



CHURCH PEACE AND THE THEOLOGY OF UNITY IN DIVERSITY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY REFLECTION ON ECCLESIAL COHESION

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Abstract

The contemporary Christian church exists within increasingly diverse social, cultural, theological, and generational contexts. While diversity is intrinsic to the nature of the church, it has often become a source of tension, fragmentation, and conflict, thereby undermining ecclesial peace. This article examines church peace through the lens of the theology of unity in diversity, employing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates biblical theology, ecclesiology, peace and conflict studies, and human relations theory. It argues that sustainable ecclesial cohesion cannot be achieved through structural uniformity or doctrinal rigidity alone, but through a theologically grounded embrace of diversity as a divine gift ordered toward communal peace. Drawing particularly from Pauline ecclesiology and Trinitarian theology, the study demonstrates that unity in diversity is foundational to the church's identity and mission. The article further contextualises this theological vision within African ecclesial realities, where ethnic plurality, leadership struggles, and doctrinal differences frequently challenge church cohesion. Using qualitative theological reflection and contextual case analysis, the study proposes a practical theological framework for nurturing church peace through inclusive leadership, participatory governance, reconciliation practices, and peace-conscious ecclesial formation. This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology rooted in theological reflection and contextual analysis. The research design combines three complementary approaches; biblical-theological analysis, interdisciplinary dialogue approach, and contextual case study approach are utilised to explore how issues of unity, diversity, and peace manifest within African church contexts.

Keywords: Church Peace, Unity in Diversity, Theology of Unity, African Ecclesia Realities, Interdisciplinary Approach

Introduction

The imperative of peace to the ministry and spiritual mandate of the church cannot be overstated. Peace is, in fact, at the heart of the theology and the spirituality of the church. However, the diverse nature of the church and its inability to properly manage this divine gift of diversity have sometimes made peace elusive to the church. Hence, what is supposed to be a gift has turned into a challenge and sometimes a burden. In other words, the challenge of the contemporary church is that diversity that is divinely intended for the enrichment of the church often becomes a source of fragmentation and sometimes violence. This has become an embarrassment not only to the church but also to the gospel message and Christ. Therefore, achieving unity in diversity is a pressing issue for ecclesial peace.



The Christian church is both a spiritual community and a social body, constituted by people of varied ethnic, cultural, theological, and socio-economic backgrounds. From its earliest beginnings, the church has grappled with the challenge of maintaining unity while accommodating diversity. The New Testament itself bears witness to conflicts arising from cultural differences (Acts 6:1), doctrinal disagreements (Gal. 2:11–14), and leadership tensions (1 Cor. 1:10–12) (Adebayo, 2021). In contemporary contexts, these challenges have intensified due to globalisation, democratisation, denominational proliferation, and identity politics (Adegbite & Fakoya, 2021). The tendency for the church to overrate the spiritual nature of the church at the expense of its social nature has also contributed to this challenge. Indeed, the church is primarily a spiritual entity, and her spiritual mandate must be given a primordial consideration. However, it is always dangerous to neglect the social nature of the church because conflicts many times are often products of the social nature of the church.

In African ecclesial contexts, diversity is particularly pronounced. Churches often mirror broader societal divisions shaped by ethnicity, language, political affiliation, and historical grievances. While the church is called to be a sign and instrument of peace, internal conflicts frequently undermine its witness and weaken its capacity to contribute to societal reconciliation. This reality raises a critical theological and practical question: how can the church in Africa embody peace amid deep and persistent diversity?

This article contends that church peace is inseparable from a robust theology of unity in diversity. It argues that unity is not synonymous with uniformity, and that diversity, when theologically understood and properly managed, can become a source of strength rather than division. By adopting an interdisciplinary framework that brings theology into dialogue with peace studies, sociology, psychology, and human relations theory, the article seeks to offer a holistic approach to ecclesial cohesion. The central argument is that sustainable church peace emerges when theological convictions about unity are intentionally translated into inclusive structures, relational practices, and peace - oriented leadership. Hence, a sound and robust theology of unity in diversity, informed by interdisciplinary insights, is essential for sustainable ecclesial peace.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

It is important to clarify certain concepts used in this paper to avoid ambiguity. This is to achieve a common understanding for all readers. Hence, it breaks down complex and ambiguous concepts into clear and specific meanings.

Ecclesiology and the Nature of the Church

There is a need to put the concept of the Church into a contemporary Christian perspective. This is particularly necessary as the Christian Church today does not have the exclusive ownership of that name. The word is used for a wide variety of religious groups, such as the Mormons, Church of Satan, and Jehovah's Witnesses. (Friesan, 2014). A lot of people also see the Church as a type of building in which a variety of religious groups meet in order to have their services. It becomes imperative to clarify the concept of the Church as it is used in this study.



The Christian community in Jerusalem was the first to call itself the *ekklesia tou theou*, meaning Church of God (Gal. 1:13). This is a reflection of the community's awareness that they are a company of those called as the centre and core of the end-time people of God. In general, the Church should be understood as an assembly of people, a congregation of people that gather to worship God. (Shekha, 2017). The Encyclopaedia Britannica asserts that the Christian view of the Church was influenced by the Old Testament's concept of the *tahal*, which means the elected people of God of the end time, and by the expectation of the coming of the Messiah in Judaism. *Ekklesia* is the Greek word used for Church means an assembly of people coming together for a meeting.

According to Karl Barth, the existence of the Church is only a response to the work that God has done. God had first revealed Himself to man, and the revelation is received and appreciated by humanity through and in the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, a community is established to proclaim God's self-revelation as confirmed in the Bible. The church is therefore a testifying response to the self-revelation of God. (Bath, 1956)

The Church must first acknowledge that it does not exist by its own power but by God's work. Though the human elements cannot be denied in Church history, it must however, be emphasised that the Church did not come into existence because of itself. The Church is the work of God in the first instance and then the activity of man. (Bath, 1956).

At the heart of this study lies an ecclesiological understanding of the church as *koinonia*, a communion of believers united in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The church is not merely an organisation but a living body whose unity is grounded in its participation in the life of God. Pauline metaphors of the body (1 Cor. 12:12–27) emphasise both interdependence and diversity, suggesting that difference is essential to the church's vitality.

Ecclesial cohesion, within this framework, refers to the capacity of the church to sustain relational bonds, shared identity, and common mission amid internal plurality. Peace is understood not as the absence of disagreement but as the presence of just and reconciled relationships that reflect the reconciling work of Christ. Hence, ecclesial unity should be understood as a spiritual oneness that is rooted in Christ. This also includes unity in the way the church carries out its mission.

Diversity

This is conceived as God intended plurality of persons, spiritual gifts, perspectives, culture, and expression within the body of Christ. They are meant to be harmonised through shared faith in Christ and the uniting work of Christ. (Aworinde, 1994)

Peace and Conflict Studies

Peace and conflict studies is an interdisciplinary field that looks at how wars, disputes, conflict and violence start, how they play out, and most importantly, how they can be prevented and resolved. It tries to understand the root causes of conflict and explore strategies that can lead to



lasting peace. (Webel and Jorgen, 2012). It emphasises the importance of early warning, dialogue, reconciliation mechanisms, conflict analysis, and conflict transformation.

Peace studies contribute a crucial analytical lens by distinguishing between negative peace, which is the absence of overt conflict, and positive peace, which implies the presence of justice, inclusion, and harmonious relationships. Applied to ecclesial life, this distinction reveals that churches may appear peaceful while harbouring unresolved grievances, exclusionary practices, and structural injustices. Such conditions often erupt into open conflict when left unaddressed. (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse, 2005)

Conflict, from this perspective, is not inherently destructive. Rather, it is a normal feature of communal life that can become transformative when managed constructively. Dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, and restorative practices are therefore essential tools for nurturing church peace.

Human Relations Theory

Human Relations Theory originated in organisational studies as a response to more mechanistic, overly structural, or classical management theories. The proponents of this theory include Elton Mayo (Known as the father of the human relations movement), Douglas McGregor, Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg, and Mary Parker Follett. It emphasises that people are not just inputs or "cogs" in the organisational machine, but they have social, emotional, and psychological requirements; meeting these requirements, constructing good interpersonal relationships, recognising people, fostering informal networks, and listening to employees increase organisational effectiveness and reduce unwanted outcomes like conflict (Pondy, 2018).

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights the importance of belonging, recognition, and participation, while Frederick Herzberg's motivation theory underscores the role of meaningful engagement and appreciation in sustaining commitment. In ecclesial settings, unmet relational and psychological needs often underlie conflicts related to leadership, ministry roles, and decision-making processes. Integrating human relations insights with theology underscores the importance of inclusive leadership, effective communication, and a culture of appreciation as practical expressions of unity in diversity.

Theological Reflection on Unity in Diversity and Peace

Paul's metaphor of the church as the body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12:12–27 provides one of the most compelling biblical visions of unity in diversity. The church is presented as the body of Christ with many different parts that must function as one. This illustrates the unity and diversity of the different spiritual gifts exercised by the people of God who are all members of the one body of Christ. The divine ordination of the ecclesia diversity is stressed in verse 18 of that chapter. "... *God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be*". Diversity of gifts, roles, and functions is presented as divinely ordained, while unity is sustained through mutual dependence and care. Paul's insistence that no member can say to another, "*I have no need of you,*" directly challenges exclusionary practices that undermine peace.



The purpose is to express the oneness of the body of Christ. To demonstrate that the church unity is spiritual and Christ- centred, not based on sameness of function, status, and background. It is also to affirm that all believers belong equally to the same body regardless of ethnicity, social status, or gifting. Theologically, unity in the body of Christ is ontologically rooted in Christ, who is the head of the church. Another purpose is to ensure mutual interdependence to prevent self-sufficiency and superiority within the church. (Erickson, 1985). It is to help believers cultivate humility and cooperation as virtues. The ecclesia implication is that diversity is designed to make the church relationally dependent rather than hierarchically competitive.

Ecclesiastical diversity is to prevent uniformity and show that diversity is not human intention but divine arrangement. Hence, rejecting diversity is equivalent to resisting God's creative intention for the church. Additionally, diversity is to affirm the dignity of every believer. It is to elevate marginalised or less visible members. (Aworinde, 1985). Just imagine the importance of a cleaner faithfully carrying out his or her gift of service to the church. Hence, diversity serves justice by ensuring that no member is dispensable or inferior.

The diversity of the body of Christ also sustains peace and prevents division through mutual care. It is meant to transform diversity from a source of rivalry into a means of solidarity. As a result, diversity becomes a mechanism for unity and peace when governed by love and mutual responsibility. Lastly, it is meant for the equipping of the church for effective ministry (Cole, 1964), and to ensure that the church is fully equipped for its mission, and to affirm that no single gift is sufficient on its own.

Similarly, Ephesians 4:1–16 presents unity as both a gift and a task. This passage offers one of the most comprehensive New Testament frameworks for understanding how unity and diversity coexist within the church. The illuminating aspect of it is its movement from theological unity to ethical responsibility and finally to functional diversity. This is to demonstrate that unity and diversity are not opposites but mutually reinforcing realities in the life of the church. (Borce, 1978).

Believers are called to preserve the unity of the Spirit through virtues such as humility, patience, and love. Diversity of gifts is portrayed as essential for the church's maturity, suggesting that peace emerges when differences are oriented toward shared growth and mission. This has some theological and ministerial implications. The first implication is that unity is a divine gift to be preserved and not to be created. Paul, in verse 3, admonished believers "*to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*". This again suggests that unity originates from God. The church does not manufacture unity.

Unity requires ethical dispositions that sustain diversity. Such ethical dispositions include humility, gentleness, patience, and love. Diversity without these virtues becomes destructive. It also implies that unity is relationally sustained and not forced and that church peace depends as much on such character formation as doctrine. The passage, just like 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 implies that unity does not eliminate diversity of gifts and roles (7-10). Diversity is Christologically distributed and not humanly assigned, and the differences in gifting are



expressions of Christ's generosity and not inequality. Therefore, equality in worth coexists with diversity in function. Hence, uniformity undermines the richness of Christ's gift to the church.

Ecclesiastical diversity also serves the building up of the body of Christ (11-13). Diversity of leadership exists to empower the whole church, not to concentrate power. A situation where a church leader has excessive power is against the spirit of the New Testament's concept of unity. Ministry is shared and not monopolized. The goal is for the growth and maturity of all believers and not individual performance. The mission implication is that diversity equips the church for holistic ministry and witness. Diversity also contributes to doctrinal stability and spiritual maturity. Therefore, immaturity and not diversity is the real threat to unity. It becomes imperative for churches to prioritise teaching and spiritual formation in order to sustain unity in diversity.

It is important to add that diversity protects the church from doctrinal and relational fragmentation, and that is why Paul warns against being "*tossed back and forth by the waves*" in verse 14. This is because multiple gifts and perspectives provide balance and discernment. (Grudem, 1994). A situation of one individual perspective makes the church prone to heresy and false teaching. Healthy diversity guards against extremism and manipulation. Unity is made strong through shared truth and mutual accountability. Theologically, diversity as a result rightly orders and stabilises the church. Lastly, Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, made it clear that love is the integrating force of unity and diversity. No wonder he said that the body grows by "*speaking the truth in love*" (15-16). Love is the moral glue that integrates diversity into unity. Truth without love divides, while love without truth distorts. Christ, but not culture or charisma, is a source of cohesion. Hence, unity and diversity are sustained by continual reliance on Christ.

Trinitarian Theology is another model of Unity in diversity in the New Testament. Trinitarian theology offers a profound model for understanding unity without uniformity. Rather than treating unity and diversity as opposing realities, the doctrine of the Trinity presents them as mutually constitutive. The church life, identity, and peace are best understood as a reflection of the relational life of the triune God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in perfect communion while remaining distinct. (Berkhof, 2006). Applied to ecclesiology, this relational ontology affirms diversity as intrinsic to unity rather than a threat to it. The church mirrors the Triune God when it cultivates relationships marked by mutual self-giving and shared purpose.

A theological reflection on the interplay between the Trinity and ecclesial unity reveals the Trinity as unity without uniformity. Christians confess one God in three persons (Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit). God is indivisibly one in essence (*ousia*) and yet irreducibly diverse in persons (*hypostases*). The implications are that unity does not require sameness and that diversity does not threaten oneness. Therefore, the church resembles God when it embodies unity without erasing differences. Trinitarian theology also reveals relational ontology and ecclesial communion. This is because the Trinity is a communion of persons defined by a relationship of love, mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*), and self-giving. Learning from this, the church is not merely an institution but a relational communion (*Koinonia*). (Berkhof, 2006). Resultantly,



church unity is sustained through relationship and not control. Diversity can only be meaningful in an atmosphere of loving communion. Church unity is more relational than structural.

Another lesson of unity in diversity from the Trinitarian theology is that of equality of persons and diversity of roles. Trinity teaches that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are equal in divinity yet distinct in roles in relation to creation, redemption, and sanctification. This implies for the church that all believers share equal dignity in Christ. (Grudem, 1994). Diverse gifts and ministries do not mean hierarchy of worth. However, it implies that functional differentiation strengthens church unity. There is a caveat, and it is that no gift or ministry should dominate the others. Trinitarian theology also teaches mutual self-giving as the basis of ecclesial unity. This is because Trinitarian life is characterized by self-giving love. The father sends the Son, and the Son obeys the father. The Spirit, on the other hand, glorifies the Son. This implies that unity is preserved through humility, service, and mutual submission and that power in the church must be exercised relationally and not coercively. (Lowe, 2002). Diversity becomes destructive when self-giving is replaced by competition.

As a result, the church must always be projected as an image of the Triune God. The church is called to reflect God's relational nature in the world. A divided church distorts the image of God it is meant to reveal. A reconciled church, on the other hand, visibly embodies the gospel. Hence, ecclesial unity in diversity is evangelistic. It must, however, be stated unambiguously that the Holy Spirit is the agent of unity in diversity. This is made clear in 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11 that the Spirit unites believers to Christ while distributing diverse gifts. Unity is Holy Spirit-generated and not humanly engineered. The role of believers is to activate the already generated unity. Diversity of gifts is Spirit-enabled and purposeful. Suppressing diversity quenches the work of the Spirit. Therefore, discernment and dependence on the Holy Spirit are essentials for ecclesial cohesion. Lastly, the harmonious relationship within the Trinity models peace as a right relationship rather than mere absence of conflict. Through Christ's reconciling work, the church is called to embody peace as a foretaste of God's kingdom (Eph. 2:14-18). Ecclesial peace, therefore, is not optional but constitutive of the church's identity and mission.

The Impact of Peace Studies and Human Relations Theory on an Ecclesial Theology of Unity in Diversity.

The theology of unity in diversity is indeed essentially and fundamentally biblical and doctrinal, but it is also a concept that is lived out within concrete human communities marked by power, culture, emotions, and conflict. As a result, the theology of unity and diversity cannot survive alone without consideration for other fields outside theology, such as peace studies and human relations theory. Peace studies and Human Relations theories can significantly impact ecclesial theology by means of translating theological conviction to practical, relational, and structural realities. The three concepts (Theology, Peace Studies, and Human Relations Theory) can play a complementary role instead of that of competition for ecclesial cohesion. Peace studies and Human Relations Theory can function as interpretative and operational partners for ecclesial theology for the unity of the church.



Peace studies can help theology to reframe peace as a positive and relational reality. Ecclesia's understanding of conflict is mostly seen as negative. As a result, conflicts are suppressed using spiritual authorities, biblical, and doctrinal interpretations. In contrast, Peace studies conceive conflict as a possible transformational agent depending on how it is managed. That conflict, if positively managed, can help not only the unity of the church but the general well-being of the church. This is why it differentiates Negative Peace (Absence of conflict) from positive peace (Presence of justice, equity, and healthy relationships). By this, church unity can be transformed from superficial harmony to relational justice and reconciliation. (Galtung, 1996). It also challenges churches to stop suppressing dissent in the name of unity. Theologically, this affirms biblical shalom as holistic well-being as stressed in Ephesians 2: 14- 17. Unity should be measured by relational health and not by conformity and the silencing of opposition.

As a result, peace studies conceive conflict as inevitable and potentially constructive and the church should see it that way for the promotion of unity in diversity. The idea of diversity itself suggests the possibility of conflict because of its divergence of opinions, worldview and perspectives. The church, though a spiritual entity, is a social entity that involves human relations where conflict becomes inevitable. Hence, churches must not see conflict as a spiritual failure but as a necessary human reality. This should also encourage theological reflection on disagreement as part of sanctification. The inevitability of conflict aligns with Paul's realism as displayed in Galatians chapter three and the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians. (Cheong, 2019). In the Galatians passage, Paul called our attention to the divergence of call between him and Peter. While Paul was called to preach to the Gentiles, Peter was called to preach to the Jews. This brought some forms of disagreement that Paul had to publicly rebuke Peter for hypocrisy. Many still see Paul's action as too confrontational and not good for ecclesial peace. But that particular conflict sorted out a few things for the church in terms of how to handle spiritual relationships between people of opposing cultures in the church and practical Christianity. Hence, unity in diversity includes the capacity to disagree without division.

Peace studies also provide tools for managing diversity constructively. This is done by offering methods such as the early warning system, dialogue, mediation, conflict transformation mechanism, and restorative justice. The impact of the above is to the extent that it supplies practical mechanisms for embodying reconciliation. It also prevents escalation of diversity-related tensions and enables theology to become performative rather than abstract. (Nwankwo, 2018). The pastoral implication for ecclesial cohesion is that it helps churches move from crisis reaction to peacebuilding.

The emphasis of peace studies on structural and systemic peace is also advantageous for ecclesial peace. Peace studies highlight structural violence, which is about inequalities embedded in the system. This exposes how leadership structure, ethnic favouritism, and exclusion, which may be part of the church system, undermine unity. It deepens the theological critique of unjust ecclesial practices. This resonates with biblical concern for justice and concern for the marginalised. Hence, unity in diversity requires not only a loving attitude. (Edmund, 2021).



The Human Relations Theory, like peace studies, can also impact ecclesial unity in diversity in many ways. An important way of achieving this is in its ability to help center human needs within the theological community. This is because the theory's emphasis on the needs for belonging, recognition, security, and meaning according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. These are areas of need that must be institutionalised within theological communities in order to reduce relational crisis behind church crisis. It is easy for conflict to emerge in churches when some sections of the diverse church community feel unrecognised, unheard, and unattended to. This explains why marginalised groups within the church resist imposed unity (Uka, 2022). Human relations theory in this regard illuminates pastoral roots of conflict beyond doctrinal disagreement. This complements theological anthropology, which highlights humans as relational beings. Church leaders need to know that when human needs are ignored, it erodes unity faster than doctrinal differences.

The Human Relations Theory, through Herzberg's motivation theory, highlights motivation, participation, and inclusion through recognition and responsibility. For Herzberg, engagement is more than church attendance. It is about participation, involvement, and meaningful inclusion. Human Relations Theory teaches that people trust and support what they help to shape. Its impact on ecclesiology is that it encourages participatory ecclesial governance, challenges authoritarian leadership styles, and also aligns with the priesthood of all believers, which is an important New Testament doctrine (Nwankwo, 2018). This highlights the ecclesiological insight that unity deepens when diversity is genuinely involved, and not merely tolerated. The church must always see diversity as a blessing and not as something that should be tolerated.

Hence, Human relations theory strengthens communication and relational trust. It does this by stressing effective communication, empathy, and feedback. Any church that must benefit from the blessings of unity in diversity must prioritise effective communication, empathy for people of diverse group and provide avenues for feedback from members through small group leadership, suggestion box, open church interactions, and many more. This will enhance the practice of truth-telling according to Ephesians 4: 15. It will also reduce misinterpretation of cultural or generational differences. In addition, it will help in building trust essential for unity in diversity in the church. It is important to stress that unity grows through dialogue, not decrees.

Lastly, the theory explains power dynamics and leadership impact by examining authority, influence, and group dynamics. This helps the church discern when power undermines communion. It encourages servant leadership modeled on Christ and also supports accountability and shared leadership. The ethical implication of this is that power must serve unity and not control diversity. Below is an integrated impact of theology, peace studies, and human relations theory on the ecclesial theology of unity in diversity.

Theology, Peace Studies, Human Relations Theory

Unity as a gift

Unity as relational peace

Unity as relational satisfaction

Diversity as a gift

Diversity as a manageable difference

Diversity as human reality



Reconciliation as doctrine Reconciliation as process Reconciliation as relationship

Church as body Church as peace community Church as relational system

Implications for African Ecclesia Contexts

The purpose of this section of the paper is to situate the discussion in the specific African context. This is because of the uniqueness of African ecclesial realities such as ethnicity, colonial legacy, leadership, and Pentecostal–mainline churches. Generally, African culture and her worldview have been a great influence on her religion and the Ecclesia brand. This section, therefore, affirms African communal values while correcting exclusion. It is also concerned about how to empower churches as agents of societal peace while strengthening church witness in plural societies.

Ethnicity is one of the most powerful identities in Africa, shaping belonging, loyalty, and worldview. A lot of primordial sentiments are attached to it to the extent that it influences church peace. Nigeria, for example, is said to have over six hundred ethnic groups. Though ethnicity itself is not inherently negative, its mismanagement and politicisation have profoundly affected ecclesial cohesion across African Christianity. What should be a gift to the church has often become a fault line that fractures unity, undermines peace, and most importantly, distorts Christian witness.

Hence, ethnicity has become a primary identity that competes with Christian identity. Many Christians, as a result, first see themselves through the lens of their tribe or ethnic group before seeing themselves as children of God who should prioritise the Bible over culture and ethnic sentiments. Believers interpret church life through ethnic loyalty and also take leadership, resource allocation, and discipline based on ethnic sentiments. This is also obvious in the selection of church leadership, where minority groups are marginalised in favour of dominant ethnic groups. (Turaki, 2019). These lead to distrust in church governance and create a crisis of leadership succession. There is no doubt that structural injustice erodes relational trust and unity.

Language is an important part of ethnicity, and it affects liturgy and worship practices. Many times, worship conducted in a dominant ethnic language excludes others. Additionally, ethnic bias shapes conflict interpretation and resolution. As a result, disciplinary processes lack neutrality, and reconciliation becomes difficult as ethnicity overrides justice. (Kalu, 2005). Sometimes, churches are drawn into ethnicised political contest where congregations are polarised along political – ethnic lines. Churches lose credibility as neutral peace actors, and prophetic witness is compromised (Elewa, 2020). This is where Churches in Nigeria found themselves leading up to and after the 2023 Presidential election. Slogans such as “Yes Daddy” (From a leaked phone conversation between a Presidential aspirant and a popular Pastor) and “Let the Church take the country back” (A statement used by a Presidential aspirant to seek church support) became popular. The shame of it all was the emergence of fake prophets whose predictions about the election never came to pass.



It must, however, be stated that ethnic diversity has positive potential. When properly applied, it can strengthen ecclesial cohesion. This is when churches allow the richness of culture to be expressed in worship. Some churches in Nigeria, for example, have days of cultural worship expression where people come to church dressed in their native attire, sing native songs, and provide native foods for people to fellowship with. Ethnicity also provides an opportunity for expanded theological perspectives where spiritual issues are considered from the perspectives of various cultures. Diversity becomes a gift when governed by love and justice (Priest & Nieves, 2006). For integrated church administration that is ethically sensitive, it is recommended that churches re- center Christian identity in Christ, institutionalise inclusive leadership structure, practice multilingual worship, and practice intentional inter- ethnic fellowship.

Africa's colonial legacy has had deep and lasting impacts on church cohesion across the continent. Colonialism not only reorder political and economic landscape of African societies, but it has also reshaped religious life, church structure, identities, and relationships. This has continued to influence how unity and diversity are negotiated within the contemporary African ecclesial structure. Colonial policies greatly contributed to African ethnicity because of the intentional political manipulation of colonial masters to divide the people for the perpetuation of their hold on the continent. They imposed artificial borders that grouped diverse ethnic communities while separating others with shared interests. (Kalu, 2005). African churches inherited and sometimes reproduced this ethnic division. The Biblical vision of one body (1Corinthians 12) is undermined by ethnic loyalties reinforced by colonial cartography.

The coming of Missionaries to Africa was through the sponsorship of their home denominations. Apart from preaching the gospel, they were also committed to the different doctrines, church administrative systems, and leadership style of their home churches, many times with absolute disregard for the culture and systems of the people. As a result, missionary efforts often reflect Western denominational rivalries (Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian). The implication is that Christianity was introduced as fragmented from the beginning, where denominational identity sometimes overshadowed Christian unity. (Cox & Haar, 2003). This denomination fragmentation is still evident today in many African countries. Competition for converts and influence also weakens unity. In addition, colonial missions many times mirrored colonial administrative hierarchies, which emphasise privileged control over participation. This produced authoritarian leadership and the marginalisation of the indigenous voice in decision-making. This power imbalance fostered resentment and schism.

There is also the effect of colonial education, elitism, and social stratification on the unity of African churches. For example, missionary schools created Western - educated Christian elites, which further created class divisions in church life. Leadership became associated with educational privilege, and grassroots voices were often excluded. As a result, social stratification disrupted communal ecclesial identity. Colonial languages also became dominant in worship and theology. This led to the exclusion of the uneducated and rural population from core church life. It further created tension between modern and traditional worship forms. (Cox, & Haar, 2003). Today, many church conflicts reflect these colonial patterns. Healing of colonial wounds is therefore essential for sustainable church peace. There is a need to reclaim African communal



values that are not opposed to the scripture. African Christian theology must help on how to practically help churches in achieving inculturation and contextual theology.

The relationship between Pentecostal and historic mission, known as mainline churches in Africa, has been characterised by both creative vitality and deep tension. Tension between these two traditions has often weakened ecclesial cohesion, complicating the church's witness to unity in diversity. This is despite the fact that Pentecostalism has contributed significantly to African Christian growth and contextual relevance.

The tension has been magnified by doctrinal and theological differences. While Pentecostal churches emphasise experiential spirituality, the immediacy of the Holy Spirit, healing, prophecy, and deliverance, mainline churches emphasise sacramental life, doctrinal continuity, liturgical order, and historical theology. This created mutual suspicion where Pentecostals accuse mainline churches of spiritual deadness. The mainline churches, on the other hand, accuse Pentecostals of theological shallowness and emotionalism. Another point of difference is that Pentecostal authority is often charisma-based while mainline authority is institutional and ordination-based. These competing sources of authority weaken mutual accountability and also produce leadership conflict in ecumenical settings. (Adeboye, 2012).

Worship style and liturgical differences constitute another reason for conflict. Pentecostal worship is expressive and spontaneous, while mainline worship is structured and liturgical. Worship style, as a result, becomes a boundary marker of identity. Generational divides also deepen as youth gravitate toward Pentecostal expression. Diversity in worship, rather than enriching unity, becomes divisive. Theology of prosperity and social ethics also shape the tension. Mainline churches critique Pentecostal prosperity teaching as materialistic, and Pentecostal churches critique mainline social theology as ineffective. The way forward is that of mutual theological recognition, Trinitarian and Pneumatological dialogue, shared peace-building actions, liturgical and charismatic hospitality, and joint leadership formation. (Obiwulu, 2021).

Leadership is another decisive factor shaping ecclesial unity in Africa. This is so because church leaders function not only as spiritual guides but also as cultural brokers, power holders, and peace actors within a pluralistic and fragile society. Unfortunately, many African churches inherited or developed a highly centralised leadership model from colonial administration and traditional chieftaincy structure, which has limited people's participation in decision making and also suppressed dissent, seen as rebellion. (Olanrewaju, 2021). Pentecostal and independent churches most often have charismatic founders with strong cohesion around the leader but with fragile institutional unity. This also leads to a crisis when such leaders fall, retire, or die. It also comes with a limited accountability structure. Unity is such an instance that becomes personality-based instead of Christ-centred.

Inadequate theological training, especially with Pentecostal and independent churches but sometimes with mainline churches, affects leadership quality and consequently fuels church cohesion. It leads to poor conflict management skills and a shallow theology of unity and peace. Leadership in some African churches is characterised with weak governance structure, which



fosters abuse of power. This most times lead to financial and moral scandals, erosion of moral authority, and congregational fragmentation.

Despite all of these challenges, many African church leaders make efforts to strengthen unity through inclusive and participatory leadership, contextually sensitive pastoral care, deliberate peace and reconciliation initiative and prophetic engagement with social justice. Additionally, many African churches have developed indigenous peace-building practices. These include communal dialogue forums, elder-mediated reconciliation, prayer and fasting initiatives, and inclusive leadership structures that reflect ethnic and generational diversity. Where such practices are intentionally grounded in theology, they have contributed to renewed cohesion and strengthened witness. To achieve a cohesion- enhancing leadership, African churches must be committed to Christ – centred servant leadership, shared and collegial governance, ethnic and gender inclusivity, strong accountability mechanism and peace-building and conflict transformation training.

Towards a Practical Theology of Ecclesia Peace

The inclusion of Peace Studies and the application of Human Relations Theory into the spirituality and theology of the church will produce a practical theology of ecclesial peace, a sustainable peace environment of the church that is relatable, productive, and beneficial to the church, believers, and Christianity as a way of life. Hence, the purpose of the inclusion of Peace Studies and the theory into church spirituality is to bridge theory and practice. To make all the arguments in this paper practical, the church in Africa in addition of recommendations that have been earlier offered, must be able to do the following;

Institutionalise intentional and aggressive peace education within the church. Church leaders and congregants should be equipped or skilled in the art of peace education.

Practice inclusive leadership and participatory governance.

Work on a theological orientation that shifts focus from power to service. Theology and Church life must be oriented towards servant leadership, just as Jesus' life and ministry modeled. Orientation towards power, personal greatness, and self –centeredness must be intentionally toned down.

Deliberately institutionalise the structure of mediation, reconciliation, and dialogue, which should include peacebuilding.

Cultivate spiritual discipline that sustains unity, such as prayer, forgiveness, healing, and mutual accountability.

Intentionally teach a theology of unity in diversity as part of discipleship and leadership formation.

When churches embody peace internally, they are better positioned to contribute to societal peace and reconciliation.



Conclusion

This article has argued that church peace is inseparable from a theologically grounded understanding of unity in diversity. By integrating ecclesiology, peace studies, and human relations theory, the study demonstrates that diversity need not undermine ecclesial cohesion. When embraced as a divine gift and guided by inclusive practices, diversity becomes a source of strength and witness. In the African contexts marked by deep social divisions, the church's faithful embodiment of unity in diversity holds profound implications not only for ecclesial life but also for broader peace-building efforts

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