

The Role of Church Leader in Peace Building for Sustainable Development in Taraba State: In the Context of Ethnic Diversities, an Analysis of Acts 6:1–7

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ABSTRACT

Peace constitutes the foundation for sustainable development and human flourishing. In Nigeria, particularly in Taraba State, insecurity remains a persistent obstacle to social harmony and economic growth. This paper examines the role of church leaders in peace building within the context of ethnic diversities in Taraba State, drawing analytical insights from Acts 6:1–7. The study, therefore, argues that church leaders, as prophetic and moral agents, must engage in practical initiatives that promote justice, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence. Using a qualitative theological approach rooted in biblical exegesis, the paper seeks to explore how the early Church's model of conflict management provides an enduring framework for resolving disputes through equity, inclusion, and servant leadership. The study concludes that peace building is both a spiritual and civic responsibility essential for sustainable development in Taraba State and Nigeria as a whole.

KEYWORDS

Church leadership, peace building, sustainable development, ethnic diversity, Taraba State, Acts 6:1–7

I. INTRODUCTION

Peace building is a crucial process in achieving sustainable development, especially in societies characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity such as Taraba State, Nigeria. The Church, as a moral and spiritual institution, plays a vital role in promoting reconciliation, justice, and inclusiveness within communities. Church leaders, in particular, bear the responsibility of fostering peaceful coexistence both within the Church and in the wider society.

The early Church faced similar challenges of diversity and internal tension, as recorded in Acts 6:1–7. The passage narrates a conflict between the Hebraic and Hellenistic Jewish Christians, where the latter complained about the neglect of their widows in the daily distribution of food. This dispute had the potential to create division and hinder the growth of the Church. However, the apostles responded with wisdom by instituting a system of equitable distribution through the appointment of seven Spirit-filled men.

This act of inclusion, delegation, and structural reform restored unity and facilitated the continued growth of the Church.

In the context of Taraba State, where ethnic and religious diversities often lead to misunderstanding and conflict, the model presented in Acts 6:1–7 provides valuable lessons. Church leaders can draw from this biblical example to promote justice, inclusion, empowerment, and peaceful coexistence as pathways to sustainable development.

Despite the significant presence of churches and Christian leaders in Taraba State, recurring ethnic and communal conflicts continue to threaten peace and social development. This suggests a Disconnect between biblical teachings on peace and their practical application in community life. Consequently, the challenge remains: how can church leaders effectively apply biblical principles, as demonstrated in Acts 6:1–7, to address ethnic tensions and foster sustainable peace and unity? This study aims to: Examine the conflict between the Hebraic and Hellenistic widows in Acts 6:1–7 and its implications for peace building. Analyse the principles and processes of peace building demonstrated in the Acts of the Apostles. Identify the role of church leaders in promoting peace and sustainable development in ethnically diverse contexts such as Taraba State. Explore empowerment and inclusion as key strategies for conflict resolution and sustainable peace.

The primary purpose of this study is to undertake a critical theological and contextual analysis of Acts 6:1–7 in order to extract enduring principles that can guide church leaders in Taraba State toward effective peace building, inclusive leadership, and sustainable development. Furthermore, the study seeks to bridge the gap between biblical teachings and contemporary socio-religious realities by demonstrating how scriptural models of conflict resolution can be applied to modern multi-ethnic contexts. It also aims to reposition the Church not merely as a spiritual institution but as an active agent of social transformation capable of addressing issues such as marginalization, inequality, and communal tensions. Additionally, the study contributes to scholarly discourse on religion and development by highlighting the intersection between theology and peace studies. It emphasizes that sustainable development cannot be achieved without intentional efforts toward justice, inclusion, and peace building.

This study is limited to a theological and contextual analysis of Acts 6:1–7, focusing on its relevance to peace building, leadership, empowerment, and inclusion within the socio-religious context of Taraba State. Geographically, the study is confined to Taraba State, though references are made to broader Nigerian realities where necessary. Conceptually, the study focuses on peace building, conflict transformation, servant leadership, empowerment, and inclusive governance. It does not involve empirical fieldwork but relies on qualitative analysis and biblical exegesis.

This study adopts a qualitative research design using an exegetical and interpretative approach. Exegesis is employed to analyse the historical, cultural, and theological dimensions of Acts 6:1–7, focusing on the nature of the conflict, the apostolic response, and its implications for leadership and peace building. Data are derived from secondary sources, including biblical texts, theological commentaries, and scholarly works on peace studies and leadership. The study also applies descriptive and contextual analysis to relate the biblical narrative to contemporary realities in Taraba State. A thematic approach is used to organize the discussion around key concepts such as justice, inclusion, empowerment, and servant leadership, allowing for a systematic and coherent analysis.

II. THE ORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conflict Transformation Theory, as developed by Johan Galtung (1996) and further expanded by John Paul Lederach (1997), provides a foundational lens for understanding conflict not merely as a problem to be resolved but as a for constructive change. The theory emphasizes the need to address the root causes of conflict such as inequality, marginalization, and structural injustice while transforming relationships, attitudes, and institutional frameworks.

In Acts of the Apostles 6:1–7, the apostles exemplify this approach by recognizing the systemic neglect of the Hellenistic widows and responding through structural reform rather than superficial appeasement. By creating a new leadership structure (the appointment of the seven deacons), they transformed a potential crisis into an opportunity for institutional strengthening and unity. Applied to Taraba State, this theory suggests that church leaders must go beyond merely settling disputes to addressing the deeper issues that give rise to conflict. This includes promoting equitable resource distribution, inclusive leadership, and participatory decision-making processes that foster long-term peace and stability.

Servant Leadership Theory, introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977), posits that effective leadership is rooted in the desire to serve others rather than to exercise power or control. Servant leaders prioritize the well-being of their followers, promote inclusivity, and empower individuals to contribute meaningfully to the community.

The apostles in Acts of the Apostles 6 embody this model by responding compassionately to the needs of marginalized members and delegating authority to capable individuals within the community. Their actions demonstrate humility, accountability, and a commitment to justice—qualities that are essential for fostering trust and unity.

In the context of Taraba State, servant leadership provides a critical framework for church leaders who must navigate complex ethnic and social dynamics. By leading through service, empathy, and fairness, church leaders can build inclusive communities that promote peace and sustainable development.

Empowerment Theory, as articulated by Julian Rappaport (1987), Marc A. Zimmerman (2000), and Douglas D. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995), emphasizes the importance of enabling individuals and groups to gain control over their lives through participation, access to resources, and shared decision-making.

In Acts of the Apostles 6:1–7, empowerment is evident in the apostles' directive to the community to select seven individuals "from among you" to oversee the distribution of resources. This participatory approach not only addressed the immediate issue but also fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility among the believers.

For Taraba State, Empowerment Theory underscores the need for inclusive governance within the Church and the broader society. Church leaders must create platforms that allow all ethnic and social groups to participate actively in decision-making processes. Such inclusion enhances legitimacy, reduces conflict, and promotes sustainable peace and development.

III. APPLICATION OF THE ORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN TARABA STATE

Taraba State, situated in the North-East region of Nigeria, is characterized by extensive ethnic plurality, with over eighty ethnic groups including the Jukun, Tiv, Fulani (Fulbe), Mumuye, Kuteb, Jenjo, Mambilla, and Chamba, as well as several minority groups such as the Yandang, Ndola, Jibu, Kaka, Karimjo (Wurkun), and Ichen (Adebayo, 2005; Taraba State Government, 2018). While this diversity contributes to cultural richness, it also creates a complex environment where issues of identity, resource control, and political representation frequently generate tension. Understanding these dynamics requires not only descriptive analysis but also theoretical interpretation.

From the perspective of Conflict Transformation Theory, the recurring conflicts in Taraba State particularly farmer–herder clashes and inter-ethnic disputes such as those between Tiv and Jukun communities are not merely isolated incidents but manifestations of deeper structural inequalities. These include unequal access to land, marginalization in governance, and contested indigene - settler relations (Blench, 2010; Egwu, 2001). As Johan Galtung (1996) and John Paul Lederach (1997) argue, sustainable peace requires addressing these root causes rather than focusing solely on immediate conflict resolution. In this regard, the ethnic configuration of Taraba State highlights the need for structural reforms that promote justice and inclusivity paralleling the apostolic response in Acts of the Apostles 6:1–7, where systemic neglect was addressed through institutional restructuring.

The diversity of ethnic groups in Taraba State also underscores the relevance of Servant Leadership Theory. The coexistence of centralized systems (as seen among the Jukun) and decentralized structures (as practiced by the Tiv) often creates competing expectations of leadership and authority (Abubakar, 1977; Bohannan, 1958). In such a context, leadership that prioritizes service, empathy, and fairness becomes essential. As articulated by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership emphasizes the well-being of all members of the community, particularly the marginalized. The apostles' response in Acts 6 reflects this model through their sensitivity to the complaints of the Hellenistic group and their commitment to equitable solutions. For church leaders in Taraba State, this implies adopting leadership styles that transcend ethnic bias, promote inclusivity, and build trust across diverse communities.

Furthermore, the ethnic diversity of Taraba State aligns closely with the principles of Empowerment Theory, which emphasizes participation and shared decision-making as key to sustainable peace. In many parts of the state, conflicts are exacerbated by the exclusion of certain ethnic groups from political and economic processes. Empowerment, therefore, becomes a critical strategy for conflict prevention and resolution. Scholars such as Julian Rappaport (1987) and Marc A. Zimmerman (2000) highlight that when individuals and groups are given the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives, they are more likely to support and sustain peaceful outcomes. This is evident in Acts 6:3, where the community was instructed to choose leaders "from among you," thereby ensuring representation and ownership of the solution.

Applying these theoretical insights to Taraba State suggests that ethnic diversity, while often associated with conflict, can be transformed into a resource for peacebuilding if managed through inclusive and participatory frameworks. Church leaders, in particular, have a crucial role to play in this process by facilitating dialogue, advocating for justice, and creating

platforms for equitable participation among different ethnic groups. By addressing structural inequalities (Conflict Transformation), leading with humility and service (Servant Leadership), and promoting inclusive participation (Empowerment), they can contribute significantly to sustainable peace and development.

The periscope of this portion (Acts 6:1-7) presents a foundational narrative for understanding peace building, conflict transformation, and leadership within the early Christian community. Far from being a mere administrative adjustment, the passage reflects a deeply theological and sociological model of addressing internal conflict through justice, inclusion, and participatory leadership. A careful exegetical and analytical reading of the text demonstrates that sustainable peace is not achieved through avoidance or suppression of conflict but through intentional structural reform grounded in fairness, equity, and communal responsibility.

A. Recognition of Conflict and Structural Inequality (Acts 6:1)

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”

This verse opens with a critical moment in the life of the early Church, noting that rapid numerical growth was accompanied by internal tension. The complaint of the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews reveals a structural imbalance in the distribution system. Scholars such as Marshall (1980) and Withering ton (1998) argue that the conflict was rooted not only in linguistic differences but also in deeper socio-cultural and economic disparities within the early Christian community. The neglect of the Hellenistic widows therefore represents systemic marginalization rather than incidental oversight.

From a peace building perspective, this reiterates the principle that conflict often emerges from structural injustice and inequality. As Galtung (1996) explains, structural violence occurs when social systems prevent individuals from meeting their basic needs. In this case, the exclusion of Hellenistic widows from daily provision reflects such systemic injustice. Similarly, Obi (2020) notes that in the Nigerian context, many conflicts arise from perceived marginalization and unequal access to resources. Therefore, the articulation of grievance in Acts 6:1 highlights the importance of recognizing and validating complaints as legitimate expressions of injustice.

In the context of Taraba State, where ethnic plurality often results in tensions related to political representation and resource allocation, this verse emphasizes that sustainable peace begins with acknowledging grievances rather than suppressing them. Silence in the face of injustice often deepens resentment and escalates conflict.

B. Leadership Responsiveness and Prioritization (Acts 6:2)

“So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.’”

The apostles’ response demonstrates proactive and transparent leadership. By convening the entire community, they ensured that the issue was addressed collectively rather than

privately. This reflects an important principle of participatory governance and open communication. Stott (1990) clarifies that the apostles were not devaluing social service but emphasizing the necessity of role differentiation within a growing institution. Their decision reflects what North Ouse (2019) describes as effective leadership, where responsibilities are clearly defined to enhance organizational efficiency. Furthermore, Greenleaf's (1977) concept of servant leadership is evident in the apostles' concern for both spiritual and material well-being. They did not ignore the problem but sought a solution that would serve the entire community. Thus, from a peace building perspective, leadership must be responsive, transparent, and strategic. Leaders must recognize that neglecting grievances can undermine trust and unity. In Taraba State, church leaders must similarly balance spiritual responsibilities with social engagement, ensuring that issues of injustice and inequality are addressed promptly and effectively.

C. *Inclusive Participation and Empowerment (Acts 6:3)*

"Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them."

This verse introduces a participatory approach to conflict resolution. The instruction to select leaders "from among you" emphasizes inclusion, representation, and communal ownership of the solution. The criteria for leadership being full of the Spirit and wisdom indicate that effective leadership requires both moral integrity and practical competence.

Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) argue that empowerment involves enabling individuals and communities to gain control over decisions that affect their lives. Similarly, Rappaport (1987) emphasizes participation as a key component of empowerment. In Acts 6:3, the apostles empower the community by allowing them to choose their representatives, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility.

This model is particularly relevant in ethnically diverse societies such as Taraba State, where exclusion from decision-making processes often leads to conflict. Empowerment must go beyond symbolic inclusion to involve actual participation and authority. When people are given a voice and a role in governance, they are more likely to support and sustain peace initiatives.

D. *Strategic Leadership Focus (Acts 6:4)*

"And will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

The apostles' decision to focus on their primary calling reflects strategic leadership and organizational clarity. By delegating administrative responsibilities, they avoided over-centralization and ensured that all aspects of the community's needs were addressed effectively.

North Ouse (2019) describes this as adaptive leadership the ability to respond to changing circumstances by reallocating roles and responsibilities. This approach also aligns with Weber's (1947) concept of rational organization, where efficiency is achieved through specialization and structured delegation. However, in peace building, effective leadership requires a balance between vision and administration. Leaders must ensure that systems are in place to address both spiritual and material needs without compromising their core

mission. In the context of Taraba State, church leaders must develop structures that allow for shared responsibility while maintaining their spiritual leadership roles.

E. Community Consensus and Inclusive Representation (Acts 6:5)

"This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen... Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas..."

The acceptance of the proposal by the entire community indicates consensus and legitimacy. Notably, all the selected individuals have Greek names, suggesting intentional inclusion of the Hellenistic group that had raised the complaint. Bruce (1988) interprets this as a deliberate effort to restore trust and address the concerns of the marginalized group.

This aligns with Rawls' (1971) theory of justice, which emphasises fairness and equity in the distribution of opportunities and resources. Inclusion, in this context, is not merely symbolic but corrective it seeks to address existing imbalances and promote equality. For peace building, this demonstrates that representation must be intentional and meaningful. In Taraba State, inclusive leadership structures that reflect ethnic diversity can enhance trust, reduce suspicion, and promote social cohesion.

F. Institutional Legitimacy and Formalization (Acts 6:6)

"They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them."

The laying on of hands signifies formal recognition and institutional legitimacy. This act transforms the selected individuals into officially recognised leaders, thereby strengthening the organizational structure of the Church. Weber (1947) emphasises that legitimacy is essential for authority to be effective. When leadership structures are formally recognized and supported by the community, they are more likely to function effectively and maintain order. In peace building, institutionalization is crucial for sustainability. Temporary or informal solutions may address immediate conflicts but often fail to produce long-term stability.

In Taraba State, church-led peace initiatives must be structured and institutionalized to ensure continuity and effectiveness.

G. Outcome: Growth, Unity, and Sustainable Development (Acts 6:7)

"So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly..."

The resolution of the conflict resulted in growth and expansion, demonstrating that effective conflict management enhances development. Lederach (1997) argues that conflict transformation leads to constructive change when it addresses underlying structures and relationships.

This outcome confirms that peace building is not merely about resolving disputes but about creating conditions for growth and flourishing. Adeyemo (2006) also emphasizes that the early Church's unity and commitment to justice contributed to its rapid expansion.

In the context of Taraba State, this suggests that sustainable development is closely linked to peace and justice. When conflicts are addressed through inclusive and equitable systems, communities are more likely to experience stability, growth, and progress.

Theologically, the concept of Shalom provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the peace described in Acts 6. Shalom, as articulated by Brueggemann (2001), encompasses wholeness, justice, and harmonious relationships among God, humanity, and creation. It is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of conditions that promote human flourishing. The actions of the apostles reflect this holistic understanding of peace, as they address material needs, restore social balance, and maintain spiritual focus. This aligns with the biblical vision of justice, where righteousness (*tsedeq*) and peace (*shalom*) are inseparable.

In contemporary application, the lessons from Acts 6:1–7 are highly relevant to the socio-political context of Taraba State and Nigeria. The state's ethnic diversity, while a source of cultural richness, also presents challenges related to marginalization and unequal resource distribution. As Obi (2020) notes, conflicts in Nigeria often arise from perceived exclusion and inequity in governance. The apostolic model emphasizes the importance of listening to grievances, fostering inclusive participation, and implementing structural reforms. These principles are essential for addressing the root causes of conflict in pluralistic societies.

Moreover, the integration of Conflict Transformation Theory, Servant Leadership Theory, and Empowerment Theory provides a robust analytical framework for understanding the passage. Conflict Transformation Theory highlights the need to address systemic inequalities (Lederach, 1997), Servant Leadership emphasizes humility and service (Greenleaf, 1977), and Empowerment Theory focuses on participation and shared authority (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Together, these perspectives reinforce the idea that peace building is a dynamic and participatory process that requires intentional leadership and structural change.

Acts 6:1–7 offers a comprehensive model of peace building that is both theologically grounded and practically applicable. The apostles' response to conflict demonstrates that sustainable peace is achieved through recognition of injustice, inclusive dialogue, empowerment of marginalized groups, and institutional reform. This model remains highly relevant for contemporary societies, particularly in contexts like Taraba State and Nigeria, where diversity and inequality continue to shape social dynamics. By applying these principles, leaders can foster environments of justice, unity, and sustainable development.

IV. THE ROLE OF CHURCH LEADERS IN PEACE BUILDING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Church leaders occupy a central and strategic position in the processes of peace building, moral formation, and social transformation, particularly within ethnically diverse societies such as Taraba State. Their influence extends beyond the pulpit into the social, political, and communal spheres, making them key stakeholders in the pursuit of sustainable peace and development. As spiritual guides and moral authorities, church leaders are uniquely positioned to shape values, mediate conflicts, and promote inclusive governance rooted in biblical principles.

One of the primary responsibilities of church leaders is the teaching and proclamation of peace. Through preaching and biblical instruction, they shape the ethical and spiritual consciousness of their congregations, promoting values such as reconciliation, forgiveness, justice, and unity. In this way, the pulpit becomes a platform for cultivating attitudes that discourage violence and encourage peaceful coexistence. This aligns with the example of the early Church in Acts of the Apostles 6:1–7, where leadership responded to conflict through wisdom and inclusion.

In addition, church leaders serve as mediators and facilitators of dialogue in conflict situations. By acting as neutral and trusted intermediaries, they help conflicting parties to communicate effectively, understand differing perspectives, and work toward mutually acceptable solutions. This mediatory role is particularly crucial in ethnically diverse contexts like Taraba State, where tensions often arise from competition over resources and representation. Through structured dialogue, church leaders can reduce hostility and foster reconciliation.

Furthermore, church leaders are expected to promote empowerment and inclusion within their communities. This involves creating platforms that allow all groups regardless of ethnicity, gender, or social status to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. Empowerment, as emphasized in Empowerment Theory, ensures that individuals are not merely passive recipients of decisions but active contributors to governance and development.

Another critical role of church leaders is advocacy for justice and equity. In line with prophetic traditions, church leaders are called to speak against systems and practices that perpetuate communities-oppression, exclusion, or inequality. This advocacy role strengthens the moral voice of the Church and positions it as an institution that defends the vulnerable and promotes fairness in society. Such engagement is essential for addressing structural injustices that often underlie conflict in Nigerian society.

Finally, church leaders are expected to model servant leadership in their personal and institutional conduct. Servant leadership, as articulated by Greenleaf (1977), emphasizes humility, service, empathy, and the prioritization of the needs of others. By embodying these qualities, church leaders build trust, credibility, and moral authority within their communities. Their example reinforces the message of peace and strengthens the effectiveness of their leadership interventions.

When these roles - teaching, mediation, empowerment, advocacy, and exemplary living are integrated, church leaders become powerful agents of transformation. They contribute not only to the resolution of conflicts but also to the creation of peaceful, inclusive, and resilient communities. In the context of Taraba State, such leadership is essential for fostering sustainable development and long-term social stability.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Promote Inclusive Leadership Structures:** Church leadership in Taraba State should reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the congregation. Inclusive leadership enhances trust, reduces marginalization, and fosters unity.

- **Establish Institutional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Churches should create structured and formal systems, such as peace and reconciliation committees, to address conflicts effectively and transparently.
- **Encourage Participatory Decision-Making:** Members should be actively involved in decision-making processes to ensure collective ownership, accountability, and acceptance of decisions.
- **Empower Marginalized and Underrepresented Groups:** Church leaders should intentionally provide opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in leadership and governance, ensuring that inclusion is both meaningful and functional.
- **Strengthen Leadership Capacity:** Regular training and workshops should be organized to equip church leaders with skills in conflict resolution, mediation, and inclusive leadership practices.

VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Acts 6:1–7 demonstrates that the early Church provides a timeless and practical model for conflict resolution and peace building. The apostles did not ignore or suppress conflict; rather, they addressed it with wisdom, fairness, and structural innovation. By recognizing grievances, engaging the community, empowering members, and institutionalizing solutions, they transformed a potentially divisive situation into an opportunity for unity and growth.

For the Church in Taraba State, this model is highly relevant. The socio-cultural realities of ethnic diversity, leadership challenges, and recurring communal tensions require a proactive and justice-oriented approach to peace building. Church leaders must therefore go beyond spiritual instruction to actively engage in conflict transformation, social inclusion, and community development.

The study concludes that peace building is both a spiritual mandate and a civic responsibility. Sustainable development cannot be achieved in the absence of peace, and peace cannot be sustained without justice and inclusion. Therefore, church leaders must embrace their role as agents of reconciliation, facilitators of dialogue, and promoters of equitable systems within both the Church and society. Ultimately, a Church that embodies the apostolic model of leadership - grounded in justice, service, and participation will not only experience internal unity but will also contribute meaningfully to the broader development and stability of Taraba State and Nigeria at large.

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