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Understanding the ecclesial model of conflict transformation from a study of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in Northern Nigeria

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Ethno-religious conflict remains a persistent challenge in Northern Nigeria, where religious communities navigate tensions between complicity and agency in peacebuilding. This article examines the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC)'s engagement in conflict transformation and develops a theologically grounded ecclesial model of peacebuilding. Drawing on Adehanloye's qualitative, interpretive case study and employing Lederach's conflict transformation theory, the study analyses the NBC's praxis through a theological–hermeneutical lens. Using thematic analysis, it identifies motifs of reconciliation, justice and peace (shalom) and demonstrates how the NBC mobilises moral authority, relational networks and ecumenical partnerships across executive, mid-level and grassroots structures to foster peace and interfaith engagement. The findings inform a multi-tiered ecclesial model of conflict transformation that integrates theological reflection with practical strategies, offering a contextually grounded framework for churches seeking to sustain peace in Northern Nigeria.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article offers a praxis-oriented theological framework that reflects the NBC's contextual witness and therefore contributes to broader discourses on religion and society, conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Africa.

Keywords: conflict transformation; ethno-religious conflict; Nigerian Baptist Convention; peacebuilding; religion and conflict.

Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society, with the Northern states in particular often marked by persistent conflict (Akanji 2021). A significant body of literature describes these recurrent crises as ethno-religious conflicts (Dike 2001; Salawu 2010). Salawu (2010) describes ethno-religious conflict as:

> [*A*] situation in which the relationship between members of one ethnic or religious group and another of such group in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is characterized by lack of cordiality, mutual suspicion and fear, and a tendency towards violent confrontation. (p. 346)

According to Egwu (2001:49), the term ethno-religious conflict more aptly denotes 'a form of conflict supposedly generated based on real or imagined "difference" rooted in ethnic and religious identities'. In Egwu's framing, such differences, grounded as they are in both grounded ethnic and religious identities, are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. This mutually reinforcing relationship between ethnic and religious identities is not unique to Northern Nigeria but is similarly recognised in other conflict contexts, such as Northern Ireland (cf. Sakupapa & Adehanloye 2025b). Yet, as Ruane and Todd (2010) demonstrate, the interrelation of ethnicity and religion assumes different patterns across settings. The intersection of these identities manifests in context-specific ways, with the relative weight and salience of each component shifting across particular historical and social circumstances (Ruane & Todd 2016:69). Importantly, Ruane and Todd (2010:6) caution that comparatively little attention has been paid to the historical variations in how these intersections evolve over time, underscoring the need for careful, context-sensitive analysis of ethno-religious conflict. In this article, we adopt Egwu's (2001) framing of ethno-religious conflict given that it highlights the 'mutually reinforcing relationships between ethnic and religious identities' (2001:49). Egwu's (2001) approach not only reveals how ethnic and religious identities are mutually reinforcing but also foregrounds the critical role of historical and social context in shaping the specific dynamics of ethno-religious conflict.

Adehanloye's (2024) empirical study found that although the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) is engaged in addressing ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria, its efforts lack a clearly defined theological or strategic framework. Building on Adehanloye's study, this article seeks to respond constructively by articulating an ecclesial model of conflict transformation. Adehanloye further observed that the NBC's approach tends to be hierarchical and top-down, often missing the vital contributions of mid-level leaders and community-based engagement. To address the above gaps, this article argues that a sustainable ecclesial approach to peacebuilding in Northern Nigeria must be both theologically rooted and relationally grounded. In light of this, we propose an ecclesial model of conflict transformation that draws from John Paul Lederach's Conflict Transformation theory and is shaped by core theological commitments.

This article draws on John Paul Lederach's theory of conflict transformation, which is often also referred to as an integrative because it transcends mere dispute resolution to address the deeper relational, structural and cultural forces that sustain conflict. Lederach's theory privileges relational approaches and the moral imagination of local actors – particularly mid-level leaders – as central to sustainable peace processes (Lederach 1999:27–29). In line with Lederach's theory, our analysis affirms the transformative potential of religious institutions when their theological resources are constructively harnessed. At the same time, we remain attentive to the contested and often ambivalent role of religion in conflict contexts. As Appleby (2000:1) rightly observes, 'Religion's ability to inspire violence is intimately related to its equally impressive power as a force for peace'. This ambivalent role of religion in conflict underscores the need for critical theological engagement with the role of the church not merely as an advocate for peace, but as a lived embodiment of reconciliation and social healing in fractured societies.

This article draws on both primary and secondary sources to engage with empirical insights from Adehanloye's field research on the NBC's involvement in conflict transformation, complemented by secondary literature on religion, peacebuilding and conflict dynamics in Northern Nigeria. This dual engagement allows for a contextualised and theoretically informed analysis that bridges lived ecclesial practice with broader scholarly debates on the ambivalence of religion in conflict contexts.

The article is organised into five main sections. Following this introductory section is a brief historical and institutional overview of the NBC. The third section explores key theological and ecclesiological themes central to a transformative understanding of the church's public witness in conflict-prone settings. Building on this foundation, the fourth section constructs an ecclesial model of conflict transformation informed by John Paul Lederach's theory, with particular attention to the strategic significance of mid-level religious leadership and relational praxis. The final section offers concluding reflections on the theological and missional implications of the proposed model, suggesting ways the church might embody a transformative presence in settings marked by religious and ethnic fragmentation.

Lederach's theory of conflict transformation

John Paul Lederach's theory of conflict transformation offers a rich conceptual foundation for reimagining the church's role in contexts of conflict. Rather than viewing conflict as a problem to be resolved or managed, Lederach (1995, 1997, 2015) conceives it as an opportunity for constructive change – emphasising transformation in relationships, attitudes, behaviours and social structures. At the heart of his approach is the conviction that sustainable peace requires more than formal agreements; it necessitates the long-term reweaving of the social fabric through processes rooted in justice, truth, mercy and peace (Lederach 1997:116).

Lederach critiques conventional top-down peace-making paradigms for their limited reach and lack of relational depth. Instead, he proposes a comprehensive, participatory model that foregrounds reconciliation, elicits local capacities for peace, and engages actors across all levels of society. His well-known leadership pyramid identifies three essential levels: top-level (state and elite actors), middle-range (religious leaders, academics and civil society) and grassroots (local communities). Particularly significant is his emphasis on middle-level actors – such as church leaders and laypersons – who possess both contextual knowledge and relational capital to mediate change from within (Lederach 1997:39).

Through metaphors such as the 'lens of transformation' and the 'map of conflict', Lederach highlights the importance of seeing conflict from multiple vantage points – focusing not only on immediate issues, but also on underlying relational patterns and systemic injustices (2015:8–14, 37–38). This multidimensional perspective is especially pertinent for ecclesial contexts, where faith communities often operate at the intersection of spiritual, social and political life.

Lederach's theory of conflict transformation has gained wide scholarly traction as a foundational peacebuilding framework, particularly for its emphasis on relational change, local agency and long-term structural transformation. Scholars such as Miall (2004) and Obiekwe (2009) underscore its value in addressing both immediate and systemic dimensions of intrastate conflict, especially in African contexts. Reflecting on Lederach's conception of peacebuilding as the long-term transformation of a war system into a peace system, Miall (2004:73) emphasises that this process entails 'changes in the personal, structural, relational and cultural aspects of conflict, brought about over different time-periods (short-, mid- and long-term) and affecting different system levels at different times'.

Obiekwe affirms the model's faith-based orientation and its emphasis on reconciliation and restorative relationships as

crucial to transforming violent conflict. Obiekwe (2009) writes, Lederach's definition of conflict transformation:

> [*I*]s to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships. (p. 6)

Similarly, Gilleland et al. (2011) apply Lederach's insights to post-war Liberia, emphasising the need for culturally rooted, locally led peace processes. Onwuegbuchulam (2014) further validates its effectiveness in post-conflict peacebuilding, noting its capacity to foster sustainable outcomes. Central to these applications is Lederach's focus on mid-level actors – particularly religious leaders – who serve as vital connectors between grassroots communities and elite structures. This multi-level, integrative approach renders Lederach's framework especially apt for ecclesial models of conflict transformation, where churches can harness their relational networks, theological resources and moral authority to promote reconciliation and systemic change from within.

A number of scholars in religion and theology have applied Lederach's theory. For instance, Shoko (2022) applies Lederach's theory of conflict transformation to demonstrate how Pentecostal and African Independent churches in Dzivarasekwa function as relational actors whose peacebuilding efficacy lies in their capacity to foster grassroots and mid-level engagement that transcends congregational boundaries. Another scholar, Plaut (2014), underscores the relevance of Lederach's peacebuilding pyramid by showing how the South Sudan Council of Churches shifted from elite-level diplomacy to strategically engaging grassroots and mid-level actors to influence political reconciliation.

We argue that Lederach's integrative framework provides fertile ground for the development of an ecclesial model of conflict transformation. His emphasis on local agency, dialogical processes and the moral imagination aligns closely with the theological vocation of the church as a reconciliatory presence in society. For the NBC, this means moving beyond hierarchical, top-down responses to conflict and cultivating a relational, multi-level strategy that mobilises mid-level leadership and engages the whole body of Christ in the work of peacebuilding.

The Nigerian Baptist Convention and ethno-religious conflict in northern Nigeria

The dynamics of ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria, along with the factors that sustain such tensions, have been explored in detail severally (Ngwoke & Ituma 2020; Onakuse & Jatula 2021). Elsewhere, we have analysed the complex interplay of religion, identity and political economy in the emergence of these conflicts through a theological and socio-historical reading (Sakupapa & Adehanloye 2025b:3–5). In 'Faith in flux', in particular, we have already provided a comprehensive account of the origins, drivers and key episodes of violent ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria (Sakupapa & Adehanloye 2025a). Therefore, we can only gesture to them here rather than rehearse the full analysis. As for the NBC's engagement in ethno-religious conflict transformation in Northern Nigeria, this has particularly been explored by Adehanloye (2024; see also Sakupapa & Adehanloye 2025a). Likewise, the historical and institutional development of the NBC has been thoroughly examined by a number of scholars (Ajayi 2010; Bamigboye 2000).[1] For the purposes of this article, it is important to note that the NBC is historically rooted among the Yoruba and remains most prominent in southern Nigeria. Statistically, the NBC comprised over eight million members nationally (Oyekan 2024).[2] In the predominantly Muslim North, however, the NBC is often regarded as a minority Christian denomination (Crampton 2004). Its presence in the region can be traced to 1914, when southern Baptist laypeople – primarily traders and civil servants – migrated to key northern towns such as Kaduna, Zaria, Kano, Jos and Minna following the amalgamation of the North and South of Nigeria (Ajayi 2010:128).

The role and strategies of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in conflict transformation

Recent empirical research has highlighted the NBC evolving engagement in conflict transformation within Northern Nigeria. Drawing on qualitative data, Adehanloye (2024:148–161) notes that the NBC's approach is marked by an emphasis on promoting peace and love as core Christian values. This orientation further translates into a consistent appeal to members to refrain from retaliatory violence and to embody relational ethics that foster mutual respect and peaceful coexistence with members of other religious communities.

Rather than adopting reactive or confrontational postures, the NBC seeks to cultivate a culture of nonviolence, undergirded by theological convictions about the sanctity of human life and the imperative of reconciliation.

Adehanloye's (2024) findings drew on empirical interviews, questionnaires, observations and archival materials to ascertain the strategies of the NBC in Northern Nigeria aimed at conflict transformation. Over half of the respondents (52.3%) to a questionnaire administered by Adehanloye confirmed their awareness of NBC initiatives dealing with ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria, while 28% reported no such programmes, and 15.9% viewed the question as not applicable. These results point to a generally favourable perception of NBC's engagement, although they also indicate potential gaps in awareness or programme implementation (Adehanloye 2024:174).

1. On the importance of Ogbomoso in the history of the NBC in Nigeria, see Ajayi (2011).

2. Other sources estimate the national membership to be around 10 million (https://www.nigerianbaptist.org/) and others indicate 9 million (https://baptistworld.org/member/nigerian-baptist-convention/).

Adehanloye's (2024) study found that the role of the NBC in addressing ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria was underscored in terms of the role of the NBC in preaching a message of peace and love, urging the embrace of nonviolence, and educating church members on their civic rights and the need for tolerance. These understandings of the role of the church in conflict transformation were shaped to various degrees by a number of factors. One such factors is the NBC tradition of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. Other factors included seminary training, which was cited by some respondents as 'playing a significant role in educating pastors and helping them understand the nature of different religions, including Islam' (Adehanloye 2024:153). Nevertheless, some respondents called for a reappraisal and revision of the theological curriculum to better prepare ministers to address contemporary challenges such as ethno-religious conflict (2024:154). Overall, the NBC has addressed ethno-religious conflict in northern Nigeria through initiatives such as awareness campaigns, intergroup dialogue and collaboration, the establishment of Internally Displaced Persons camps, provision of relief and funding, and training for individuals and groups involved in conflict transformation endeavours.

The NBC's engagement with ethno-religious conflict is further evident from the ways in which the church integrates interreligious dialogue within its mission training and programming. As Adehanloye's study shows, a majority (57%) of participants in his study affirmed that these mission initiatives included interreligious dialogue, whereas 17.8% indicated the absence of such dialogue, and 19.6% considered the question not applicable. This pattern suggests that while interreligious dialogue is generally promoted within NBC's mission framework, there remains a portion of members who are either unaware of or not participating in these efforts (Adehanloye 2024:175). What emerged clearly in the study was that the role of the NBC in conflict transformation has often been understood in terms of the role of the church in promoting peace-seeking and love-preaching while also emphasising the need for commitment by church members to refrain from violent acts or conflicts with other religious groups or individuals. A key aspect of this role entails educating church members about their individual civic rights and fostering a culture of mutual tolerance.

These findings also aligned with the responses gathered from the semi-structured interviews conducted by Adehanloye (2024). The latter showed that there is a commitment by the leadership to actively seek peace and express a genuine love for peace while adhering to principles that foster peace. This entails consistently refraining from engaging in violent actions or resorting to the use of force as part of its approach but instead articulating a theology of peace. The NBC thus emphasises accommodating differences and fostering an atmosphere of tolerance. Despite encountering various challenges and directly experiencing the consequences of ethno-religious conflicts, the NBC has consistently exhibited a spirit of tolerance. More specifically, the NBC engages in inter- and intra-dialogue with other faiths to foster peaceful coexistence. Amongst others, this entails at least two key aspects.

The first aspect pertains to interfaith dialogue. As Akanji (2021) has argued, engaging in dialogue holds immense importance to cultivate and maintain harmonious relationships between the church and individuals belonging to different religious beliefs. It has the potential to contribute to the establishment of peaceful coexistence within Nigeria. The second aspect relates to the various ways in which the NBC establishes robust ecumenical relations and participation in ecumenical organisations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). The NBC is also a member of the AACC, an ecumenical organisation that, in the words of Sakupapa (2018:3) accentuates the role of the church in social transformation with respect to the concerns of 'human rights, democracy, peace and reconciliation' amongst others. The ecumenical dimension of the role of the NBC in conflict transformation thus becomes a pertinent one.

The Nigerian situation adds credence to what Oduyoye (2004:476) had observed years ago, namely, that ecumenism in Africa operates amidst a 'highly unstable context of disorganised political, military, economic and social changes'.

Adehanloye's findings on the role of the NBC in interfaith dialogue and the establishment of robust ecumenical relations as interventions to address ethno-religious conflict are collaborated by a number of scholars. For instance, Adogame, Mclean and Jeremiah (eds. 2014:475) emphasise 'the church's crucial function in fostering interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding and reconciliation'. Consequently, the church's engagement in conflict transformation is firmly rooted in its biblical mandate to advocate for peace and pursue justice on behalf of the oppressed.

A transformative ecclesiology

On the basis of the foregoing, we argue that the role of the NBC in conflict transformation in Northern Nigeria points towards the need for a transformative ecclesiology. In the context of northern Nigeria, the identity and mission of the church are both challenged and shaped by prevailing realities of ethno-religious conflict. This necessitates an ecclesiology grounded in co-existence, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is an ecclesiology that fosters healing in physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions. Such an ecclesiology begins with the church itself embodying these values, drawing on its rich moral and theological resources rooted in Scripture. Repositioned in this way, the church becomes a site of dialogue, mediation and reconciliation. This vision moves beyond an advocacy model towards a relational ecclesiology informed by a shared humanity and biblical imperatives to love one's neighbour and pursue justice. The church bears a responsibility to promote peace and love through its teachings while remaining committed to nonviolence and

respectful engagement with others. Nonetheless, the church's advocacy remains vital, particularly in leveraging its unique religious resources in the service of governance, civic education and conflict transformation. By the church's unique resources, we refer to what Ter Haar (2005:22–27) has conceptualised and categorised as religious resources, namely, religious ideas, religious practices, religious organisation and religious experiences. In the Nigerian context, a transformative ecclesiology further needs to be grounded in dialogical ecumenism.

Dialogical ecumenism

Sakupapa (2019:125) has underscored that fostering ecumenical consciousness among Christians and their institutions is essential for the church's authentic and prophetic witness. In Northern Nigeria, where ethno-religious conflict undermines both social cohesion and Christian credibility, such consciousness provides a critical basis for dialogical ecumenism.

Notions of church that inspire and embody an ethos of co-existence, forgiveness and reconciliation necessarily call for an ecumenical orientation. According to Akanji (2011), ecumenism is a movement that seeks to overcome divisions and foster dialogue and collaboration among different Christian traditions, but its principles can also be applied to interfaith and interreligious contexts. The NBC already has an ecumenical orientation evident through its membership of various ecumenical bodies and consistent partnerships both nationally and internationally. At the continental level, NBC is affiliated with the All-African Baptist Fellowship (AABF) and the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). It also collaborates with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), primarily concerning missions and evangelism through the SBC's International Missions Board (IMB).

Within the Nigerian context, the NBC maintains strategic ecumenical affiliations, both nationally and internationally. Nationally, it is a member of the CAN, an association representing registered Christian denominations, and the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), which comprises primarily historic mission churches.

Internationally, the NBC affiliates with the AACC and the World Council of Churches (WCC), thereby situating itself within broader continental and global ecumenical discourses. These platforms not only amplify the NBC's theological and social concerns but also enable it to engage constructively with the government on societal issues.

Through CAN, the NBC collaborates with other Christian bodies to raise concerns over acts of violence and advocate for justice. At both intra-faith and interfaith levels, the NBC fosters dialogue and cooperation. Intra-faith engagement is largely channelled through the CCN, where the NBC advances a vision of Christian unity that emphasises collective witness and shared mission. The Convention views ecumenism as a theological and practical imperative – facilitating a common Christian voice and enhancing the church's public witness.

Furthermore, through its Department of Ecumenism, the NBC undertakes grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, particularly among internally displaced communities. These efforts involve collaboration with local religious leaders and community actors, fostering participatory models of conflict transformation that enhance local ownership and sustainability. Nonetheless, while the NBC's ecumenical engagement is notable, there remains scope for deepening and broadening its ecumenical orientation to more robustly address Nigeria's complex religious landscape. We argue that the transformative ecumenical ecclesiology that is proposed here is necessarily underpinned by a nuanced theology of peace as *shalom*.

Theology of peace

Peace, understood through the biblical concept of *shalom*, encompasses far more than the absence of violence. Rather, it signifies a holistic vision of human flourishing, justice, reconciliation and the restoration of right relationships with God, self, others and the created world (Brueggemann 2001:16). Peace and *Shalom* denotes a comprehensive state of well-being that exceeds the negative definition of peace as the absence of conflict. This theological vision foregrounds the moral and spiritual resources embedded within religious traditions that promote nonviolence, social justice and reconciliation. As Lederach (1999:67) has argued, religious worldviews possess a unique capacity to foster peace and reconciliation, grounded not merely in political strategy but in deeply held beliefs about the nature of humanity, community and divine purpose. In a similar vein, Padilla (2013:42) has systematically explored the theological foundations of peacebuilding, emphasising its rootedness in the redemptive mission of God (*missio Dei*).

A theology of peace thus emerges as a dynamic framework for transforming relationships, addressing structural and interpersonal violence, and nurturing processes of healing and reconciliation. It calls for alternative paradigms of conflict engagement. The theology of peace articulated here prioritises restorative over retributive justice and rejects violence as a legitimate means of resolution. Such a theology fosters the moral imagination necessary to break cycles of vengeance and estrangement by promoting practices of forgiveness, empathy and solidarity.

Volf (2005) powerfully articulates the centrality of forgiveness within a Christian ethic of peace when he argues as follows:

> The Christian perspective on forgiveness involves a triangular relationship between the parties in conflict and God, who is the ultimate Forgiver. Humans forgive because God forgives, and they should mirror God's forgiveness … As Christians receive God's forgiveness through Christ, they are obligated to extend forgiveness to others, empowered by the presence of Christ within them. (pp. 879–880)

This theological conviction reinforces the imperative for churches as faith communities to be agents of reconciliation in divided societies. Moreover, a theology of peace recognises the interdependence of all life and calls for a collective moral responsibility towards the well-being of humanity and the planet. Rooted in scriptural teachings and ecclesial communal ethics, it provides the spiritual and ethical grounding necessary for sustained engagement in conflict transformation.

Within a transformative ecumenical ecclesiology, a theology of peace becomes not only a doctrinal commitment but also a missional practice. It motivates and equips individuals and communities to integrate their faith into concrete actions that advance peace, justice and reconciliation in daily life. Through dialogical engagement, ecumenical cooperation and public witness, such a theology empowers the church to embody its vocation as a reconciled and reconciling community in a fractured world. In our considered view, the aforementioned insights could be better expressed in terms of an ecclesial model of conflict transformation whose key aspects we seek to unpack in the remainder of this article.

An ecclesial model of conflict transformation

In response to the empirical insights from Adehanloye's study as discussed earlier, we develop an ecclesial model of conflict transformation. Such a model not only addresses the strategic and theological gaps identified in Adehanloye's study but also reframes the NBC's role within a broader paradigm of transformative peacebuilding. Informed by the theological vision of a transformative ecclesiology articulated in the preceding section, the ecclesial model of conflict transformation proposed here is not merely a sociological response to violence but a theologically grounded praxis of peace rooted in the church's self-understanding as a reconciled and reconciling community. The NBC's hierarchical structure – comprising top-tier executives (including the Convention Officer, Conference Officer and Association Moderator), mid-level local pastors and grassroots local church members and leaders – offers a fertile ecclesial architecture for implementing a three-tiered model of peacebuilding in alignment with Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation pyramid. Lederach's multi-layered peacebuilding pyramid emphasises the synergy between elite mediation, mid-level relational engagement and grassroots peace constituencies (Lederach 1997). Our proposed model is undergirded by a theology of peace shaped by biblical notions of *shalom*, the ethic of forgiveness and dialogical ecumenism, all of which converge in a missional ecclesiology that reimagines the church as a site of justice, healing and relational repair. Put differently, it advances both a strategic response to ethno-religious conflict and a missional commitment to the church's vocation as an agent of reconciliation and social cohesion.

High-profile mediation at the executive level

At the apex of the NBC structure are the executive leaders who engage in high-profile peacebuilding initiatives, primarily through negotiated dialogues involving key elite actors. These efforts align with Lederach's conception of top-tier peacebuilding as a strategic intervention aimed at establishing ceasefires and formal agreements among conflict parties (Lederach 1997:44). The NBC's establishment of its Ecumenical Department exemplifies this approach by fostering collaboration with other faith-based organisations to collectively address ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Through such engagements, the NBC would not only embody but also witness a dialogical ecumenical ecclesiology. In this way, the NBC parallels the Church of Nigeria (CAN) in Northern Nigeria, leveraging its institutional authority to influence political elites and advance systemic reconciliation. Such engagement ought to be conceived as being more than political advocacy, given that it should reflect a theological vocation. At this level, the NBC ought to mobilise its moral authority, theological insight and institutional capital to serve as an agent of reconciliation in Nigeria's fractured polity.

Mid-level engagement: Building relational bridges

Mid-level actors – primarily local pastors and affiliated community-based organisations – play a pivotal role in conflict transformation. Their embeddedness in both ecclesiastical structures and everyday community life positions them as relational bridges between macro-level peace efforts and grassroots realities. Lederach (1997) identifies such actors as pivotal in building 'peace constituencies' across conflict lines. By receiving training on peacebuilding, conflict transformation and peaceful coexistence, these mid-tier leaders become critical nodes for translating top-level peace initiatives into localised contexts. As Lederach emphasises, mid-level actors hold the key to sustaining peace efforts by nurturing relationships that cut across social and political divides (cited in Kansiime 2018:17). In his words, 'the middle range may hold the most potential for building a long-term process and developing a broader peace constituency able to sustain conflict transformation' (Lederach 1997:92). Their frequent interactions within diverse community networks position them uniquely to foster inclusive dialogue, de-escalate tensions and sustain peace constituencies. From a theological perspective, this role requires the cultivation of moral imagination – the ability to envision and embody new relational possibilities grounded in the redemptive work of God (missio Dei), as articulated by Padilla (2013). Trained in conflict transformation and peace theology, these leaders can mediate not merely disputes but ruptured relationships, enabling processes of healing, restorative justice and reconciliation. Mid-tier leaders thus function as both theological interpreters and pastoral agents of peace within conflicted communities.

Grassroots level: The foundation of sustainable peace

At the foundation of the NBC's ecclesial peace model is the grassroots level, which constitutes local church members and community leaders who are intimately situated within conflict-affected environments. For Lederach (1997:54), this

level constitutes the base of any sustainable peace infrastructure and therefore essential for authentic and sustainable peacebuilding. For Lederach (1997:54), durable transformation emerges from organic, community-based processes rather than solely top-down interventions. In other words, peace must be built from within and not imposed from above. Within a transformative ecclesiology, these grassroots actors are not passive recipients of external peace but active agents of *shalom* – a biblical vision of holistic peace that integrates justice, reconciliation and human flourishing.

This grassroots praxis is grounded in the church's rich theological and spiritual heritage, particularly within the Baptist tradition in Northern Nigeria, where practices such as intercessory prayer, congregational worship, testimony, communal discernment and the shared reading of Scripture function as formative disciplines. These practices have the potential to cultivate a peace-oriented imagination and nurture the moral and relational capacities necessary for sustained conflict transformation from within the faith community.

The local church members may engage in local peace consultations, relief distribution, psycho-social support and inclusive dialogue embodying a theological ethic of reconciliation that responds to both spiritual and material needs. They may further engage in community integration efforts designed to reduce prejudice and heal communal divisions. In the face of violence, they function as first responders, moral witnesses and facilitators of forgiveness and solidarity. In this way, the grassroots level becomes not only the foundation of the NBC's conflict transformation model but also its theological heartbeat, where lived faith, relational witness and practical peacemaking converge.

Conclusion

This article offered a critical and constructive exploration of the NBC role in addressing ethno-religious conflict in Northern Nigeria and has proposed an ecclesial model of conflict transformation grounded in both theological reflection and contextual analysis. By engaging John Paul Lederach's theory of conflict transformation alongside empirical insights from Adehanloye's study, we have argued for a multi-level, theologically informed approach that centres the NBC's peacebuilding efforts within a transformative ecclesiology. What emerges from this model is not merely an adaptation of Lederach's pyramid but a contextual theological embodiment of it. Put differently, it espouses a transformative ecclesiology in action.

Anchored in theological commitments and informed by Lederach's insights, the proposed model envisions the church not merely as a moral voice, but as an embodied practice of reconciliation within a fractured society. The model we propose situates the church not merely as a passive religious institution but as an agent of reconciliation actively engaged in addressing the spiritual, relational and structural dimensions of conflict. Drawing on the NBC's ecclesial architecture, the model mobilises its leadership at executive, mid-level and grassroots tiers, each bearing distinct yet interconnected roles in fostering reconciliation, promoting justice and nurturing a culture of peace. Theologically, this model is shaped by a vision of *shalom*, sustained by a missional vocation rooted in the *missio Dei*, and informed by dialogical ecumenism as a practical ecclesial posture.

This study contributes to the discourse on the constructive role of religion in conflict transformation by demonstrating how ecclesial communities – when theologically resourced and contextually responsive – can embody peacebuilding in ways that transcend episodic benevolence or rhetorical advocacy. The NBC's presence in Northern Nigeria, though numerically minor, holds significant potential for catalytic impact when its moral capital, relational networks and theological resources are harnessed strategically.

As such, this article affirms the urgency of a renewed ecclesiology that is both contextually situated and theologically robust. It is hoped that the model articulated here will not only inform institutional praxis within the NBC but also stimulate further theological reflection, ecumenical engagement and ecclesial innovation across the African continent and beyond – towards a church that embodies peace as both gift and calling in a fractured world.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Oladele P. Adehanloye: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – reviewing & editing. Teddy C. Sakupapa: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Project administration, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

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The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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