

THE PARADOX OF FAITH: STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING IN THE AGULERI-UMULERI CONFLICT, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges faced by religious leaders in mediating the longstanding Aguleri–Umueri intercommunal conflict in Anambra State, Nigeria. It explores the most effective ways to address those challenges for lasting peace and harmony among the community members. While religious leaders are often seen as moral authorities and identity brokers with the ability to bridge divides, their effectiveness is limited by denominational rivalry, concerns about credibility, political interference, and a lack of institutional and material support. Using qualitative fieldwork, which includes semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis, the study highlights both the opportunities and obstacles of clerical involvement in grassroots peace efforts. Results show that, although religious leaders played a crucial role in reducing hostility and promoting dialogue in the Aguleri–Umuleri conflict, their efforts often fell short due to certain intervening factors. The analysis, based on Social Identity Theory, Conflict Transformation Theory, and Peacebuilding Theory, reveals the paradox of religious leadership: it is highly influential yet structurally fragile. The article concludes that increasing ecumenical cooperation, maintaining neutrality, and embedding peace initiatives into permanent institutional frameworks are crucial for sustainable results. The practical contribution provides policymakers, faith-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with evidence-based recommendations and policy suggestions for enhancing the capacity of religious actors in intercommunal conflict resolution, both in Anambra State and in similarly divided communities across Nigeria and West Africa.

Keywords: Religious leaders, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, Aguleri–Umueri, denominational rivalry, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Intercommunal conflicts persist as a recurring challenge in Nigeria, particularly in regions where historical, cultural, and identity-based rivalries intersect with political and economic interests. The Aguleri–Umueri conflict in Anambra State illustrates such dynamics. Rooted in disputed historical narratives, land ownership issues, and longstanding intercommunal rivalries, the conflict has periodically flared into violence, claiming lives, destroying property, and destabilizing local development (Odoemene, 2012). Despite government interventions and peace agreements, the recurrence of hostilities exposes the limitations of solely political or security-focused solutions.

In this context, religious leaders have become pivotal figures in local peacebuilding efforts. Their influence comes from both moral authority and social integration. In Igbo communities, religious institutions not only command respect but also shape communal identity and values (Aghamelu, 2016). As a result, priests, pastors, and other faith leaders often serve as mediators in disputes, leveraging their ability to mobilize communities and communicate shared ethical principles such as forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice (Lederach, 1997; Kukah, 2011). Their role in the Aguleri–Umueri conflict underscores the broader African trend of faith-based peacebuilding, where religious actors attempt to supplement, or sometimes replace, weak government structures in resolving local conflicts (Appleby, 2000; Haynes, 2009).

However, religion, while capable of building bridges, can also deepen divides. Religious leaders often face challenges that weaken their credibility and reduce their influence. Denominational rivalries, political co-option, accusations of bias, and lack of institutional support frequently hinder their peacebuilding efforts (Ikelegbe, 2005; Philpott & Powers, 2010). In some cases, the very identities that make religious leaders potential mediators—such as shared faith, ethnicity, or communal ties—become liabilities, leading to suspicions of partiality. Moreover, the lack of ongoing resources and formal peace infrastructures makes many interventions fragile and unsustainable.

This study aims to analyze these challenges specifically in Aguleri–Umueri in a critical manner. Using interviews and focus group discussions with religious leaders, community members, and traditional authorities, it offers an empirical view of the obstacles that influence and sometimes restrict faith-based peacebuilding. While existing research has emphasized the positive role of religious leaders in Nigeria and beyond, fewer studies have thoroughly explored the structural and contextual barriers they encounter.

The paper is organized as follows: first, a review of relevant literature on religion and peacebuilding is provided, emphasizing both the potentials and constraints, along with African and Nigerian experiences that offer context for the current case study. This review is followed by an explanation of the methodology,

presentation of the findings, and a discussion that places these findings within broader theoretical frameworks. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications for sustainable peacebuilding in Aguleri-Umueri and similar settings, offers recommendations, and highlights the practical contributions of the research to peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

The role of religion in peacebuilding has sparked broad debate. On the one hand, religion offers moral authority, social capital, and profound cultural significance, positioning religious leaders as natural mediators in conflicts (Appleby, 2000; Gopin, 2000). These leaders often embody values like forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice, which align with the principles of conflict transformation (Lederach, 1997). They command respect across different communities, and their networks grant access to grassroots populations, providing strategic reach where secular institutions might be lacking. However, religion is also a "double-edged sword" (Appleby, 2000). The same institutions that promote peace can also reinforce exclusive identities, deepen divisions, and sustain biases (Philpott, 2007). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) emphasizes how religious affiliation frequently overlaps with ethnic or communal identities, rendering religious leaders susceptible to accusations of partisanship. In divided societies, this complicates their ability to act as neutral mediators.

Scholars increasingly recognise the constraints that undermine the effectiveness of faith-based peacebuilding. Credibility and impartiality are recurrent concerns. Ikelegbe (2005) emphasizes that religious actors who appear aligned with one faction quickly lose legitimacy in the eyes of the other faction. Haynes (2009) similarly warns that the politicisation of religion in Africa reduces public confidence in clerics as neutral brokers. Denominational fragmentation is another documented challenge. Hayward and Marshall (2005) observe that inter-denominational rivalries weaken unified faithbased approaches to peace, while Huber and Leininger (2020) note that such rivalries are particularly acute in multi-faith African contexts where churches compete for members and resources. This competition dilutes the collective moral authority of religious institutions.

Resource constraints also restrict the sustainability of interventions. Philpott and Powers (2010) argue that while faith leaders may mobilize communities, they often lack the logistical, financial, and institutional support needed to maintain long-term peace efforts. This aligns with Galtung's (1996) analysis of structural violence, which suggests that peace initiatives often fail when systemic neglect deprives local actors of essential resources. The absence of institutionalized peace infrastructures only makes things worse. Lederach (1997) stresses the importance of creating "peace architectures" that go beyond individual charisma. However, in many African contexts, faith-based initiatives remain personality-driven, collapsing once influential

leaders are transferred or pass away (Adogame, 2013). This results in a cycle of episodic, fragile interventions.

The African continent provides many examples of religious leaders playing vital yet limited roles in conflict resolution. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, Christian and Muslim leaders collaborated to negotiate ceasefires, but their efforts were hindered by limited resources and political manipulation (Haynes, 2009). In Sudan, the InterReligious Council created a platform for dialogue; however, divisions within the council diminished its long-term effectiveness (Leininger, 2010). In Nigeria, religious leaders have historically intervened in communal conflicts, including those in Jos, Kaduna, and the Niger Delta. Kukah (2011) emphasizes how Christian clergy promoted dialogue in Kaduna, though denominational splits sometimes constrained their influence. As Adogame (2013) observes, in Nigeria's religiously diverse landscape, competition among Christian denominations complicates efforts at collaborative peacebuilding.

Closer to the focus of this study, Igbo communities have long depended on religious and traditional leaders to mediate disputes (Ojukwu & Onifade, 2010). However, these efforts face structural and cultural barriers. Aghamelu (2016) notes that denominational rivalry among churches in Eastern Nigeria weakens collective responses to intercommunal tensions. Similarly, Odoemene (2012) demonstrates how identity politics undermine peacebuilding efforts in Igbo land, as communities often suspect mediators of bias due to their background. While much scholarship has explored the positive and negative roles of religion in peacebuilding worldwide (Appleby, 2000; Lederach, 1997; Philpott, 2007), fewer studies offer detailed empirical accounts of the specific challenges religious leaders encounter in local Nigerian intercommunal conflicts. Existing research in Nigeria often highlights the potential of religious leaders (Kukah, 2011; Ojukwu & Onifade, 2010) but does not sufficiently examine the structural, political, and identity-based obstacles that limit their effectiveness.

This paper addresses the gap by examining Aguleri–Umueri, a case that illustrates the challenges of religious peacebuilding amid deeply rooted communal identity conflicts. By emphasizing issues such as political interference, denominational rivalry, identity bias, resource constraints, and weak institutional support, the study adds to both academic debates and practical policy formulations.

3. Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative research design, combining semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with Catholic and Anglican priests, Pentecostal pastors, imams, and lay religious leaders, as well as traditional rulers, elders, and local officials in Aguleri and Umueri. Focus group discussions were held with youth groups, women's associations,

and church congregations. Interviews were conducted in both English and Igbo, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis.

The researchers employed both deductive and inductive methods to analyze the collected data. Deductive codes were based on themes found in the literature (e.g., denominational rivalry, political manipulation, resource constraints), while inductive coding facilitated the discovery of new themes. Triangulation using interviews, FGDs, and documentary sources (peace accords, church communiqués) increased the credibility of the results. Ethical approval was secured, and participants' confidentiality was protected through anonymization.

4. Findings

The analysis identified five recurring themes that indicate the challenges faced by religious leaders: denominational rivalry, accusations of bias and a credibility deficit, political interference, resource limitations, and the weak institutionalization of peace efforts.

Denominational Rivalries and Fragmented Christian Witness

One of the most consistent findings was the disruptive role of denominational rivalries in the peacebuilding process. Aguleri and Umueri are home to numerous denominations, with Catholic, Anglican, and Pentecostal churches dominating the religious scene. While these churches often preach peace individually, they rarely present a united front in their mediation efforts. This lack of ecumenical cohesion undermines the collective authority of the religious community. A Catholic priest interviewed in Aguleri remarked, "When we call for peace, the Anglican pastors organise their own meetings. Each denomination tries to show it is the true voice of God. The people then ask, 'If the churches cannot unite, how can they unite us?'" (Interview, 12 August 2025). Similarly, a Pentecostal pastor in Umueri admitted that denominational competition weakened their interventions: "Sometimes, our efforts are seen as attempts to win new members, not to bring peace. People suspect hidden motives." (Interview, 18 August 2025).

The rivalries were not only theological but also institutional, with each church maintaining separate committees, funding channels, and youth mobilisation programs. Youth focus groups reported that this competition translated into confusion on the ground. One youth participant explained: "We were invited to three different 'peace rallies' in one week—one by Catholics, another by Anglicans, and yet another by Pentecostals. It was too much. Instead of unity, it showed division." (FGD, Umueri Youths, 20 August 2025). The implication is that denominational fragmentation dilutes the moral authority of religious leaders, as communities perceive disunity among clerics as symptomatic of deeper rivalries.

Claims of Bias and Lack of Credibility

Another central theme was the issue of credibility. Religious leaders often faced accusations of bias because of their community ties. Since most priests and pastors were native to either Aguleri or Umueri, their actions were often seen as partisan. As one community elder in Umueri plainly said: "When a priest from Aguleri speaks, Umueri youths suspect him of taking sides. The same thing happens when an Umueri pastor calls for peace. Nobody believes the other side will be fair." (Interview, 15 August 2025).

This finding aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which suggests that people interpret actions through the lens of in-group and out-group identity. The shared identity that gives leaders access also makes them vulnerable to suspicion. A Catholic catechist from Aguleri reflected on this paradox: "Our own people listen to us, but the other side doubts us. You are trusted here but distrusted there." (Interview, 17 August 2025). This credibility gap often paralyzed dialogue efforts, as communities questioned the neutrality of mediators.

Political Interference and Manipulation

Participants also highlighted the recurring issue of religious leaders being manipulated politically. During election seasons, politicians often co-opted religious figures to get partisan support. This made it unclear where religious mediation ended and political favoritism began. An Anglican pastor shared his experience: "When we tried to mediate, politicians came with money, asking us to support their side. Once you are seen with them, you lose respect. People say you have been bought." (Interview, 22 August 2025).

A focus group (women) in Aguleri corroborated this dynamic: "Our priests sometimes speak boldly, but when elections come, you see them on campaign platforms. How can they then ask us to trust them as peacemakers?" (FGD, Aguleri Women, 19 August 2025). Political co-option undermines both independence and legitimacy. It also polarises communities further, since politicians often exploit intercommunal divisions for electoral gain.

Resource Limitations and the Fragility of Interventions

A fourth theme was the lack of financial and logistical resources. Religious leaders often initiated peace rallies, community prayers, and dialogue forums, but struggled to sustain them over time. A Pentecostal pastor lamented, "We want to hold more meetings, but who will pay for the hall, the refreshments, or transport for participants? We cannot fund peace from our own pockets indefinitely" (Interview, 25 August 2025).

This lack of resources often meant that peacebuilding efforts were irregular and reactive, rather than consistent and comprehensive. A youth leader explained: "We only see big peace events after a crisis, when donors or politicians give money. Once

things calm down, everything stops until the next fight" (FGD, Aguleri Youths, 21 August 2025). This cycle reflects what Galtung (1996) would call the structural violence of neglect: peace processes collapse not because of unwillingness, but because they lack institutional and financial support.

Weak Institutionalization of Peace Initiatives

Finally, the study revealed a lack of institutional frameworks to support religious interventions. Peace efforts were often led by individual personalities and depended on the influence of specific clerics. When leaders were transferred, retired, or passed away, their initiatives often fell apart. A traditional ruler in Umueri said: "When Bishop X was here, we saw progress. He brought people together. But when he was transferred, everything ended. No structures were left" (Interview, 23 August 2025). This absence of institutional support makes the peace process fragile. Without formal mechanisms, such as standing interfaith councils or community peace committees, religious interventions are sporadic and unsustainable.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal how religious leaders in Aguleri–Umueri encountered structural and contextual challenges that complicated their roles in peacebuilding. These challenges can be examined through the frameworks of Social Identity Theory, Conflict Transformation Theory, and Peacebuilding Theory. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explains why the credibility of religious leaders is both their most significant asset and their biggest liability. As insiders, they gain trust from their own community. However, this same identity makes them suspicious to people from the opposing community. This was clearly demonstrated in the words of an Umueri elder, as already noted: "When a priest from Aguleri speaks, Umueri youths suspect him of taking sides" (Interview, August 20, 2025). This credibility paradox explains why mediation efforts often fail: each side views the mediator as biased due to their in-group identity. For peacebuilding to be practical, joint mediation efforts (where clerics from both sides collaborate) or external facilitation (by neutral third parties) may be necessary.

Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 1997) emphasises the need to build relationships and change structures that perpetuate conflict. However, denominational rivalries undermine this process. Instead of modelling reconciliation, churches often replicate the conflict logic by competing for influence. The FGD with Umueri youths, which revealed frustration at "three different peace rallies in one week," demonstrates how fragmentation dilutes credibility and confuses communities. Unless religious leaders transcend denominational competition and embrace ecumenical collaboration, they risk reproducing the very divisions they seek to heal.

Peacebuilding Theory (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997) stresses the importance of building sustainable structures of peace. In Aguleri–Umueri, peace efforts were

personality-based, collapsing when key leaders left. This reflects a lack of institutionalisation, which prevents the development of enduring peace infrastructures. The testimony of a traditional ruler—"When Bishop X was here, we saw progress... but when he was transferred, everything ended"—illustrates the fragility of such personality-based peacebuilding. To move toward sustainable peace, there is a need for formal mechanisms, such as standing interfaith councils and joint peace committees, as well as consistent funding streams.

Political manipulation of religious leaders aligns with Galtung's (1996) concept of structural violence, where systemic forces undermine grassroots agency. Politicians who exploit religious figures for electoral gain erode the neutrality of clerics and deepen divisions. The afore-noted observation from Aguleri women — "Our priests sometimes speak boldly, but when elections come, you see them on campaign platforms"— demonstrates how co-option damages credibility. The challenge is not merely a personal weakness, but a structural one: in a political culture where clerics are expected to endorse candidates, resisting co-option requires strong institutional guidelines and accountability mechanisms.

While the challenges in Aguleri–Umueri are local, they reflect broader patterns in faith-based peacebuilding across Africa. Similar dynamics of denominational rivalry, identity bias, political co-option, and resource scarcity have been documented in Sudan (Leininger, 2010), as well as in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Haynes, 2009), and in Nigeria's Middle Belt (Kukah, 2011). This suggests that the dilemmas are structural rather than incidental. By situating Aguleri–Umueri within these broader debates, the study highlights that faith-based peacebuilding necessitates not only moral authority but also ecumenical unity, institutional frameworks, and insulation from political exploitation.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that religious leaders in Aguleri–Umueri occupy a paradoxical role in peacebuilding: they are deeply trusted as moral authorities, yet denominational divisions, political entanglements, and a lack of resources frequently constrain them. While their identity as clerics grants them unique leverage to mediate intercommunal violence, their effectiveness is often undermined by the very identities they represent. To make their interventions more sustainable, religious leaders must transcend denominational rivalries, safeguard their credibility, and embed their work in lasting institutional structures. The findings affirm Social Identity Theory, Conflict Transformation Theory, and Peacebuilding Theory by demonstrating both the promise and fragility of religious authority in volatile communal settings.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis, the study proposes the following measures to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of religious leaders in intercommunal conflict resolution in Aguleri–Umueri and similar contexts:

Promote Ecumenical and Interfaith Collaboration: Religious leaders across denominations should establish a standing *ecumenical council for peace and reconciliation*. Joint peace initiatives would reduce denominational rivalry and demonstrate unity to communities. Training programs on ecumenical peacebuilding could be facilitated by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Catholic–Anglican Joint Committee.

Enhance Credibility through Inclusive Mediation: To address accusations of bias, mediation teams should include clerics from both Aguleri and Umueri, as well as neutral external facilitators. Mixed teams signal fairness and reduce the perception of partisanship.

Safeguard Independence from Political Manipulation: Churches should adopt clear guidelines prohibiting clerics from openly endorsing political candidates. Transparency and accountability mechanisms, such as public declarations of neutrality during election seasons, would protect their integrity and moral authority.

Provide Sustainable Funding and Capacity Building: Faith-based peace initiatives often collapse due to a lack of resources and inadequate capacity. Partnerships with NGOs, donor agencies, and state institutions should be developed to ensure consistent funding. Training in mediation, trauma healing, and peace education would further enhance leaders' technical skills and capacities.

Institutionalize Peace Structures: Permanent structures should replace personality-based initiatives, such as community peace committees, interfaith dialogue platforms, and church-based conflict transformation units. Embedding peacebuilding into institutional frameworks ensures continuity even when individual leaders are transferred or retire.

Integrate Peace Education at the Grassroots. Churches should incorporate messages of reconciliation into sermons, youth programs, and catechesis. Building a culture of peace at the grassroots can reduce cycles of violence and strengthen resilience.

Policy Implications

The recommendations above carry broader implications for stakeholders at multiple levels:

Government Agencies (State and Local): They should establish a *Peacebuilding Support Desk* within the Anambra State Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs to formally partner with religious leaders. The government should provide small grants to ecumenical and interfaith councils that demonstrate sustained grassroots engagement. It should incorporate clerics into state-led early warning and early response systems for communal violence.

Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and Religious Councils: The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) should strengthen their local chapters in Anambra State to monitor tensions and proactively mediate. Denominational seminaries and theological colleges should include courses on peace and conflict transformation as core training for clergy. Churches should design clear ethical guidelines for clergy regarding political neutrality and intercommunal dialogue.

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and International Partners: They should support training workshops in mediation, trauma healing, and community dialogue specifically tailored for clergy and lay religious leaders. There is also a need to provide technical assistance to help establish sustainable structures, such as *Community Peace Resource Centers*, document and disseminate lessons learned from Aguleri–Umueri as a model for other Nigerian communities facing similar identitybased conflicts.

Community and Traditional Leaders: These groups should work jointly with religious leaders to institutionalise peace committees that cut across ethnic, denominational, and political divides. They have to recognize and respect the mediating role of clerics, especially when they seek neutrality in times of heightened political or communal tension. Youth and women's groups, often mobilized by churches, should be involved in grassroots reconciliation initiatives.

By translating these recommendations into concrete policies and practices, stakeholders can strengthen the role of religious leaders as effective peace agents. This will not only help stabilise the Aguleri–Umueri context but also provide replicable models for peacebuilding across Nigeria's many conflict-prone communities.

8. Practical Contribution

This study makes a practical contribution to peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria by highlighting the concrete challenges that religious leaders face in intercommunal mediation and offering actionable strategies to strengthen their role. By documenting lived experiences from Aguleri–Umueri, the paper provides policymakers, church bodies, and civil society organisations with evidence-based insights on how to support clerics through ecumenical collaboration, credibility safeguards, resource

mobilisation, and institutionalised peace structures. Beyond theory, the findings furnish a replicable framework that can guide interventions in other identity-based communal conflicts across Nigeria and West Africa, where religious leaders continue to occupy a central but fragile position in conflict transformation.

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