclusion>.
- [30]. Okwara, Emmanuel Chukwuma . 2023. "Boko Haram Insurgency and Its Implications on Nigeria's National Security." International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention 10 (01): 7577–85. <https://doi.org/10.18535/ijsshi/v10i01.03>.
- [31]. Paden, John . 2015. "Religion and Conflict in Nigeria Countdown to the 2015 Elections." United States Institution of Peace. [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR359-Religion-and-Conflict-in-Nigeria.pdf). <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR359-Religion-and-Conflict-in-Nigeria.pdf>.
- [32]. Pettigrew, Thomas F., and Linda R. Tropp. 2006. "A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 90 (5): 751–83. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.
- [33]. Plateau Reports. 2025. "JISRA Closes Five-Year Peacebuilding Programme, Leaves Legacy of Unity and Inclusion in Plateau." August 22, 2025. <https://plateareports.com/jisra-closes-five-year-peacebuilding-programme-leaves-legacy-of-unity-and-inclusion-in-plateau>.
- [34]. Shaffer, Branson. 2017. "Vatican II: The Radical Shift to Ecumenism." Academia.edu. September 15, 2017. https://www.academia.edu/34577708/Vatican_II_The_Radical_Shift_to_Ecumenism.
- [35]. Tearfund. 2021. "New 5-Year Peacebuilding Initiative to Promote Freedom of Religion or Belief in 7 Countries." 2021. <https://www.tearfund.org/stories/media/press-releases/2021/04/new-5-year-peacebuilding-initiative-to-promote-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-in-7-countries>.
- [36]. Tearfund Learn. 2021. "Research Reports: Masculinities, Faith and Peace in Nigeria." 2021. <https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/series/changing-gender-norms-transforming-masculinities/changing-gender-norms-masculinities-faith-and-peace/masculinities-faith-and-peace-in-nigeria>.
- [37]. Tearfund Learn. 2023. "Impact Reports: The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA)." 2023. <https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/impact-reports/the-joint-initiative-for-strategic-religious-action>.
- [38]. This Day Newspaper. 2025. "Tinubu Tasks Christians, Muslims on Peaceful Co-Existence, National Consensus – THISDAYLIVE." Thisdaylive.com. 2025. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/2025/05/01/tinubu-tasks-christians-muslims-on-peaceful-co-existence-national-consensus>.
- [39]. ThisDay Live. 2025. "Faith, Values & Education: Reforming Nigeria's Curriculum to Protect the next Generation – THISDAYLIVE." Thisdaylive.com. 2025. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/2025/09/26/faith-values-education-reforming-nigerias-curriculum-to-protect-the-next-generation/>.
- [40]. Thompson, Karl. 2018. "Emile Durkheim's Perspective on Religion." ReviseSociology. June 18, 2018. <https://revisesociology.com/2018/06/18/functionalist-perspective-religion-durkheim/>.
- [41]. U.S. Mission Nigeria. 2024. "United States Spent \$15 Million; Trained over 46,000 in Dispute Resolution for Northern and Middle-Belt Regions - U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria." U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Nigeria. April 23, 2024. <https://ng.usembassy.gov/united-states-spent-15-million-trained-over-46000-in-dispute-resolution-for-northern-and-middle-belt-regions/>.
- [42]. Vanguard. 2017. "CRK Not Removed from Schools' Curriculum - NERDC." Vanguard News. June 20, 2017. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/06/nerdc-says-crk-not-removed-from-schools-curriculum/>.
- [43]. WANEP. 2021. "Conflict "Prevention": Early Warning/Early Response ." WANEP-Nigeria - Building Relationships for Peace. July 29, 2021. <https://wanepnigeria.org/early-warning-early-response/>.
- [44]. Weber, Max. 1930. "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." <https://gpde.direito.ufmg.br/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/MAX-WEBER.pdf>.
- [45]. Wikipedia. 2025. "1992 Zangon Kataf Crises." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation. December 15, 2025.
- [46]. Wosu, Eze. 2016. "Development Theories and Culture Change in Nigeria." December 14, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh8r2b8.9>.