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Full Length Research

Religion and peacebuilding in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria: Perceived roles, effectiveness and structural challenges

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ABSTRACT: Religious institutions are important actors in peacebuilding in conflict-affected communities, but their contribution can be shaped by the wider social and political environment. This study examined respondents' perceptions of the role of religion in resolving post-conflict disputes, the perceived adequacy of religious and other peace-building actors, and the challenges confronting peacebuilding in Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas, Plateau State, Nigeria. A survey was conducted, involving 400 participants. The data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using SPSS version 27.0. Of 378 respondents who answered the item on religion, 64.29% described its influence as positive, while 17.20% reported a negative influence. Religious leaders were rated very adequate by 48.14% of 376 respondents and adequate by a further 23.14%; their mean score was 3.91, the highest among the actors assessed. However, poverty (96.25%) and religious intolerance (94.25%) were frequently identified as challenges, alongside limited economic opportunities and unequal political representation. The findings suggest that religion is perceived as a potentially constructive but not uniformly positive resource for peacebuilding. Its contribution is likely to be stronger when religious actors cooperate with public and community institutions and address wider socioeconomic and governance-related grievances.

Keywords: Christians, Jos, Muslims, peacebuilding, reconciliation, religion, religious leaders.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has been described as the most populous Afro-cultural grouping in the World. However, the country tends to be divided along three major ethnic groups: the Igbo, the Hausas, and the Yorubas, with a mixture of religions amongst animist traditions (Paul et al., 2024). Religion is a body of truths, laws, and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being (Anameje, 2026). For every religion in the world today preaches peace, but the gap between these religions or it majors today boils down to the conflict, tolerance and misunderstanding we have in our contemporary world today (Paul et al., 2024; Köbrich and Hoffmann, 2023).

Plateau State occupies a strategic location in Nigeria's North-Central geopolitical zone and has generally been considered one of the country's most ethnically and religiously diverse regions (Alabi, 2026). Created on 3 February 1976 from the former Benue-Plateau State, Plateau State has over forty indigenous ethnic groups, including the Berom, Afizere, Anaguta, Mwaghavul, Ngas, Tarok, and Goemai, among others (Best, 2007). The state capital, Jos, emerged during the colonial period as an important mining centre following the discovery of tin deposits in the early twentieth century. British colonial economic policies attracted migrant labour from different parts of Nigeria, thereby transforming Jos into one of the country's most cosmopolitan cities (Plotnicov, 1971). While this diversity initially fostered economic growth and cultural interaction, it also laid the foundation for complex struggles over identity, citizenship, political representation, and access to land and economic opportunities (Madueke, 2018; Nnabuihe, 2020).

The evolution of communal conflicts in Plateau State reflects a gradual transformation from localised disputes into protracted cycles of collective violence. Early clashes

often revolved around disagreements over land ownership, grazing routes, farming boundaries, and local political representation (Alabi, 2026). However, these disputes progressively attained ethnic and religious dimensions, particularly where communities construed competition for scarce resources through identity-based narratives (Krause, 2011). The Jos crises of 2001, 2008, and 2010, alongside repeated attacks in Barkin Ladi, Riyom, Bassa, Mangu, and Bokkos Local Government Areas, demonstrate how isolated incidents quickly spiralled into widespread communal violence resulting in thousands of deaths and massive displacement (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Many scholars view religion as a motive for conflict, as it has emerged as a critical component in many past and present conflicts (Abubakar, 2021). Religion does not always, however, drive conflict, but it is also an integral factor in the peacebuilding and post-conflict reconciliation process (Anakwue and Ekwueme, 2021). Connectivity between religion and violent conflict is easy, as most of the world's violent outbreaks, both present and past, are couched in religious terms (Abubakar, 2021). This is evidenced by the contemporary conflicts in Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Iraq, and Israel/West Bank/Gaza (USAID, 2009). However, religious Actors can be significant in forestalling struggles and building serene social orders, and the significance of their commitment is broadly perceived (Abubakar, 2021).

Peace building involves the restoration of relationships, the management of grievances and the development of institutions and practices that reduce the likelihood of renewed violence (Galtung, 1969; Lederach, 1997). Religious institutions can contribute through moral leadership, mediation, community networks and the mobilisation of adherents for restraint and reconciliation. Yet religion can also intensify divisions when leaders legitimise exclusion or frame political and social disputes in antagonistic religious terms (Appleby, 2000; Smock, 2006).

In Jos, Christian-Muslim relations have unfolded within a wider setting of ethnic identities, indigene-settler contestation, political competition and socioeconomic grievances (International Crisis Group, 2012; Madueke and Vermeulen, 2018). The city's conflict history should not obscure examples of peaceful cooperation or the potential for religious and community actors to prevent escalation. Studies on religion and peacebuilding therefore encourage attention to both the constructive and harmful uses of religious authority and to the institutional conditions under which interfaith engagement can contribute to peaceful coexistence (Dowd, 2016; Ossai, 2024).

This study examines perceptions of religion's influence on post-conflict dispute resolution, the adequacy of religious leaders and organisations compared with other actors, and the economic, political, and social challenges respondents associate with peacebuilding in Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas, Plateau State. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine respondents' perceptions of religion as a resource for resolving post-conflict disputes.
2. assess the perceived adequacy of religious leaders, religious organisations and other peace-building actors in post-conflict resolution.
3. identify the economic, political and social challenges that may constrain peacebuilding efforts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design and study setting

The study adopted a survey research design. It was conducted in Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas of Plateau State, Nigeria. The two local government areas were selected because of their central position in the social and conflict history of Jos and the interaction of Christian and Muslim communities in the area.

Study population and sampling

A total of 400 respondents were drawn from five clusters obtained from the political wards of Jos-North and Jos-South L.G.A. for the administration of questionnaires. Multistage cluster sampling was used to select questionnaire respondents. The participants for the study were drawn from among community leaders and representatives of the Jama'atul Nasril Islam, Christian Association of Nigeria, the Red Cross Society of Nigeria, human-rights advocates, and NGOs involved in peacebuilding as well as youth-based community organisations. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with relevant experience for the study.

Data collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering respondents' socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, conflict experiences, causes and effects of conflict, conflict-resolution strategies and peace-building roles. Closed-ended items provided structured response categories, while open-ended questions enabled respondents to express views beyond the fixed options. Key informant interview and focus group discussion guides were used for the qualitative component.

Data analysis

The data collected were entered into Microsoft Excel for cleaning and coding and subsequently analysed using

SPSS version 27.0. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarise categorical responses. Mean scores were used where respondents rated the perceived adequacy of conflict-resolution mechanisms and actors. Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests were used to examine differences in the distribution of categorical responses. Statistical significance was assessed at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

In this study, a total of 400 respondents consisting of 197 (49.25%) persons from Jos North and 203 (50.75%) from Jos South were approached for their responses (Table 1). Males (74%) were more numerous than females (26%). Most of the respondents were aged 41 years and above (32.25%) and 31-35 years old (30.5%). 68.5% of the respondents were married, while 31.5% were single, with slightly more than half identifying as Christians (56%) and the remaining 44% as Muslims. The majority of the respondents have a degree/HND (43.75%) and a postgraduate certificate (39.5%). Most of the respondents were civil servants (23.75%) and public servants (12.75%). Only 19% were clergy. Concerning monthly income, 3.25% of the respondents said they earned nothing and are dependent on others for their upkeep, while 3.75%, mostly the clergy, did not disclose how much they earn. However, 38.75% said they earn above ₦50,000.

The inclusion of respondents from both LGAs and from Christian and Muslim communities provides perspectives from a socially and religiously diverse setting. However, the sample was not evenly distributed by sex, and respondents with tertiary or postgraduate education were strongly represented. In addition, participants were drawn partly through purposive selection because of their experience or involvement in community affairs and peacebuilding

Perceived influence of religion on conflict resolution

Out of the 400 respondents, 378 gave their responses on the influence of religion on conflict resolution (Table 2). The result indicated that 243 (64.29%) respondents described its influence on conflict resolution as positive. Another 15 (3.97%) reported that religious actors addressed adherents about the consequences of violence, while 10 (2.65%) specifically associated religion with encouraging tolerance. Conversely, 65 (17.20%) reported a negative influence. Thirty respondents (7.94%) indicated that religious leaders sometimes spoke in favour of their own religion in ways that increased dissension, and 15 (3.97%) stated that leaders could manipulate followers for personal gain. The distribution differed significantly ($\chi^2 = 649.37$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$).

The predominance of positive responses indicates that religion was widely perceived by respondents as a potential resource for resolving disputes. At the same time, the 17.20% who reported a negative influence, together with the more specific concerns about partiality and manipulation, show that this positive assessment was not unconditional. The finding is consistent with Appleby (2000) account of the ambivalence of religious authority: religious commitments and institutions can support reconciliation, but may also be used to legitimise exclusion or hostility. In this study, the coexistence of positive and negative views is therefore more informative than a simple conclusion that religion either promotes peace or causes conflict.

Dowd (2016), using survey data and interviews, found that the relationship between religious observance and tolerance varied across contexts. He stated that in the most religiously diverse and integrated setting, religious observance was associated with greater respect for religious freedom, and Christian and Muslim leaders more openly encouraged tolerance. This provides a useful comparison with the present finding: religious commitment does not have a uniform effect independent of the social setting or the messages communicated by leaders. In another study, the International Crisis Group (2012) and Krause (2011) describe the interaction of identity, political competition, claims to belonging and access to resources in the conflict environment. Madueke and Vermeulen (2018) further show that the spread of violence in Jos can vary with neighbourhood location and relationships across adjoining areas, not simply with the ethnic composition of a neighbourhood. These studies help explain why religious identity may become a channel through which wider grievances are expressed. They do not, however, establish that these processes explain the views of particular respondents in the present survey. Furthermore, Ossai (2024) review of empirical research on peaceful Christian–Muslim relations in Nigeria also highlights collaborative conflict prevention, everyday intergroup relationships, civilian agency and inclusive governance as conditions that can support peaceful coexistence. These studies therefore suggest that the constructive potential identified by the 64.29% of respondents depends partly on whether religious leaders foster contact across group boundaries, discourage inflammatory language and acknowledge grievances beyond their own congregations. The survey measures perceptions, however, and does not directly evaluate the content of sermons, the frequency of interfaith cooperation or the outcomes of specific mediation efforts.

Perceived adequacy of religious leaders and organisations in peacebuilding

Among the 376 respondents who gave their views about the adequacy of religious leaders and organisations in peacebuilding, 181 (48.14%) rated religious leaders' contribution as very adequate and 87 (23.14%) as adequate.

Table 1. Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of respondents.

Variable	Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
LGA	Jos North	197	49.25
	Jos South	203	50.75
Sex	Female	104	26.00
	Male	296	74.00
Age	15-20 years	28	7.00
	21-25 years	0	0.00
	26-30 years	26	6.50
	31-35 years	122	30.50
	36-40 years	95	23.75
	41 years and above	129	32.25
Marital status	Married	274	68.50
	Single	126	31.50
Religion	Christianity	224	56.00
	Islam	176	44.00
Educational qualification	Secondary	28	7.00
	NCE/OND	39	9.75
	Degree/HND	175	43.75
	Post Graduate	158	39.5.0
Occupation	Student	39	9.75
	Artisan	56	14.00
	Trader	28	7.00
	Farmer	15	3.75
	Self employed	15	3.75
	Teacher	13	3.25
	Civil servant	95	23.75
	Clergy	76	19.00
	Private practice	12	3.00
	Public servant	51	12.75
Income (₦)	Nil	13	3.25
	10,000-20,000	35	8.75
	20,000-30,000	40	10.00
	30,000-40,000	55	13.75
	40,000-50,000	87	21.75
	≥ 50,001	155	38.75
	No response	15	3.75

A further 13.83% rated the contribution inadequate and 7.45% grossly inadequate (Table 3). The distribution was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 217.11$, df = 4, $p < 0.001$) (Table 2). Religious organisations were rated very adequate by 34.04% and adequate by 30.32% of respondents; 20.74% rated their contribution inadequate and 3.99% grossly inadequate (Table 4).

These results indicate that respondents generally viewed religious leaders favourably, with nearly half assigning the highest adequacy rating. This is consistent with studies that described how religious leaders can draw on community networks, moral authority and established relationships to encourage restraint or facilitate dialogue (Appleby, 2000; Smock, 2006). Smock (2006) work on

Table 2. Respondents' perceptions of religion's influence on conflict resolution (n = 378).

Perceived influence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive influence	243	64.29
Positive: addresses adherents on consequences of violence	15	3.97
Positive: encourages tolerance	10	2.65
Negative influence	65	17.20
Negative: leaders favour own religion and increase dissension	30	7.94
Negative: leaders manipulate followers for personal gain	15	3.97
Total	378	100

$\chi^2 = 649.37$, df = 5, $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Perceived adequacy of religious leaders' role in conflict resolution (n = 376).

Rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very adequate	181	48.14
Adequate	87	23.14
Fair	28	7.45
Inadequate	52	13.83
Grossly inadequate	28	7.45
Total	376	100

$\chi^2 = 217.11$, df = 4, $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Perceived effectiveness of religious and other peace-building actors (n=400).

Actor	Very adequate (%)	Adequate (%)	Inadequate (%)	Mean score
Religious leaders	48.14	23.14	13.83	3.91
Religious organizations	34.04	30.32	20.74	3.70
Family	34.13	26.67	23.73	3.67
Community leaders	22.93	40.80	18.13	3.54
Traditional leaders	20.00	54.40	11.20	3.69
NGOs/CBOs	24.29	20.41	45.48	3.17
Government	30.05	21.01	17.29	3.38

religious contributions to peacemaking includes examples of faith-based actors supporting dialogue and mediation, including in settings affected by Christian–Muslim tensions.

The mean scores in Table 4 provide a comparative view of respondents' assessments. Religious leaders had the highest reported mean score (3.91), followed by religious organisations (3.70), traditional leaders (3.69), family (3.67), community leaders (3.54), government (3.38), and NGOs/CBOs (3.17). This pattern suggests that, within the set of actors assessed, respondents placed particular confidence in religious leaders and relatively less confidence in NGOs/CBOs and government. In a study by Krause (2017) of two neighbouring areas in Jos, they found that preventing killings during communal conflict depended in part on civilian agency, local leadership, social control over youth and refusal to cooperate with external armed groups. This offers a more specific local comparison: community-level leadership can matter in preventing violence, but its contribution depends on actions and relationships rather than title alone. The present survey's relatively favourable ratings for religious and traditional leaders are compatible with this perspective, although the studies used different methods and measured different outcomes. Similarly, Lederach (1997) emphasises that sustainable peacebuilding requires relationships and engagement across levels of society. The implication is not that religious leaders should replace government or civil society, but that they should be part of a coordinated network that includes community, traditional, public and non-governmental actors. This finding can also be understood through Putnam (2000) concept of social capital, which emphasises the importance of social networks, trust and reciprocity in facilitating cooperation and collective action. In the context of peacebuilding in Jos, relationships within families, religious institutions and local communities may provide channels for communication, mediation and conflict

Table 5. Economic, political and social challenges to peace building (n = 400).

Challenge domain	Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)	P-value
Economic	Poverty	385	96.25	0.002
	Lack of economic opportunities	339	84.75	
	Lack of skills acquisition for self-reliance	302	75.50	
	Lack of job opportunities	299	74.75	
Political	Unequal political representation	312	78.00	0.006
	Lack of free and fair elections	278	69.50	
	Poor government performance	259	64.75	
	Indigene-settler dispute	232	58.00	
Social	Religious intolerance	377	94.25	< 0.001
	Lack of proper education	313	78.25	
	Lack of proper socialization	279	69.75	
	Weak entrenchment of societal values	220	55.00	

Note: Responses were multiple choices therefore percentages were computed by dividing the the frequency of each response by 400.

resolution. However, these relationships are more likely to support wider peacebuilding when they foster cooperation across religious and ethnic boundaries rather than reinforce divisions between groups.

Economic challenges associated with peacebuilding

Poverty was the most frequently identified economic challenge to peacebuilding, reported by 385 respondents (96.25%). This was followed by lack of economic opportunities (339; 84.75%), lack of skills acquisition for self-reliance (302; 75.50%), and lack of job opportunities (299; 74.75%) (Table 5). These responses show that respondents overwhelmingly associated the prospects for peacebuilding with material security and livelihood opportunities, rather than viewing reconciliation as a matter of religious relations alone.

This is consistent with analyses of the Jos crisis that locate conflict within overlapping political, economic and identity-related grievances (International Crisis Group, 2012; Krause, 2011). Galtung (1969) concept of structural violence provides a useful perspective to this because it directs attention to social arrangements that restrict people's well-being and opportunities, even when direct physical violence is absent. Applied carefully, this framework suggests that peacebuilding may be difficult to sustain where residents perceive livelihoods and opportunities as insecure or unfairly distributed. It does not mean, however, that poverty automatically produces violence, or that the present survey demonstrates a causal pathway from poverty to conflict.

The percentages represent the proportion of respondents who selected each challenge in a multiple-response item. They establish how frequently these issues were identified, not their independent causal effects or relative contribution to violence. Economic hardship may intersect with perceptions of political exclusion, competition over resources and the mobilisation of group identity. As Haynes (2007) notes more broadly, the relationship between religion and development can involve both cooperation and conflict; in the present context, the findings support considering livelihood and development measures alongside dialogue and reconciliation. They do not establish which specific employment or skills programme would be most effective. Such programmes should therefore be based on local needs assessments and monitored for fair access across communities.

Political challenges and the governance context

Unequal political representation was identified by 312 respondents (78.00%) as a challenge to peacebuilding. Other reported political challenges were lack of free and fair elections (278; 69.50%), poor government performance (259; 64.75%) and indigene–settler disputes (232; 58.00%) (Table 5). These findings indicate that many respondents understood peacebuilding to depend partly on the fairness and credibility of political institutions and on how claims to belonging and representation are managed.

This pattern is in line with the International Crisis Group (2012) analysis of the Jos crisis, which discusses competition over political power, indigene status and access to public resources, and with Krause (2011) account of interacting political and identity-related drivers of violence. Gambo et al. (2025), in a secondary-data study of ethno-religious violence and peacebuilding approaches in Jos, likewise identify the indigene–settler dichotomy as a persistent issue and recommend greater interaction and understanding among religious and ethnic organisations. Madueke and Vermeulen (2018) added that

the spatial relationships between neighbourhoods can shape the spread and recurrence of violence. Although their study does not measure political representation, it reinforces the broader point that conflict dynamics in Jos are embedded in local relationships and structures. In this study, 58.00% of the respondents selected indigene–settler disputes as a challenge. This does not suggest that this issue is less important simply because its percentage is lower than poverty or religious intolerance. Because respondents could select multiple challenges, the percentages do not rank the causal importance of the factors. The practical implication is that religious dialogue should be complemented by credible mechanisms for addressing grievances, fair participation, transparent decisions and consistent public responses to violence.

Social challenges, religious intolerance and sustainable peace

Religious intolerance was identified by 377 respondents (94.25%), making it the most frequently selected social challenge in Table 5. Respondents also identified lack of proper education (313; 78.25%), lack of proper socialisation (279; 69.75%) and weak entrenchment of societal values (220; 55.00%). The fact that most of the respondents identified religious intolerance, as compared to the 64.29% who observed that religion has a positive influence on peacebuilding, does not necessarily suggest a contrary view. Rather, respondents may value religion as a source of moral guidance and reconciliation while also recognising that religious identity or leadership can be used in intolerant or exclusionary ways. Dowd (2016) provides a useful comparative perspective by showing that religious diversity and religious observance do not have identical implications across Nigerian settings; integration and the messages of religious leaders were associated with greater encouragement of tolerance in one of the settings studied. Ossai (2024), reviewing empirical work on peaceful Christian–Muslim relations, similarly concludes that intergroup cooperation can be enabled by civilian action, inclusive governance and practical relationships across religious boundaries. These findings support the value of sustained engagement between Christian and Muslim communities in Jos, but they do not demonstrate that dialogue alone will eliminate intolerance.

The high proportions identifying education and socialisation as challenges suggest that respondents also see the formation and transmission of attitudes as relevant to peaceful coexistence. However, the survey does not establish that lack of education causes intolerance, nor does it measure educational content, family socialisation, or exposure to inflammatory messages. A defensible implication is that peacebuilding should create repeated opportunities for cooperation and address the ways that stereotypes and hostile narratives circulate in community, educational and religious settings. Lederach (1997) argues that sustainable peace requires long-term relationship-building and local capacity to manage conflict; this is relevant because the reported challenges extend beyond individual disagreements.

The results also indicate why interfaith initiatives should not be expected to substitute for reforms addressing poverty, political representation and public accountability. Religious leaders and organisations can help communicate restraint, facilitate dialogue and challenge inflammatory rhetoric, but wider institutions must address the grievances that communities identify. A coordinated approach is therefore more consistent with the findings than reliance on religious institutions alone.

Limitations of the study

Some of the limitations of this study include: First, the study examined respondents' perceptions of religion and peacebuilding rather than independently measured peacebuilding outcomes. Consequently, the favourable assessment of religious leaders reflects their perceived adequacy and does not establish the extent to which their activities have reduced violence or prevented the recurrence of conflict. Second, the cross-sectional survey design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between religious influence, socioeconomic challenges, political exclusion and peacebuilding outcomes. The findings therefore identify perceived challenges and associations in respondents' views rather than demonstrating causal effects. Third, the study was restricted to Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas. Its findings provide evidence from these settings but may not be directly generalisable to other parts of Plateau State or Nigeria, where conflict histories, community relationships and peacebuilding institutions may differ.

Conclusion

This study examined perceptions of religion's influence on conflict resolution, the adequacy of religious and other peacebuilding actors, and the challenges confronting peacebuilding in Jos North and Jos South, Plateau State. The findings indicate that religion is predominantly perceived as a positive resource for conflict resolution, with religious leaders receiving the highest mean adequacy score among the actors assessed. Nevertheless, the reported negative uses of religious authority demonstrate that religious influence is not uniformly constructive.

The identification of poverty, limited economic opportunities, religious intolerance and unequal political representation as major challenges further indicates that peacebuilding in Jos extends beyond religious dialogue. Although religious institutions possess perceived legitimacy and potential to support reconciliation, their

contribution must be considered alongside the economic, political and social conditions within which communal relationships develop. The study therefore concludes that sustainable peacebuilding requires a coordinated approach that combines responsible religious leadership and interfaith engagement with inclusive governance, socioeconomic interventions and collaboration among community, traditional, civil society and public institutions. Such an approach offers a more comprehensive basis for addressing the challenges identified by respondents than reliance on religious institutions alone.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Religious leaders and organisations should establish regular Christian–Muslim dialogue and joint community initiatives focused on peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and the nonviolent resolution of disputes.
2. Religious institutions should strengthen efforts to discourage inflammatory rhetoric, manipulation of adherents and statements that encourage religious exclusion.
3. Government agencies and development partners should complement reconciliation initiatives with context-appropriate employment support, vocational training and livelihood programmes.
4. Relevant authorities should promote fair political participation, transparent decision-making and credible mechanisms for addressing community grievances, including disputes relating to representation and indigene–settler relations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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