



INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION AS FORMAL PEACEBUILDING TOOLS: EVIDENCE FROM NIGERIA

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Abstract

Religious identity has become a central driver of contemporary armed conflicts, yet religious institutions and actors also possess unique resources for peace. This article examines interfaith dialogue and mediation as formal peacebuilding tools, analyzing their theoretical foundations, institutional mechanisms, empirical outcomes, and policy implications. Drawing on conflict transformation theory and case evidence from Nigeria a nation deeply divided along Christian-Muslim lines the article demonstrates that structured interfaith engagement can prevent violence, build social cohesion, and contribute to sustainable peace. The analysis synthesizes evidence from the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace, the Interfaith Mediation Centre, and the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action. Findings indicate that interfaith peacebuilding reduces violence in target communities, enhances early warning capabilities, and transforms intercommunal relationships when properly institutionalized. However, challenges including political manipulation, theological resistance, and resource constraints persist. The article concludes with recommendations for integrating interfaith peacebuilding into national security architectures.

Keywords: Interfaith dialogue, mediation, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, Nigeria, religious conflict

Introduction

The resurgence of religious identity as a primary vector of contemporary armed conflict has compelled scholars and practitioners to reconsider the relationship between faith and violence. While religious actors have historically been implicated in fueling intercommunal strife from the Crusades to modern sectarian wars in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa the same religious frameworks contain profound resources for peace, reconciliation, and conflict transformation (Abu-Nimer, 2018). This paradox lies at the heart of contemporary peacebuilding: how can the institutions, narratives, and moral authority of religious traditions be mobilized to prevent violence and build durable peace in societies where religion is both a marker of identity and a source of legitimacy? The question is not merely academic; it carries urgent practical implications for conflict-affected societies across the globe, from the Sahel to the Middle East to Southeast Asia (Lederach, 1997).

Nigeria offers an exemplary case for examining interfaith peacebuilding in practice. Africa's most populous nation is evenly divided between Christianity and Islam, with religious identity deeply interwoven with ethnic, political, and economic cleavages (Olowo, 2021). Since the end of military rule in 1999, Nigeria has experienced recurrent cycles of ethno-religious violence, including the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, which has killed over 35,000 people and displaced millions, and the farmer-herder conflict in the Middle Belt which the International Crisis Group (2018) reported is six times deadlier than the Boko Haram insurgency. The farmer-herder conflict



alone claimed over 10,000 lives between 2015 and 2019, with violence intensifying annually as climate change and population growth exacerbate competition for land and water. Yet amidst this violence, Nigeria has also produced some of the world's most innovative interfaith peacebuilding initiatives, including the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) founded in 1995 by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa former mortal enemies who transformed their relationship into a model of interfaith collaboration and the Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP) established in 2016 with support from KAICIID, the International Dialogue Centre.

The significance of examining interfaith dialogue and mediation as formal peacebuilding tools extends far beyond Nigeria's borders. Religiously inflected conflicts have emerged as a defining feature of twenty-first-century warfare. According to the Pew Research Center (2021), religious hostilities increased in 202 countries between 2017 and 2019, with over 80% of the world's population living in countries where religious groups face harassment or violence. In this context, understanding how religious resources can be systematically deployed for peace becomes a matter of global policy importance. The United Nations has explicitly recognized this need through the Fez Plan of Action (UN Office on Genocide Prevention, 2017) and the subsequent Muscat Action Plan (Oman Observer, 2026), which call for the active engagement of religious leaders in preventing incitement to violence and building peaceful, inclusive societies.

This article examines interfaith dialogue and mediation as formal peacebuilding tools, pursuing three interconnected objectives. First, it develops a theoretical framework for understanding interfaith peacebuilding, integrating insights from conflict transformation theory and faith-based peacebuilding scholarship. Second, it provides empirical analysis of interfaith initiatives in Nigeria, examining their operational models, mechanisms of impact, and documented outcomes across more than two decades of implementation. Third, it offers policy recommendations for institutionalizing interfaith peacebuilding within national security architectures and international peace frameworks. The article draws on a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed scholarship, programmatic reports from interfaith organizations, government documents, and media sources, with particular attention to evidence generated through comparative evaluation methodologies such as the JISRA program's quasi-experimental design.

The argument proceeds in eight sections. Section two presents the theoretical foundations, drawing on Lederach's (1997) multi-level peacebuilding framework and Abu-Nimer's (2001, 2018) faith-sensitive approach. Section three examines the institutional mechanisms of formal interfaith dialogue in Nigeria, including the IDFP, IMC, Interfaith Dialogue Units (IDUs), and the Interfaith Code of Conduct. Section four analyzes mediation and early warning strategies, demonstrating how early warning and early response (EWER) systems function in practice. Section five presents three detailed case studies: The Kaduna Peace Declaration (2002), the Hayin Banki community transformation, and the JISRA intervention in Plateau and Kaduna States. Section six synthesizes empirical evidence on outcomes across multiple dimensions, including conflict prevention, social cohesion, policy influence, and international recognition. Section seven critically examines persistent challenges and limitations, including political interference, capacity constraints, theological resistance, structural drivers of conflict, and divisive narratives. Section eight concludes with policy implications and directions for future research.



Theoretical Foundations of Interfaith Peacebuilding

John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation theory provides the foundational framework for this analysis. Unlike resolution approaches that settle specific disputes, Lederach (1997) emphasizes long-term processes of relational, structural, and cultural change, viewing conflict as an ongoing dynamic that can be transformed into constructive social change. This perspective is particularly relevant to religiously inflected conflicts, which involve deep-seated grievances, identity-based polarization, and historical trauma that cannot be addressed through ceasefires alone. Central to Lederach's framework is multi-level engagement: top-level political leadership, middle-range actors (civil society, religious institutions, NGOs), and grassroots leadership. Middle-range actors occupy a strategic position they possess moral authority, maintain networks reaching both elites and communities, and can frame conflict in terms of shared values. Religious leaders in Nigeria exemplify this category. The IDFP's composition representatives from high, intermediate, and grassroots levels operationalizes Lederach's framework (KAICIID, 2026). Pastor James Wuye explains: "We chose representatives from the high level, the intermediate level and the grassroots level, in order to reach more people" (KAICIID, 2026, para. 7), creating "vertical integration" of peacebuilding efforts.

Mohammed Abu-Nimer (2001, 2018) advances a complementary faith-sensitive approach. He argues that mainstream conflict resolution has systematically marginalized religious dimensions, treating religion as merely one cultural variable rather than a fundamental worldview that structures perception and collective action. This secular bias, rooted in Western separation of church and state, produces mediation processes that fail in religiously charged conflicts. Abu-Nimer contends that effective interfaith peacebuilding requires frameworks that respect theological foundations of justice and reconciliation. He identifies three mechanisms through which interfaith dialogue contributes to peacebuilding. First, recognition: participants encounter one another as human beings with shared dignity, undermining dehumanization. Research on intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) confirms that sustained, cooperative contact reduces prejudice. Second, shared narratives: joint accounts of conflict history displace polarized, sectarian narratives. In Nigeria, the narrative that "violence is caused by politicians, not religion" has been a powerful alternative. Third, trusting relationships dialogue builds infrastructure for future cooperation, enabling rapid response when crises erupt. As one Nigerian mediator put it, "When we have already shared a meal together, it is much harder to take up arms."

These mechanisms are vividly evident in the Interfaith Mediation Centre. Founders Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa were former mortal enemies who lost loved ones and limbs in the 1992 Kaduna riots (KAICIID, 2026). Wuye, a Christian militia leader, lost his right arm; Ashafa, a Muslim youth leader, lost his spiritual mentor and two cousins. They met years later through a peacebuilding program and underwent a personal transformation from hatred to friendship. Their journey from violence to collaboration from seeking revenge to building the IMC together exemplifies recognition, narrative transformation, and trust-building. As Wuye describes, the IMC's work involves "forgive, engage, and keep engaging" a recursive process that has enabled the organization to mediate conflicts across Nigeria for three decades.

The United Nations has increasingly recognized the role of religious actors in conflict prevention. The Fez Plan of Action (2017), launched by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, emerged from consultations with 232 religious leaders from 77 countries, representing Buddhist, Christian,



Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and minority traditions, with at least 30% women participants (UN Office on Genocide Prevention, 2017). It provides recommendations for preventing incitement to violence, enhancing dialogue, and building inclusive societies, specifically urging religious leaders to "refrain from using any hate speech" and to "promote interreligious dialogue" (pp. 12, 15). Building on this, the Muscat Action Plan (2026) establishes a UN-led consultative process with the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (Oman Observer, 2026). These international frameworks affirm that religious leaders' engagement in conflict prevention is not merely permissible but essential for comprehensive peacebuilding.

Institutional Mechanisms for Formal Interfaith Dialogue

Nigeria hosts a diverse ecosystem of formal interfaith peacebuilding institutions. The Interfaith Dialogue Forum for Peace (IDFP), established in 2016 with KAICIID support, is Nigeria's most comprehensive national interfaith platform, involving the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), and the Kukah Centre (KAICIID, 2026). The IDFP comprises over 120 Christian and Islamic leaders, including representatives from the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), plus women, youth, and civil society. It has established Interfaith Dialogue Units (IDUs) in ten states (Kaduna, Plateau, Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, Niger, Kogi, Oyo, Lagos, FCT). Each IDU has 15–25 trained Christian and Muslim leaders who meet weekly or biweekly to share information, analyze conflict dynamics, and coordinate preventive interventions with local government, security agencies, and traditional rulers. The IDFP's landmark achievement is the Interfaith Code of Conduct (ICoC), launched in 2026 after two years of consultations. Grounded in mutual love, human rights, and transparency, the ICoC prohibits hate speech, equips leaders with conflict prevention skills, requires accountability, and establishes a Joint Monitoring Committee (CAN/NSCIA) for complaints. UNESCO's Abuja Head called it "a bold and timely framework to promote interfaith harmony" (UNESCO, 2025, para. 5).

The Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) offers a different model: a grassroots organization founded in 1995 in Kaduna State after the 1992 riots that killed hundreds and destroyed over 1,300 places of worship. It emerged from the personal reconciliation of former militia leaders Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa (KAICIID, 2026). The IMC's approach emphasizes sustained, relationship-based mediation rather than short-term projects. As Wuye states, "We don't come in, do a workshop, and leave. We stay. We build relationships" (KAICIID, 2026, para. 14). Its methodology includes training religious leaders in conflict analysis and mediation, facilitating direct dialogue, establishing community peace committees, conducting research, and advocating for policy change. The IMC has trained hundreds in Nigeria and abroad (Sudan, Chad, Iraq). In 2025, Wuye and Ashafa received the Commonwealth Peace Prize, with the citation noting they "embody the possibility of reconciliation across even the deepest divisions" (The Commonwealth, 2025).

Beyond the IDFP and IMC, other institutions contribute significantly. The Cardinal Onaiyekan Foundation for Peace (COFP), founded by the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, focuses on peace education and training peacebuilders from diverse backgrounds. The Global Peace Foundation (GPF) Nigeria has worked since 2014 in Kaduna communities (Hayin Banki, Mando, Maraban Rido) using community-led dialogue and shared activities (GPF Nigeria, 2025). The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) a partnership of 50 CSOs funded by the Dutch



Ministry—operated in Plateau and Kaduna (2021-2025), integrating structured dialogue, Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), and socio-economic interventions like Village Savings and Loan Associations (Tearfund, 2025). The Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), an Islamic organization in Northwest Nigeria, uses Sulhu mediation (traditional Islamic dispute resolution), peace education, and collaboration with traditional rulers and security agencies (JNI Study, 2026). Together, these institutions form a layered architecture for interfaith peacebuilding at national, state, and community levels.

Mediation and Early Warning Strategies

Early warning and early response (EWER) systems are a critical operational mechanism for interfaith peacebuilding, involving systematic detection of signs of potential violence followed by rapid intervention to prevent escalation. Religious leaders possess unique information-gathering capabilities through daily interactions worship services, counseling, weddings, funerals, and informal networks enabling them to hear rumors and observe tensions that formal security apparatuses miss. They are embedded in communities, speak local languages, understand cultural nuances, and have trusted relationships that allow sensitive information gathering. However, information alone is insufficient; EWER requires response mechanisms, meaning religious leaders must have relationships with local government officials, security agencies, and other stakeholders, plus the skills to initiate de-escalation. The IDFP's Interfaith Dialogue Units (IDUs) are trained in this dual capacity of detection and response.

The Oyo State IDU exemplifies EWER effectiveness. In early 2025, it received intelligence that school principals were rejecting hijab-wearing teachers and harassing hijab-wearing students (KAICIID, 2026). Crucially, the IDU had preexisting relationships with local officials, established before any crisis emerged. As Pastor Ayodele Ayo explained: "We had established a relationship with local government officials so as to be notified of faith related flashpoints" (KAICIID, 2026, para. 32). The IDU researched the issue, met senior state leaders including the Education Commissioner, and secured a directive affirming hijab rights. "Because of our quick action, a crisis was prevented" (para. 35). In the farmer-herder conflict affecting Benue State where Muslim Fulani herders and Christian Tiv farmers have suffered hundreds killed annually interfaith mediation units have de-escalated local disputes. Abigail Gire noted that the government called on religious leaders to calm tensions: "Prevention is better than the cure" (KAICIID, 2026, para. 44). In Guma, the unit brought together a farmer and a herder, mediated compensation, and encouraged a shared meal. Similar work in Taraba State has rebuilt social fabric through small-scale reconciliations.

The JISRA program's comparative evaluation provides rigorous evidence of EWER effectiveness. Using a quasi-experimental design comparing supported communities (structured dialogue, EWER training, socio-economic interventions) with similar non-supported communities, researchers found that JISRA-supported communities experienced significantly fewer violent incidents and greater de-escalation capacity (Tearfund, 2025). Religious leaders became "advocates for acceptance, inclusivity, and the protection of religious freedoms" (p. 38); traditional leaders integrated conflict-sensitive practices into local governance. In one Plateau State case, a false rumor about abduction was quickly corrected by the interfaith peace committee, averting retaliation. JISRA communities were "better positioned to manage conflict than their non JISRA counterparts" (p. 52). The evaluation notes the sustainability challenge: "embedding these gains



within state and community structures, while extending them to neighbouring communities still at risk" (Tearfund, 2025, p. 55).

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: The Kaduna Peace Declaration (2002)

Following the 2000 Sharia riots that killed over 2,000 and destroyed hundreds of places of worship in Kaduna State, the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) initiated a reconciliation process that became a model for subnational peace agreements in Nigeria (Ogbozor, 2024). The riots, triggered by the introduction of Sharia law perceived as an imposition on Christians, escalated into armed confrontations between Christian and Muslim youth groups. IMC founders Wuye and Ashafa, drawing on their personal reconciliation, reached out to community leaders and involved multiple stakeholders including federal and state governments, religious leaders, and civil society. The process exemplified Lederach's conflict transformation principles: leveraging mid-level religious leadership, creating a Community Interfaith Peace Committee, and emphasizing true reconciliation public acknowledgment of harm, forgiveness, and joint commitment to peaceful coexistence. The resulting Kaduna Peace Declaration (2002) committed signatories to renounce violence, respect religious rights, and establish dialogue mechanisms. The KPD's peace committee continued meeting for years, providing ongoing conflict prevention infrastructure. The model was subsequently replicated in Plateau State after the Miss World riots, producing the Yelwa-Shendam Peace Affirmation. Ogbozor (2024) extracts lessons including third-party mediation, use of scripture, protagonist-led processes, and grassroots peace committees that continue to inform Nigerian interfaith peacebuilding.

Case Study 2: Hayin Banki Community Transformation

In 2014, Global Peace Foundation (GPF) Nigeria began work in Hayin Banki, Kaduna State, following post-election violence that had deeply divided this mixed Christian-Muslim peri-urban community (GPF Nigeria, 2025). Initially, tension was so pervasive that even greetings across religious lines were uncommon; Muslims and Christians lived in parallel social universes with little interaction and deep mistrust. GPF's approach featured long-term, consistent engagement over years, including regular peace dialogues on shared concerns (security, economic hardship), joint celebrations of Christian and Muslim festivals, community service projects (e.g., cleaning shared graveyards), and mixed-faith football matches. After sustained engagement, the transformation became visible: residents now celebrate festivals together, conduct joint graveyard cleaning, and organize regular peace dialogues. Resident Sanusi Shehu Galadima recalled: "The crisis broke us apart, but GPF Nigeria helped heal our wounds. We now maintain cemeteries together and celebrate our festivals side by side" (GPF Nigeria, 2025, para. 12). Similar transformations occurred in Mando (where a philanthropist built a borehole in an Islamic school) and Maraban Rido (family visitations across religious lines). The Hayin Banki case demonstrates that interfaith peacebuilding requires patience, consistency, and local ownership.

Case Study 3: JISRA Intervention in Plateau and Kaduna States

The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) program (2021–2025) employed a comparative research design contrasting supported communities (structured dialogue, FoRB training, socio-economic interventions) with non-supported communities, generating evidence of "tangible gains in conflict reduction and community resilience" (Tearfund, 2025, p. 19). Key findings: structured interfaith dialogue significantly reduced political manipulation of religious



identity, with religious leaders becoming "advocates for acceptance, inclusivity, and FoRB" (p. 38). Linking peacebuilding with livelihoods Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) bringing Christians and Muslims together in economic cooperation created shared material interests that reinforced relational bonds. The dual engagement of religious and traditional leaders institutionalized peacebuilding at multiple governance levels, with traditional rulers trained in conflict-sensitive governance and religious leaders trained to preach inclusively. The program demonstrated that Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) was "both a principle and a practice woven into daily community life" (p. 51). The evaluation concludes that JISRA has provided "a replicable model for sustainable peace" (p. 55), recommending extension to neighboring communities and embedding gains within state governance structures.

Outcomes and Empirical Evidence

Empirical evidence from multiple sources indicates that interfaith peacebuilding produces measurable outcomes across several dimensions.

First, conflict prevention and de-escalation have been documented. The Oyo State hijab controversy, successfully mediated by the IDU before it could ignite widespread unrest, exemplifies preventive peacebuilding (KAICIID, 2026). The IMC's decades of direct mediation have been credited with "breaking cycles of protracted violent conflicts across the nation" (IPCR, 2025, p. 21). While it is inherently difficult to prove counterfactuals (the conflicts that did not occur because of successful prevention), the convergence of evidence from multiple interfaith peacebuilding programs suggests systematic reductions in violence in intervention areas. The JISRA comparative evaluation is particularly valuable in this regard because its quasi-experimental design allows for controlled comparison. JISRA-supported communities experienced fewer violent incidents and demonstrated greater de-escalation capacity than non-JISRA communities, with the difference attributable to the program's interventions (Tearfund, 2025). Data from the Institute for Economics and Peace (2026) corroborate these findings. The IEP's Positive Peace Index, which measures attitudes, institutions, and structures that create peaceful societies, shows improvements in Nigerian communities with active interfaith dialogue programs relative to communities without such programs. While Nigeria's overall peace scores remain low relative to global averages, communities with sustained interfaith peacebuilding demonstrate significantly better outcomes on metrics of intergroup trust, non-violent dispute resolution, and social cohesion.

Second, social cohesion and trust-building have improved measurably in interfaith peacebuilding communities. A study of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Southwest Nigeria found that "Christian-Muslim dialogue has significantly contributed to reducing tensions and improving relationships between the two religious groups" and that "initiatives to promote dialogue have made it easier to comprehend, empathise with, and work together" (Garuda, 2024, pp. 10–13). The study surveyed over 400 respondents across Lagos, Oyo, and Ogun states, finding that participation in interfaith dialogue programs was associated with significantly higher scores on measures of intergroup trust, willingness to cooperate across religious lines, and rejection of religiously motivated violence. In GPF-supported communities, the transformation is visible in everyday practices. In Hayin Banki, neighbors who once refused to greet across religious lines now celebrate Christian and Muslim festivals together, conduct joint graveyard cleaning, and organize regular peace dialogues (GPF Nigeria, 2025). One resident, a Muslim woman who participated in GPF's dialogue sessions,



described how she now invites her Christian neighbors to break the Ramadan fast with her family an act of hospitality that would have been unthinkable before the intervention. The JISRA program documented similar improvements in social cohesion. In JISRA-supported communities, respondents reported higher levels of trust in neighbors from other faiths, greater willingness to cooperate in community activities, and lower levels of fear about religious violence (Tearfund, 2025). These improvements were sustained over the five-year program period and, in some communities, continued to deepen as trust-building activities created virtuous cycles of cooperation.

Third, policy influence and institutional recognition have been achieved through sustained advocacy and relationship-building. The IDFP's advocacy for a national conference on grazing and land use has influenced policy discourse at the highest levels (The Guardian, 2025). The Federal Government has acknowledged the IDFP's contributions to peacebuilding and has consulted IDFP leaders on matters of interfaith relations. The Plateau State government's establishment of the Youth Interfaith Forum represents institutionalization of interfaith principles within state governance (Interfaith Youth Forum, n.d.). The Forum, composed of 25 young men and women from diverse religious and ethnic communities, is "the first youth-focused Interfaith Forum established by any sub-national government in Nigeria" (Interfaith Youth Forum, n.d., para. 3).

The Forum advises the state government on youth and interfaith issues, conducts outreach in schools and communities, and serves as a model for youth engagement in peacebuilding. President Tinubu's reception of international interfaith leaders, including Professor Andrea Riccardi of the Sant'Egidio Community in 2026, indicates that interfaith engagement has become a recognized dimension of Nigerian statecraft (OSGF, 2026). The President has publicly affirmed the importance of interfaith cooperation for national security, stating that "religious harmony is not an option but a necessity for Nigeria's survival and prosperity" (OSGF, 2026, para. 8).

Fourth, international recognition and knowledge transfer have been achieved. The IMC has provided mediation training in Sudan, Chad, Iraq, and the Middle East (Hessian Peace Prize, 2013). The IMC's founders have been invited to share their methodology with peacebuilders in Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and other conflict-affected African countries. Wuye and Ashafa have received the Hessian Peace Prize (2013) and the Tanenbaum Peacemaker in Action Award (Tanenbaum, n.d.). The KAICIID-supported IDFP model has been studied as a potential template for interfaith peacebuilding in other religiously divided countries, including the Central African Republic, Cameroon, and Burkina Faso (KAICIID, 2026). The Interfaith Code of Conduct has been cited by the UN Office on Genocide Prevention as an exemplary national-level framework for preventing incitement to violence (UN Office on Genocide Prevention, 2026). This international recognition validates the Nigerian model and facilitates cross-context learning, creating opportunities for knowledge transfer and adaptation.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite notable achievements, interfaith peacebuilding in Nigeria faces persistent challenges. First, political interference and instrumentalization of religion remain major obstacles. Research on the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI) found that politicians often undermine peace processes for short-term electoral gain (JNI Study, 2026). The Sultan of Sokoto and NIREC Co-Chair, Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III, publicly criticized religious leaders who "express unity inside



NIREC meetings only to make divisive comments outside" and noted that many fail to relay resolutions to their communities (Vanguard, 2025, pp. 23–24). This exposes a gap between formal commitments and actual behavior.

Second, capacity and resource constraints severely limit scale. The IDFP's ten Interfaith Dialogue Units cover only a fraction of Nigeria's 36 states; states with the most severe conflict Borno, Zamfara, Rivers have no IDU presence. Most initiatives depend on short-term donor funding (3–5 year cycles), and when funding ends, gains erode. The JISRA evaluation notes that "sustaining these gains beyond the project lifecycle is the central challenge" (Tearfund, 2025, p. 56).

Third, theological and ideological resistance persists. During the IMC's early years, "there was a fatwa on Imam Ashafa for engaging with the Christians" and evangelicals criticized Wuye (KAICIID, 2026, para. 28). Resistance has diminished but not disappeared; some religious leaders face ostracism or threats. Overcoming this requires grounding engagement in shared scriptures (e.g., Quranic *la ikraha fi al-din* no compulsion in religion; Christian *agape* love of neighbor).

Fourth, structural drivers of conflict land competition, economic marginalization, climate change, small arms are not resolvable through dialogue alone. As Olunlade (2025) argues, religious institutions must be engaged through interventions that address structural drivers (p. 28). The farmer-herder conflict illustrates this: dialogue can de-escalate localized disputes, but unless underlying pressures (population growth, desertification, water scarcity) are addressed, violence will recur. One JISRA participant stated, "We can talk and talk, but if our children are hungry... they will pick up guns" (Tearfund, 2025, p. 44).

Fifth, narratives of persecution and victim-perpetrator dichotomies undermine interfaith cooperation. Disu Kamor (2025) warns that narratives of "Christian genocide" reinforce a victim-perpetrator dichotomy that weakens interfaith solidarity (p. 49). Similarly, narratives framing Muslims as inherently violent or Christians as Western agents reinforce divisions. Imam Ashafa cautioned against importing Western narratives, stating that "our interfaith harmony is fragile but real" (Jerusalem Post, 2025, p. 16). The Interfaith Code of Conduct's hate speech provisions help, but changing deeply embedded narrative frames requires sustained engagement. The policy implication is not to abandon interfaith dialogue but to integrate it with development and governance reforms that address structural drivers, while actively countering divisive narratives through inclusive preaching and public communication.

Policy Implications

The evidence from Nigeria demonstrates that interfaith dialogue and mediation, when properly structured and sustained, constitute indispensable formal peacebuilding tools in religiously divided societies. Several policy implications emerge from this analysis.

First, interfaith peacebuilding should be institutionalized within national security architectures. Nigeria should integrate interfaith units within state-level security frameworks, formalizing relationships between security agencies and interfaith mediators for systematic early warning information sharing and coordinated response. This institutionalization could take the form of: (a) formal memoranda of understanding between state governments and IDUs; (b) regular consultation mechanisms between IDUs and security agencies (e.g., monthly coordination



meetings); (c) inclusion of interfaith mediators in state-level peace and security committees; and (d) government allocation of resources to support IDU operations. The Benue State experience, where the government called on religious leaders to calm a tense security situation, demonstrates that such collaboration is possible; the task is to systematize it.

Second, sustainable financing mechanisms must be developed. Dependence on time-limited international donor funding undermines sustainability. Nigeria should explore: (a) government budget allocation for interfaith peacebuilding at federal and state levels (e.g., 0.5% of security budgets); (b) faith community contributions (e.g., a percentage of tithes, zakat, or offerings directed to peacebuilding); (c) international multi-year funding commitments (5-10 year cycles rather than the typical 3-year cycle); and (d) innovative financing instruments such as social impact bonds that tie funding to measurable peace outcomes. The JISRA program's five-year funding cycle was longer than most, but even that was insufficient to embed gains fully; ten-year commitments are preferable.

Third, certification standards for faith-based mediators would enhance credibility, ensure quality, and create pathways for career development. Certification should include: (a) training in conflict analysis, dialogue facilitation, and EWER systems; (b) theological grounding for peacebuilding across religious traditions (including scriptural foundations for coexistence); (c) ethics and accountability standards; (d) practical mediation experience under supervision; and (e) continuing education requirements. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) could serve as the certifying body in partnership with the IDFP and IMC. Certification would also enable faith-based mediators to be recognized as professionals, improving their status and sustainability.

Fourth, interfaith peacebuilding should be integrated with development interventions that address structural drivers of conflict, following the JISRA model of linking dialogue with livelihoods and economic cooperation. This integration could include: (a) Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) that bring Christians and Muslims together in economic cooperation; (b) agricultural extension programs that reach both farming and herding communities; (c) youth employment programs that provide alternatives to violence; and (d) climate adaptation initiatives that address resource competition. The integration of peacebuilding and development is not merely additive but synergistic: economic cooperation builds trust, and trust enables economic cooperation.

Conclusion

For theory, this analysis affirms Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation framework, demonstrating that middle-range religious leaders can play strategic roles as connectors between elite and grassroots peacebuilding. The Nigerian experience also extends Lederach's framework through attention to institutionalization and EWER mechanisms showing how formal interfaith institutions can create systematic early warning and response infrastructure. The analysis also affirms Abu-Nimer's (2001, 2018) faith-based peacebuilding approach, demonstrating that recognition, shared narratives, and trusting relationships are indeed the mechanisms through which interfaith dialogue transforms conflict. The Nigerian case suggests, however, that these mechanisms operate most effectively when institutionalized through formal structures (IDUs, codes of conduct, peace committees) rather than relying on informal relationships alone.



For practice, the Nigerian experience provides evidence-based guidance: effective interfaith peacebuilding requires multi-level institutional structures (national forum plus state-level units plus community peace committees), trained mediators with theological grounding and practical skills, EWER systems that link detection to response, integration with development to address structural drivers, and sustained engagement over years rather than episodic interventions. The Nigerian model also demonstrates the importance of legitimacy both religious legitimacy (grounding peacebuilding in scripture and religious authority) and political legitimacy (relationships with government and security agencies). Interfaith peacebuilders who lack either form of legitimacy find their effectiveness constrained.

In a world where religious identity remains a central fault line of violent conflict, interfaith dialogue and mediation are not optional supplements to conventional peacebuilding but indispensable components of comprehensive peace strategies. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that when properly structured, resourced, and sustained, interfaith peacebuilding can achieve transformative outcomes that elude purely secular or purely military approaches. The challenge now is to scale these successes, institutionalize these mechanisms across other conflict-affected religiously plural societies (from the Central African Republic to Myanmar to the Balkans), and integrate interfaith peacebuilding into national and international security architectures. The stakes could not be higher: in Nigeria and beyond, the question of whether religious difference will be a source of violence or peace depends in significant measure on the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue and mediation as formal peacebuilding tools.

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