

Systemic Interdependence and Ecclesia Peace: Re-imagining Conflict Transformation in African Churches

FESTUS ADEGBOYEGA AKINOLA¹

Abstract

Conflict Transformation theory is an important concept in the field of peace and conflict studies. It is also relatable to ecclesia cohesion in many ways. This article re-imagines ecclesial conflict transformation in African churches through the analytical lens of Systems Theory integrated with biblical and theological conceptions. While conflict within African ecclesial communities is frequently interpreted in spiritual, moralistic and personality-driven terms, this study argues that many crises are systemic, emerging from interdependent relational structures, leadership configurations, ethnic boundary formations, and socio-political embeddedness. Drawing on General Systems Theory and conflict transformation scholarship, the paper constructs a theological-systemic framework grounded in Trinitarian relations, Pauline ecclesiology, and prophetic watchmanship in the book of Ezekiel. The study demonstrates how feedback loops, boundary maintenance, adaptive equilibrium, and emergent communal identity operate within African church contexts, particularly where ethnicity, charismatic authority, and economic precarity shape ecclesial life. By re-framing the church as a redemptive, adaptive social system, the article proposes structural peacebuilding strategies that move beyond episodic conflict resolution toward sustained transformation. It proposes five architectural pillars as systemic and transformational tools for sustainable ecclesia cohesion. The paper contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue between theology, sociology and peace studies and offers a contextual model for African ecclesial peace architecture.

Keywords: Ecclesia, Systems Theory, Conflict Transformation, African Churches, Interdependence,

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¹ The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary

Corresponding author: fasakinola09@gmail.com

Introduction

Many scholars have agreed that conflict is part of human relationships, and religious organisations are not immune to it. The Church, as a human organisation with multiple relationship levels, has experienced conflict from the beginning. The Bible provides several examples of conflict among God's children. Church conflicts have, in fact, shaped Christian history, influenced theology, practice, and relationships among different Christian groups. This is because the Church, though a spiritual entity, also has its social relationships. It brings together people with different backgrounds, perspectives and expectations. Though its fundamental missions revolve around faith and community, the dynamic that propels the Church is not immune to the complexities of human interaction, which include potential conflict (Uka, 2022). Resultantly, any efforts to understand the various factors that contribute to or mitigate conflict within the Church are crucial for fostering healthy and productive ecclesia environments.

Social factors have a significant influence not only on ecclesia cohesion but also on the impact of the ministries of the church on the world and the growth of the church. The church, though, stemmed from God's revelation and exists in relationship with others. It must necessarily interact with institutions that govern, guide, and shape humankind. The world that the church serves and to which it testifies is governed by politics (Bath, 1957). This compelling relationship between the church and the state may provide the church with the opportunity to minister God's grace to people in power, ensuring that they deliver services that promote humanity. In doing this, the church may perform social existential functions for the populace. Additionally, the involvement of the church in the promotion of justice, peace and righteousness opens her up to opportunities to perform functions that socially impact the people. Above all, such interaction places the church in another systemic relationship.

Conflict within African churches has become an enduring pastoral, theological, and socio-political concern. Leadership struggles, ethnic polarisation, doctrinal fragmentation, prosperity controversies, and denominational competition reveal that ecclesial tensions are rarely isolated incidents. Rather, they are patterned phenomena embedded in relational and structural systems. The form and tenacity of some conflicts in churches within the continent are so embarrassing not only to the Christian community but also to the name of Christ that the church represents. The need, therefore, is a need for ecclesia peace initiatives to address possible systemic issues that are responsible for such conflicts in order to mitigate them.

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This study argues that ecclesia conflict in Africa must be examined through systemic interdependence. By integrating General Systems Theory (GST), associated with Ludwig von Bertalanffy, and conflict transformation theory as developed by John Paul Lederach, this article constructs a theological framework that interprets the Church not merely as a spiritual fellowship but as a dynamic social organism embedded in wider political and cultural systems. The aim is to construct a systemic solution driven by biblical theology and aided by Conflict Transformation Theory for ecclesia tensions.

Theoretical Framework: Conflict Transformation and Systems Theory

Conflict Transformation in Perspectives.

Every church must seek to institute a system that transforms conflict for the good of the church. This is because conflicts are not always negative. The way conflicts are managed determines whether their impact on the church will be positive or negative. This paper, therefore, conceives Systems Theory as a way to reimagine conflict transformation. Putting it in another way, Systems Theory is presented as a tool for ecclesia conflict transformation. It is therefore important to put the concept of Conflict Transformation in perspective.

The Conflict Transformation Theory is articulated prominently by Lederach (1997), who reframes conflict as a dynamic social process rather than a discrete event. Conflict transformation theory, particularly as articulated by Lederach, moves beyond conflict resolution toward structural and relational change. It emphasises long-term, relational repair, structural justice, cultural reorientation and moral imagination. Systems Theory complements this approach by diagnosing the relational architecture within which conflict evolves (Uhi-Ben & Arena, 2018).

It represents a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of conflict, moving beyond traditional approaches of conflict resolution and management towards a holistic and relational perspective. The theory emphasises long-term relational change, structural justice, and the transformation of underlying causes of conflict. Rather than asking how conflicts can be suppressed or resolved quickly, conflict transformation asks how relationships, systems, and narratives can be reshaped toward peace. This theory emphasises early engagement, long-term relational change, and structural reform rather than short-term conflict suppression (Rupesinghe, 1995).

Within the church, conflict transformation encourages leaders to interpret conflict as a signal for growth and reform. It emphasises early identification of patterns, narratives, and power imbalances. It also supports proactive pastoral and structural interventions aimed at restoring relationships.

There are core assumptions of this theory which include its conception of conflict as an inevitable phenomena to human communities. The church, though a spiritual community, is not immune to conflict because it is also a human organisation. The church must, as a result, refrain from seeing conflict solely as signs of failure and sin. Another important assumption is that conflict has constructive potential. It can lead to growth, reforms and unity when engaged positively. It, however, becomes destructive when ignored or mishandled. Additionally, relationships in conflict transformation theory are conceived as central to peacebuilding. Sustainable peace is measured not merely by the absence of visible conflict but also by the quality of relationships and structure that support justice and mutual respect. The last assumption is that transformation is a long-term process which requires patience, dialogue, and institutional learning rather than quick fixes (Jeong, 2019).

When the theory is applied to the church, it recognises that church conflicts are not isolated incidents but that they emerge from patterns of interaction shaped by leadership culture, governance structure, theological narratives, and social-cultural influences. In African ecclesia situations, these systemic dimensions are many times intensified by strong charismatic leadership, communal expectations, loyal networks, ethnic and regional identities and socio-economic and political pressures. The theory enables church leaders to interpret early warning signs not as isolated disruption but as indicators of deeper systemic stress requiring transformation at relational, structural and cultural levels (Sande, 2004).

Conflict Transformation theory, like the early warning system, emphasises early engagement of conflicts at the latent and emerging stages. This is because conflict is understood as a process with four identifiable stages viz; latent, emerging, escalating and manifest stages. Intervention is most effective at the first two stages. Conflict Transformation Theory, therefore, sees early warning signs as opportunities for preventive transformation, as a delayed response increases relational damage and institutional fragmentation (Dayton & Kriesberg, 2009). Sustainable peace requires addressing root causes and not the symptoms. Hence, the church should allow early warning indicators to trigger transformative responses rather than suppressive measures.

Lederach identified multiple levels at which transformation can occur. They are the personal, relational, structural and cultural transformation levels. *Personal or Actor transformation* level speaks to the need for change in attitude, perception and emotional responses of church members to conflict situations. Imbibing a positive and proactive attitude to conflict is imperative for sustainable peace. *Relational transformation* focuses on the restoration of communication, trust, and mutual respect. The church must prioritise a dialogue mechanism that prevents relational breakdown (Lederach, 2003). It is sometimes referred to as Issue Transformation because they deal with the causes of conflicts, which may sometimes transcend relational problems.

Structural transformation addresses the need for structural changes such as the amendment of the nebulous constitution, institutionalising acceptable leadership succession and accountability mechanisms. Needed structural reforms will prevent recurring crises. *Cultural transformations* are important because church conflicts are also shaped by cultural narratives that affects interpretation of authority, obedience, gender roles, and even spirituality. Transforming these narratives is imperative for long-term peace. This is also known as Legal Transformation because it also speaks to legal culture. That is, the need to put in place a legal system of laws that could facilitate positive change (Lederach, 2003). .

For churches in Africa, it is imperative to state that conflict transformation not only aligns with the Bible, but it also aligns with African approaches to conflict resolution, which emphasise restoration of relationships over punitive outcomes, community involvement in the conflict process, moral legitimacy and moral harmony. Traditional African approaches such as elder's council and communal dialogue resonate with the transformation-oriented system. The need, therefore, for African churches to contextualise the approach to complement indigenous practices. This will enhance their applicability with the contemporary church structure.

What Conflict Transformation does for the church is to shift her attention from conflict resolution to conflict transformation. Conflict resolution is concerned with ending immediate disputes, while Conflict Transformation focuses on sustainable peace, which is a deeper process that addresses relational patterns, structural injustices, and cultural narratives that generate recurring crises. However, Conflict Transformation requires accurate diagnosis, and that is what the Systems Theory provokes. Systems Theory is the analytical grammar necessary for identifying hidden power structures, reinforcing feedback loops, boundary

rigidity and communication breakdown patterns within the church. Conflict Transformation asks the question “*How do we stop this crisis,*” but the system-based transformation reinforces the question to be “*What systemic conditions are reproducing the crisis?*” (Wheatley, 2006). Hence, Systems Theory becomes the diagnostic tool upon which Conflict Transformation operates. What then is Systems Theory?

Systems Theory in Perspective

Systems theory is an interdisciplinary framework that emerged in the 20th century, seeking to understand complex realities as an integrated whole rather than isolated parts. Its emergence was first credited to Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, (1968) who developed it as a response to reductionist scientific models. He argued that biological, social and organisational phenomena must be understood not in pieces but as organised totalities whose properties cannot be explained by analysing the different components in isolation. For example, the biological system of any animal, which includes humans, is better analysed not as different parts but as a whole. This is because the different systems, whether respiratory, nervous, production, circulatory, digestive, excretory, endocrine and muscular are not only related but also interdependent.

The theory rests on several interrelated principles such as Wholeness, Interdependence, Open Systems, Feedback Mechanism, Boundaries, Homeostasis, adaptation and emergence. By wholeness, it means that a system is more than the sum of its parts. The interaction between components generates emergent properties that cannot be predicted from the parts alone (Grenz, 2000). Hence, a church must be understood as a whole, not from its different parts such as ministries, departments, functions and its relationship with government, or even the society. Interdependence suggests that each component of the whole influences and is influenced by others. A change in one part inevitably affects the entire structure (Newbigin, 1953). This implies that anything that affects a ministry of the church affects other ministries. Every part of the church ministry and relationships are interdependent system.

An open system connotes that social systems are open in a way that makes them exchange information, energy and resources with their environment. They are shaped by external pressures (Luhmann, 1995). The church as a social system is also not immune to external pressure, like the political and economic conditions of its environment and even of the world. The church is also influenced by ecumenical situations that are outside the local church. The

principle of the feedback mechanism explains that social systems regulate themselves through feedback loops. In this regard, positive feedback amplifies change while negative feedback stabilises and restores equilibrium (Grenz, 2000). It is also true that the church as a social organisation is regulated by feedback that helps leaders decide on changes or what to correct. Additionally, every social system maintains its identity through boundaries that distinguish the “inside” from the “outside”, though the boundaries are semi- permeable (Parsons, 1951). The church can be influenced by outside factors, as earlier stated, but this does not erase the uniqueness of the church. The church still maintains a reasonable boundary that protects her mission and mandate as a spiritual institution. There is a limit to which the church must allow external factors to influence her.

Social systems also seek balance (*homeostasis*) but must adapt to environmental changes to survive (Mugambi, 2003). There are environmental changes that must lead the church to seek some level of adaptation. This is not to mean that the church must adapt to the environment in a way that changes her core message, mission and mandate. COVID-19, for example, made churches all over the world adapt to online worship instead of physical gathering. It also propels the church to shift to neighbourhood church gathering. The pandemic was a biological and environmental factor that necessitated such adaptation without altering the message and mission of the church. Economic factors or policies can also make the church seek adaptation in the way she runs her finances. The last principle is that new patterns or qualities emerge from systemic interaction, not from individual elements alone (Mugambi, 2003). Interaction with other churches or denominations can lead a church or denomination to imbibe new doctrines and theology, and a way of worship or church administration.

The Systems Theory was later developed by sociologists like Niklas Luhmann and Talcott Parsons, who is regarded as the father of modern sociology. They interpreted the society itself as a network of interrelated subsystems involving religion, politics, economy and family (Bujo, 1992). The church also fits into this new development because it is built on interrelated subsystems. Though a religious organisation, it has its own unique politics and economy.

The Practical Convergence of the Church and Systems Theory

The foundational convergence of the Systems Theory and the church points to the fact that the church is also a system and must be seen that way. Any study about peace and conflict resolution or peacebuilding in the church will stand on a solid foundation when this truth is

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foundational. Systems Theory conceives organisations as interrelated, dynamic wholes whose parts affect one another (Bediako, 1992). Ecclesia peace and conflict studies similarly treat the church as a relational body, taking from 1Corinthians 12. Though there are different spiritual gifts, all of them are products of the Holy Spirit; they are interrelated and are meant for the common good of the whole church. The church also functions as an open system that interacts not just with its different ministries and departments but also with society, culture and politics, thereby building systems outside its fold. Therefore, church conflict must not be interpreted in an isolated manner. It is systemic, arising from interaction patterns rather than individual failure alone. Hence, ecclesia conflict analysis must shift from " *who is wrong*" to "*what system is producing tension*".

The emphasis of the Systems Theory is on the interdependence of the parts, arguing that a change in one unit affects the whole. This relational pattern is important for the church and this is the reason while communion (*Koinonia*), mutuality and corporate identity are germane to the peace of the church according to Ephesians 4: 15-16. As a result, ethnic, doctrinal, leadership and gender conflict in the church are relational feedback problems and not merely spiritual disagreements. Peace is sustained when relational links are healthy (Kriessberg, 2012). The need, therefore for church peacebuilding strategies to focus on restoring broken relational circuits, strengthening communication pathways and addressing power asymmetries.

Systems Theory seeks balance (*homeostasis*), but must adapt to survive. Contrary to this, the church sometimes resists changes to preserve peace, leading to suppressed conflict. This rigid *homeostasis* only leads to false peace or the peace of the graveyard. Conceiving the church from the perspective of Systems theory makes adaptive equilibrium a necessity for sustainable peace in the church. This will help the church to be receptive to certain changes like liturgical changes, generational leadership transitions and others. Church conflict can be adaptive when managed constructively.

Systems Theory defines itself through boundaries, determining who is in and who is out or a clear demarcation of who is a part of the systems and who is not. The church also has boundaries in terms of doctrines, denominational identities and sometimes even along ethnic lines. It is important for the church to seek to manage these boundaries effectively as poorly managed boundaries can lead to exclusion, sectarianism and identity- based conflict. Peace

and conflict studies emphasise for the church the need for her to redefine her boundaries along Christological unity (Galatians 3: 28) and missional openness.

Systems Theory is also concerned about the early detection of indicators that stress the system, leading to breakdown. This aligns with biblical imagery of the watchman in Ezekiel 33, where church leaders, as shepherds, must watch over the church against impending crisis or doom. Crises in the church are not a random event but are preceded by indicators such as declining trust and the formation of informal power blocs. The church is therefore expected to develop a preventive peace mechanism and not just reactive discipline. Lastly, Systems Theory emphasises the need for leaders to act as system regulators, influencing flows, norms and responses to stress. In the same vein, ecclesia peace studies discuss the issue of leadership style as important for church peace. It identifies different leadership styles like authoritarian, participatory, and transformational. It also discusses the impact of each of them on the peace of the church. This is because leadership failure often reflects system overload and not just moral collapse. Shared leadership models function as a distributed regulation mechanism. Therefore, peace- oriented ecclesia leadership requires system literacy, not only spiritual maturity.

An integrated analytical model suggests a situation where the Systems Theory offers analytical tools and diagnostic clarity for the church peace system, and ecclesia peace theology provides moral vision and redemptive telos for church peace. This is because the church is a redemptive social system called to model adaptive peace through relational integrity, spiritual formation and systemic discernment.

When contextualised into the ecclesia domain, systems theory offers a powerful and meaningful interpretive framework for understanding the church not just as a spiritual institution but also as a living, relational and adaptive community. An adaptive community adjusts and evolves in response to changing circumstances or environments. The church in this regard is a body of believers that adjusts its approaches, ministries, and sometimes structures to stay relevant, engage effectively, and fulfil its mission in a changing world or context. It is also about being responsive to the needs of its members, the community, and the broader society, while staying true to its core beliefs.

The point here is that the church is simultaneously spiritual and systemic. It is a theological system ordered by revelation and doctrine. It is also a social system structured by

relationships and roles. Additionally, the church is a missional system oriented towards apostolic mandate and a moral system regulated by covenantal norms (Newbigin, 1953). Understanding the church as a system and the interdependence of the systems will help the church in transforming conflicts into growth.

The nexus between Systems Theory, Conflict Transformation and ecclesia peace is evidenced through structural justice and feedback reform. Conflict Transformation insists on addressing structural injustice. Systems Theory explains how these structures produce behaviour through a feedback mechanism. For example, exclusionary leadership recruitment reproduces ethnic domination and a lack of transparency in leadership, which in turn reinforces suspicion loops. As a result, transformation requires redesigning governance structures, instituting accountability mechanism and establishing a transparent communication system.

In the African church context, systemic pressures include ethnic pluralism, political patronage influence, economic precarity and rapid Pentecostal expansion (Eze, 2022). Conflict Transformation must therefore map out inter-ethnic relation flows within the congregation, deconstruct centralised charismatic authority models, reform financial accountability structures and also foster intercultural liturgical practices. Systems Theory ensures these interventions are coherent rather than piecemeal.

It must, however, be noted that conflict transformation in the church is not purely sociological. It is also theological. For example, the theological background needed to understand ecclesial peace includes the Trinity models relational harmony, the cross that embodies reconciliation, shalom that defines the telos of transformation and the Holy Spirit that empowers communal renewal. Thus, Systems Theory explains how systems function, while biblical theology defines why transformation is necessary. Putting it together, it can be said that Systems Theory provides the structural analysis; the Conflict Transformation provides the methodological pathway, and biblical theology provides the moral and eschatological vision. It is important to wrap up this section of the paper with four integrative statements. First, ecclesia conflict in Africa is systemic in origin. Second, conflict transformation requires systemic reconfiguration. Third, Sustainable ecclesia peace emerges from structural, relational, and cultural recalibration. Lastly, the church as a redemptive adaptive system embodies transformation when interdependence is reordered according to the biblical concept of shalom.

Biblical–Theological Grounding

Systems theory is indeed a modern concept, but its logic highly resonates with biblical ecclesiology in many ways. Paul’s metaphor of the church as a body composed of differentiated members, as found in 1Corinthians 12, mirrors the systemic interdependence of the various parts of that body. The metaphor parallels systemic interdependence: “*If one member suffers, all suffer together.*” The Corinthian crisis, marked by factionalism (1 Cor. 1), socio-economic division (1 Cor. 11), and spiritual elitism, illustrates systemic dysfunction. Paul’s solution is structural and relational reordering, not mere moral reprimand. This theology suggests that no part exists independently, injury to one affects the whole and honour or dishonour circulate systematically (Shekha, 2017). An honour to the music ministry of the church is an honour to other departments, and the weakness of the music ministry of the church affects not just the choir but church worship, the prayer ministry and the spiritual upliftment of the church. Hence, the ecclesia body demonstrates systemic properties.

There is also the functional differentiation of the five-fold ministry of the church (Apostles, teachers, pastors, evangelists and prophets), but all of them are relationally interdependent as none of them can exist as an island. Their purpose is to build up the body of Christ, foster unity and maturity in faith, equip believers for service and ministry and also promote interdependence among members (Ephesians 4: 11-12). Together, they help create a balanced, healthy church community where members grow and serve effectively.

Another doctrine of the church that reflects the idea of systems theory is the Trinitarian theology. It describes God as one being in three distinct, coequal, and co- eternal persons: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. The “three in one” concept emphasises the interdependence within the Godhead. Hence, Trinitarian theology is a system that reflects the smooth relationship and the interdependence of one God reflected in three personalities and functions. The three are one in essence, yet perform three interdependent roles in the church and in the lives of believers. These relational dynamics demonstrate a situation where each person relates to the others. The Father loves the Son, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. They also have joint action in creation, salvation and ongoing work. It reflects ordered relationality without a hierarchy of essence (Friesan, 2017).

The church, as an image-bearing community, reflects divine relational ontology. Unity does not erase distinction, and distinction does not destroy unity. The Trinity embodies unity-in-diversity, mutual indwelling, and ordered equality. Ecclesial peace thus reflects divine relationality rather than hierarchical domination. Systemically, this implies differentiation without fragmentation and authority without oppression. Therefore, Systems theory helps articulate this paradox where differentiation within unity is not fragmentation but dynamic coherence.

Platinga describes the idea of biblical peace (*Shalom*) as comprehensive wellbeing. It comprises relational, spiritual and structural peace. It has also been described as a state of wellness of the body, soul and spirit. Platinga went further to say that *shalom* signifies “The webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice and delight” (Platinga, 1995). Thus, ecclesia peace is not silence or suppression but restored relational equilibrium. It also corresponds conceptually to systemic equilibrium. However, unlike secular homeostasis, biblical peace is moral and covenantal, not merely structural stability. As a result, ecclesia peace requires just leadership structure, healthy communication flows, inclusive boundaries and spiritual formation practices. All of these are the required systems that must be institutionalised for church peace to be effective.

Traditional explanations of church conflict have always limited it to personal sin, doctrinal deviation and leadership failure (Heffelfinger, 2018). Though all of these factors are germane to church conflict, the application of Systems theory will expand this interpretation and analysis to include structural causes that explain conflict from the perspective of unclear governance, power centralisation and inequitable participation of members in church affairs. Systems theory will also be interested in feedback escalation, which comprises unresolved grievances which create positive feedback loops as a result of problems of gossip, factional meetings and withdrawal of trust by some congregants.

Additionally, boundary rigidity, which explains that ethnic or denominational identity may harden into exclusionary systems where some people are excluded from the life of the church. Systems theory also explains church conflict from the perspective of environmental pressures like economic crisis, political stability or cultural change that influences ecclesia dynamics. This is because the church does not exist outside these systems. In the African contexts in particular, churches function within the nested systems of ethnic identity systems, political patronage networks, economic precarity structures and global Pentecostal

movements. Conflicts in the church are many times systemic and ecological and therefore rarely isolated.

However, in Systems theory, leadership functions as a regulatory mechanism (Kriesberg 2012). Bringing it down to the context of the church, church leaders like pastors, bishops, and elders are expected to regulate relational flows. They must also ensure that the governance structure distributes authority in a just manner. Additionally, they are expected to ensure accountability, system stabilisation, and the general well-being of the institution. Where leadership is overly centralised, positive feedback may amplify instability. On the other hand, where authority is distributed, the system becomes adaptive and resilient (Chukwuma & Okon, 2022). The Bible in Ephesians chapter 4 frames leadership responsibility as equipping the saints. In this regard, leadership include the equipping of congregants to be part of the leadership system and not monopolised control.

As a result, Systems Theory challenges the static notions of peace. It argues that Systems must either adapt or collapse. Contextualising this to the church, generational transition requires structural adaptation, urbanisation reshapes congregational identity, and theological engagement must respond to contemporary realities. Healthy adaptation should not be mistaken for doctrinal compromise but contextual faithfulness. Rigid *homeostasis* (balance) may preserve form while eroding vitality. Adaptive equilibrium, on the other hand, allows for transformation without fragmentation.

African Ecclesial Conflict as Systemic Phenomenon

The African ecclesia conflict can be described as a phenomenon in which ethnic identity functions as a boundary-regulating system. This is because churches frequently mirror wider societal cleavages. Other systemic implications of the above include leadership monopolisation by dominant ethnic groups, exclusionary recruitment networks and in-group loyalty loops. **Such patterns mentioned**, reinforce feedback cycles that escalate polarization (Adewale, 2019). The Bible in the book of Galatians 3:28 offers a Christocentric redefinition of boundaries, destabilising ethnic absolutism within the ecclesial system. It made it clear that unity in Christ transcends ethnic, social and gender distinctions.

African ecclesial landscapes, particularly within Pentecostal contexts often exhibit founder-centric governance. The result of which includes unchecked authority, financial opacity and conflict suppression. When dissent emerges, suppressed tension erupts dramatically (Poirier,

2018). This is against the spirit of the scripture in Ephesians 4: 11-12 which reimagines leadership as distributed gifting, functioning as systemic stabilisation. Leaders were gifted as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and leaders were not to monopolise the work of God and become “*thin gods*” but to “*prepare God’s people for works of service*”. They were not expected to do all the work for the people, but were to train the people to do the work themselves. The purpose is that “*the body of Christ may be built up*”

It is also very important to point out that African economic instability intensifies demand for miracle-oriented teaching. As a result, many Churches have become adaptive survival systems responding to economic desperation. This has led to systemic risk like transactional spirituality, disillusionment cycles and membership volatility (Chukwuma, 2022). Contrary to this, the messages of the Bible theologically challenge economic reductionism and re-centre covenantal faithfulness. Christians are encouraged to trust God to provide for their needs and not to turn the church into a transactional outfit. Similar to this is the proliferation of denominations in African cities, which has created competitive religious markets. Systems Theory reframes this as ecological competition within a shared religious environment. Peacebuilding requires cooperative mission models rather than expansionist rivalry.

Toward a Systemic Ecclesial Peace Architecture

The concept of systemic ecclesial architecture assumes that peace in the church is not accidental or solely spiritual. Rather, the search for ecclesial peace must be intentionally structured using relational, institutional and theological mechanisms to sustain communal wholeness (*shalom*). Drawing from Systems Theory and Conflict Transformation Theory, this study proposes five interlocking pillars, which are: Relational Diagnostics, Institutional Feedback, Boundary Reconfiguration, Adaptive Reform and Spiritual Formation for achieving systemic cohesion in the church. They are to serve as the structural peacebuilding interventions for the church.

Relational Diagnostics is about mapping and analysis of church interaction patterns, power flows, communication structures and trust networks in a systematic way. This agrees with Conflict Transformation Theory that emphasises relational repair over episodic settlement (Ledrach, 2003). Such mapping can be conducted using a congregational listening forum, like what is known in the Baptist denomination in Nigeria as the “Church in Conference”.

Other methods include anonymous perception survey, inter-group dialogue circles and conflict history tracing. This prevents superficial peace and exposes hidden fractures before they escalate into chaos.

The second is the need for Institutional Feedback Mechanisms, which regulate systemic stability. This mechanism calls for actions such as the institution of conflict mediation committees and transparent governance. This is because positive feedback can help in keeping systems that work, while negative feedback helps in correcting deviations and also restores equilibrium. Without structural feedback, systems will either collapse into chaos or calcify into authoritarian rigidity (Zizioulas, 1985). It is also important to mention that feedback channels in many African churches are sometimes weak or personalised. This allows grievances to escalate into gossip networks, silent withdrawal, church splits and social media confrontation. Institutional feedback requires a structured process such as a clearly defined grievance procedure, transparent financial reporting, conflict mediation committee, inter-ethnic consultations and leadership review structures. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 serves this purpose for early Christianity. Institutional feedback should be conceived as being faithful to God and His work and not another bureaucracy.

There is also the need for ecclesia Boundary Reconfiguration, which must create room for Christological identity rather than ethnicity. This is because every system maintains identity through boundaries that distinguish between insiders and outsiders. The church in this regard must be careful of rigid boundaries that create exclusion and fragmentation. On the other hand, porous boundaries that dissolve the church's biblical identity and unity must also be avoided. In African churches, boundaries often align with ethnicity, language, founder's loyalty, denominational rivalry, prosperity-oriented identity and other doctrinal differences. However, boundary reconfiguration in the church requires re-ordering ecclesial identity on Christ and not culture. Galatians 3: 28 destabilises primordial boundaries like being Jew or Greek, and the contemporary church must follow this pattern. Boundary reconfiguration does not erase cultural identity but celebrates it under biblically-ordered unity. This can be celebrated through inter-ethnic worship expressions, rotational leadership representation and multilingual liturgical practices. Peace architecture requires that church boundaries reflect covenantal inclusion and not cultural hierarchy.

The next intervention is the Adaptive Reform, which allows for theological reflection responsive to socio-economic realities. Systems naturally seek stability (*homeostasis*), but

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rigid stability resists changes and suppresses tension. Adaptive reform in ecclesia context recognises that peace requires structural evolution without doctrinal abandonment. Factors like rapid urban migration, economic precarity, youth demographic explosion and global Pentecostal influence may require African churches to make some structural reforms, as failure to adapt may lead to generational exits, underground dissent or even doctrinal extremism within the church. Such ecclesia reform mechanisms may include leadership succession plans, financial transparency reforms, theological re-education initiatives, gender and youth inclusion in church governance, and digital accountability practices. An example of adaptive reforms in the early church is seen in Acts 6, when deacons were appointed to address the Hellenistic neglect. Thus, adaptive reform is embedded in apostolic precedence.

Lastly, the church should institute Spiritual Formation as a Systemic Practice. While the four other pillars address structural and relational dimensions of church conflict, sustainable peace within the church also requires spiritual formation at the communal level. However, spiritual formation must be conceived not merely as individual piety but as a systemic practice that shapes the relational culture of the church. Through spiritual formation, believers are progressively shaped into the likeness of Christ using the tools of spiritual discipline, communal worship, theological instruction, and moral accountability. Spiritual formation should go beyond individual piety to a collective practice that influences the entire ecclesial system. Thus, it operates as a moral and spiritual feedback loop that stabilises the church's relational environment and also nurtures peaceable dispositions among members. These interventions shift ecclesial practice from reactive crisis management to proactive transformation.

The New Testament presents spiritual formation as a communal reality rather than just a private discipline. The book of Acts 2: 42- 47 illustrates how shared spiritual practices formed the foundation of ecclesial unity among the early Christian community (Berkhof, 1949). The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. These practices generated a culture of generosity, mutual accountability, and communal solidarity, which are foundations for ecclesia peace. Paul also encouraged members of the Colossian church to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience allowing the word of Christ to dwell richly among them (Colossians 3: 12-16). This is because spiritual discipline serves as regulators of communal behaviour in the church.

The relationship between spiritual formation and conflict transformation is significant. Conflict transformation emphasises long-term relational change rather than temporary dispute resolution, while spiritual formation contributes to this process by reshaping the inner dispositions that often fuel conflict, such as pride, envy and fear. The transformation of life through spiritual formation enables individuals and communities to approach conflict with humility, empathy and patience. Consequently, conflicts that might otherwise escalate into division become opportunities for growth and reconciliation. This implies that spiritual formation is the moral engine for systemic peacebuilding within the church. As a result, spirituality in African churches must go beyond spiritual warfare, search for personal breakthrough and prosperity aspiration, to a reorientation towards peace cultivation and relational healing. When spiritual formation is integrated with the other pillars, the church becomes a self-renewing community capable of sustaining peace. This is what structural reforms alone cannot achieve.

These pillars function interdependently. Together, they produce what may be termed a self-correcting, inclusive, adaptive ecclesia peace system. In African contexts, a systemic ecclesia peace architecture diagnoses relational distortion, regulates institutional power, reconfigures identity boundaries, reform adaptively under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and institutes spiritual formation that ensures the spiritual growth of believers. Such a church does not just avoid conflict but transforms it into an instrument of communal maturation.

Conclusion

Re-imagining conflict transformation in African churches demands both theological depth and systemic literacy. By integrating Systems Theory with biblical-theological visions, the Church is repositioned not merely as a site of recurring crisis but as a transformative community capable of adaptive peace. Systemic interdependence is not a threat to ecclesial life; it is, in fact, a divine design. This article contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by demonstrating that ecclesial conflict in Africa is systemic rather than incidental. It also affirms that Systems Theory enhances theological peace analysis and is not opposed to it. In fact, Biblical vision offers normative direction for structural transformation.

Therefore, sustainable ecclesial peace requires adaptive equilibrium rather than rigid homeostasis. The African Ecclesia must therefore be understood as a redemptive, adaptive

social system called to embody Trinitarian relationality within complex socio-political environments. The introduction of the five interlocking pillars as the architecture of ecclesial peace is a novel contribution of this paper to church cohesion.

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