

## Original Research Article

## Assessing Faith-Initiated Peacebuilding Initiatives in Addressing South Sudan's Political Conflicts

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**Abstract:** This study critically examines the role and effectiveness of faith-initiated peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan's ongoing political conflicts. Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has experienced persistent violence, with over 400,000 deaths and more than 4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of 2023. Despite numerous peace agreements, including the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), violence has resurged, exposing the fragility of peace processes and highlighting the need for alternative peacebuilding approaches. This research explores how faith-based organizations (FBOs) and religious leaders have contributed to peace efforts, leveraging their moral authority, community networks, and traditional reconciliation practices. The study employs a qualitative, multi-sited case study methodology across three regions: Juba, Jonglei State, and Central Equatoria, involving approximately 950 participants, including church leaders, government officials, traditional authorities, and community members. Data collection involved 91 semi-structured interviews, 16 focus group discussions, archival research, and discourse analysis, analyzed through thematic coding following Braun and Clarke approach. Empirical reviews included recent studies that documented faith-based interventions, revealing a median success rate of approximately 64–73% in mediating inter-ethnic disputes, with significant variations tied to community involvement, traditional leader participation, and resource mobilization. Key findings indicate that faith actors have played pivotal roles in high-level mediation, national advocacy, grassroots dialogue, and international ecumenical diplomacy. For example, the 1999 Wunlit Peace Conference, mediated by faith leaders, successfully fostered inter-ethnic reconciliation between the Dinka and Nuer communities, illustrating the potential of religious efforts to reduce violence and promote social cohesion. However, challenges persist: systemic political manipulation, ethnic allegiances within faith communities, external donor pressures, and internal divisions undermine neutrality and sustainability. Faith actors often face threats, co-optation, and resource constraints, with success rates declining from 71% (2015–2017) to 47% (2020–2022), highlighting fatigue and changing conflict dynamics. The study underscores that faith-based peacebuilding offers promising avenues for fostering societal healing but requires strengthened community engagement, strategic international partnerships, and contextualized approaches. Recommendations include empowering church leaders as mediators, fostering intra-faith dialogue, bridging the gap between national peace declarations and local realities, and ensuring independent evaluation mechanisms. Overall, faith-initiated peacebuilding remains vital but must be complemented by broader political and institutional reforms for sustainable peace in South Sudan.

**Keywords:** Faith-Initiated, Peacebuilding Initiatives, Addressing, South Sudan's Political Conflicts.

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## INTRODUCTION

The global landscape of conflict resolution has undergone a significant transformation, with faith-based actors increasingly recognized as vital agents of peacebuilding and reconciliation. Traditionally, international peace efforts centered on secular diplomacy, statecraft, and military interventions; however, the “religious turn” in peace and conflict studies highlights the growing importance of religious actors in mediating conflicts (Appleby, 2000; Omer *et al.*, 2015). Current research indicates that nearly 84% of the world’s population identifies with a religious group, underscoring the potential influence of faith communities in shaping societal stability (Pew Research Center, 2017). Religious leaders often command moral authority and social networks that span local, national, and international levels, positioning them uniquely to address deep-seated divisions rooted in ethnicity, identity, and ideology. Their involvement reflects an acknowledgment that sustainable peace must incorporate moral and spiritual dimensions alongside political negotiations.

Religious actors have demonstrated their ability to bridge divides and foster reconciliation in numerous international conflicts, often filling gaps where secular diplomacy struggles. For instance, the Catholic Church’s mediation role in the Beagle Channel dispute (1980s) between Argentina and Chile showcases how religious authority can complement diplomatic efforts by providing moral legitimacy and neutral ground (Smock, 2006). Similarly, faith-based organizations like the Community of Sant’Egidio, originating from Italy, played a pivotal role in negotiating peace accords that ended Mozambique’s civil war, saving thousands of lives and illustrating how spiritual networks can facilitate dialogue among warring factions (Appleby, 2000). Their success stems from leveraging spiritual authority, community trust, and transnational connections, which enable them to operate effectively in environments where political institutions are weak or compromised.

Scholars have developed comprehensive theoretical frameworks to understand the complex role of religious actors in peacebuilding. Lederach’s pyramid model emphasizes that peacebuilding efforts must operate at multiple levels from grassroots reconciliation to top-level diplomacy highlighting the necessity of integrating local faith communities into broader peace processes (Lederach, 1997). Appleby’s concept of “the ambivalence of the sacred” captures the dual potential of religion: it can incite violence or serve as a source of reconciliation, depending on how religious resources are mobilized (Appleby, 2000). This ambivalence underscores the importance of contextual understanding and strategic engagement by faith actors to promote peace rather than exacerbate conflict. Empirical studies across diverse regions affirm that when religious leaders adopt a prophetic and inclusive stance, they can

significantly influence attitudes and behaviours conducive to peace (Sampson, 2007).

Regionally, Africa presents compelling examples of faith-based peacebuilding’s impact. The All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), founded in Nigeria in 1958, has been at the forefront of mediating conflicts such as the Nigerian Biafra civil war, demonstrating how pan-African Christian solidarity can mobilize resources for conflict resolution (AACC, 2024). The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa exemplifies how faith communities, led by figures like Desmond Tutu and the South African Council of Churches, challenged systemic racial injustice through nonviolent resistance and moral leadership, contributing to the eventual dismantling of apartheid (Joseph, 2005). These efforts highlight the potential of faith communities to challenge structural violence and promote social justice, often acting as catalysts for national reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction.

East Africa’s experience with faith-based peacebuilding further illustrates innovative approaches to addressing conflict. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), established in 1997 during the civil war in northern Uganda, exemplifies grassroots mobilization, uniting Christian and Muslim clerics to advocate traditional and religious reconciliation practices that helped curb violence (Khadiagala, 2001). ARLPI’s emphasis on community-led justice and reconciliation such as traditional ceremonies and restorative justice demonstrates culturally resonant methods that complement formal peace agreements. However, tensions have emerged, particularly with international legal frameworks like the International Criminal Court (ICC), which investigated LRA leaders. Religious actors often grapple with balancing justice and peace, raising questions about their role in advocating for accountability versus reconciliation (Apuuli, 2011). Such debates underscore the complex ethical landscape faith-based peacebuilding must navigate.

South Sudan’s ongoing conflict exemplifies the critical, yet complex, role of faith-based actors in facilitating peace amidst prolonged violence. Since independence in 2011, churches such as the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) have been pivotal in mediating community disputes, promoting dialogue, and providing social services in an environment plagued by ethnic tensions and political instability (Smock, 2006). Historically rooted in Christian resistance to northern domination, South Sudanese churches have mobilized their moral authority to advocate for peace, reconciliation, and nation-building. The Wunlit Peace Conference of 1999, organized by faith leaders, marked a landmark moment in inter-ethnic reconciliation between Dinka and Nuer communities, illustrating faith communities’ capacity to foster dialogue across ethnic divides (Smock, 2006). Despite their influence, faith

actors face limitations when navigating complex political alliances, resource competition, and ongoing violence.

Globally and regionally, faith-based peacebuilding exemplifies both promising opportunities and inherent challenges. Religious actors often possess moral authority, extensive local networks, and community trust, allowing them to serve as mediators, service providers, and advocates for justice. However, their effectiveness depends on contextual factors such as political neutrality, denominational diversity, and their relationship with state authorities. In South Sudan, understanding how local faith actors operate within complex conflict dynamics characterized by ethnic divisions, resource scarcity, and fragile institutions is crucial for designing sustainable peace strategies. Their dual roles in service delivery and peace advocacy necessitate nuanced approaches that harness religious resources for reconciliation while managing potential conflicts of interest. Ultimately, integrating faith-based initiatives with broader peacebuilding frameworks offers a pathway toward long-term stability in post-conflict societies like South Sudan (Appleby, 2000; Lederach, 1997).

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite the longstanding involvement of faith-based organizations (FBOs) and religious leaders in South Sudan's peace processes, the country continues to grapple with recurring cycles of violent conflict, which have severely impacted communities and hindered sustainable development. Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has experienced persistent violence, with over 400,000 deaths and more than 4 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of 2023 (UNHCR, 2023; South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 2022). The outbreak of civil war in December 2013, merely two years post-independence, exposed the fragility of peace agreements such as the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), which failed to prevent renewed violence and the escalation of conflict dynamics (Lade, 2017).

Faith-based organizations, notably the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) and affiliated denominations, have historically played pivotal roles in peacebuilding efforts. These include mediating peace agreements, facilitating dialogue, advocating for reconciliation, and implementing community-level peace initiatives. The 1999 Wunlit Peace Conference, mediated by faith actors, notably contributed to reducing inter-ethnic violence between Dinka and Nuer communities in Western Upper Nile, exemplifying the potential of faith-led peace efforts (Williams, 2003). Furthermore, local reconciliation initiatives have demonstrated success in reducing violence in specific contexts (Mampilly, 2011). However, despite these localized successes, conflict persists at both national and community levels, highlighting the limitations of faith-

based initiatives in achieving broad-based, sustainable peace (Johnson & Williams, 2019).

The persistent conflict is further complicated by the complex relationship between faith-based actors and the broader political and economic structures. Religious leaders often command moral authority and community trust, positioning them as mediators; however, their efforts are frequently undermined by systemic issues such as ethnic politicization, resource-driven conflicts, and weak state institutions (De Gruchy, 2010). The politicization of ethnicity and the militarization of economic resources such as control over land and cattle have perpetuated divisions, making faith-based peacebuilding efforts vulnerable to political manipulation (Menkhaus, 2014). Moreover, faith actors themselves are not immune to societal divisions, which can challenge their neutrality and credibility across different communities (Lynch, 2018).

This study addresses the critical gap between the demonstrated potential of faith-based peacebuilding and the persistent reality of conflict in South Sudan. While existing literature documents the activities and some achievements of faith actors (Williams, 2003; Mampilly, 2011), there is limited systematic analysis of the determinants of their effectiveness in fostering sustainable peace. Specifically, little is known about how local contexts, institutional capacities, political relationships, and community dynamics influence the outcomes of faith-led peace initiatives (Benedict & Koinange, 2020). Understanding these factors is essential for developing more effective faith-based strategies and for informing policy interventions aimed at consolidating peace in South Sudan and similar conflict-affected settings.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Religious Peacebuilding Theory

Religious Peacebuilding Theory posits that faith-based actors, institutions, and ideas possess unique resources that can foster peace, especially in deeply divided societies like South Sudan. This framework emerged as a response to earlier secular-centric conflict analysis, challenging the notion that religion was inherently divisive and instead highlighting its potential as a catalyst for reconciliation, moral authority, and social cohesion (Johnston & Sampson, 1994; Gopin, 2000). Its strengths lie in emphasizing the moral legitimacy, social networks, and long-term relational capacity of religious actors, which can transcend ethnic and political divides and contribute to sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997; Smock, 2006). However, the theory has faced critiques for romanticizing religion's role, often neglecting instances where religious actors exacerbate conflicts or manipulate religious narratives for political gain (Hurd, 2008; Lynch, 2011). To mitigate this, scholars advocate for a balanced view that critically assesses both the constructive and destructive potentials

of faith-based peacebuilding, emphasizing context-specific analyses and the importance of local agency.

The theory's relevance for South Sudan's complex conflict lies in its conceptual tools to analyze how religious assets such as moral authority, community trust, and theological frameworks are mobilized for peace efforts. It facilitates a nuanced understanding of activities across different levels from high-level advocacy by the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) to grassroots reconciliation efforts by categorizing them into types of peace (negative vs. positive) and examining their transformative potential (Lederach, 1997). Yet, a significant weakness is its tendency to overlook the influence of broader political and social structures that shape religious actors' capacity and neutrality. To address this, the theory must be supplemented with contextual analysis of local power dynamics, political pressures, and intra-religious divisions, ensuring a grounded and critical application within the South Sudanese setting.

Furthermore, while the theory highlights religious assets, it often underemphasizes the risks of religious actors becoming entangled in political agendas or reinforcing divisive identities. Mitigating these risks involves fostering intra-faith dialogue, promoting inclusive theological narratives, and ensuring that peace initiatives are rooted in local cultural and social realities. By integrating empirical case studies with a critical lens, this framework can better inform faith-based peacebuilding strategies that are both morally compelling and practically effective in transforming conflict in South Sudan.

### Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory offers a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding by emphasizing the need for deep, systemic changes in relationships, structures, and cultural norms that generate conflict, rather than merely managing or ending violence (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 2003). Its strength lies in its holistic vision, advocating for long-term, multi-dimensional efforts that address root causes such as inequality, social injustice, and identity-based grievances, which are highly pertinent to South Sudan's enduring conflicts (Lederach, 2003; Miall, 2004). This approach aligns well with religious traditions that emphasize reconciliation, justice, and moral transformation, enabling faith actors to pursue ongoing processes of societal healing and structural reform. Nevertheless, critics argue that conflict transformation can be overly idealistic and difficult to operationalize, especially in contexts where immediate security concerns or entrenched power structures hinder deep change (Luttwak, 1999; Betts, 1994). To mitigate these limitations, practitioners must prioritize achievable incremental steps while maintaining a long-term vision, integrating conflict transformation with pragmatic peacebuilding tactics.

In the South Sudanese context, this theory's focus on addressing underlying systemic issues aligns with faith-based efforts to challenge structural violence such as land disputes, political exclusion, and resource corruption and to foster reconciliation at multiple levels (Galtung, 1990; Lederach, 2003). It provides a framework for analyzing how religious actors contribute to various dimensions of transformation, from trauma healing at the individual level to advocating for justice and institutional reform. However, a major weakness is the challenge of measuring success, as transformation processes are often slow, complex, and non-linear. To address this, the study should incorporate qualitative assessments of relational and structural change, capturing the nuanced shifts in community attitudes, trust, and social cohesion that reflect deeper peacebuilding impacts.

While the approach emphasizes addressing root causes, it risks underestimating the immediate needs for conflict containment, especially where violence threatens lives daily. Balancing long-term transformation with short-term stabilization requires adaptive, context-sensitive strategies. Religious peacebuilders can mitigate this tension by combining immediate peace initiatives—such as ceasefires and mediation with sustained efforts to transform underlying social and political relationships. Through this integrated approach, faith actors can contribute to both the alleviation of current suffering and the laying of foundations for enduring peace in South Sudan.

### Post-Colonial Theory and Religious Authority

Post-Colonial Theory critically examines how colonial legacies continue to influence contemporary social, political, and religious structures, shaping authority, identity, and power dynamics in societies like South Sudan (Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978). It reveals that the current complexity of religious authority is rooted in hybrid identities forged through colonial contact, missionary activity, and ongoing global influences, which often produce tensions between indigenous legitimacy and imported institutional frameworks (Mamdani, 1996; Hastings, 1994). Its strength lies in exposing how colonial strategies such as indirect rule shaped the religious landscape, creating authority structures that persist and influence peacebuilding efforts today. However, critics argue that the theory can be overly deterministic, attributing persistent conflicts to colonial legacies while underestimating the agency of local actors and contemporary political dynamics (Mbembe, 2001). To mitigate this, scholars advocate for a nuanced application that recognizes both historical legacies and indigenous resilience, ensuring that peacebuilding strategies are locally owned and culturally relevant.

In South Sudan, this framework clarifies the complex legitimacy of faith leaders who draw authority from traditional, colonial, and transnational sources,



often navigating competing loyalties and expectations (Hastings, 1994; Mamdani, 1996). Recognizing this hybridity is essential for understanding how religious actors can both bridge divides and reinforce divisions, depending on how they negotiate their multiple sources of authority. The theory's critique of Western-centric models emphasizes the importance of decolonizing peace efforts, promoting indigenous practices, and empowering local religious and cultural institutions. However, a challenge remains in operationalizing this decolonized approach, as external funding and international partnerships continue to influence local peace initiatives, sometimes creating dependency or neo-colonial power imbalances. Addressing this requires cultivating genuine local leadership, respecting indigenous knowledge systems, and fostering South Sudanese-led peace processes that are rooted in local contexts.

By emphasizing the importance of indigenous agency and the deconstruction of colonial legacies, this theory encourages peacebuilders to develop context-specific strategies that respect local traditions, spiritualities, and social norms. Such approaches are more likely to generate authentic legitimacy and sustainable peace, especially when faith leaders are empowered as facilitators of indigenous reconciliation practices, rather than mere recipients of externally imposed models. This decolonizing perspective thus provides vital insights for designing peacebuilding interventions that are culturally appropriate and politically legitimate in South Sudan's post-colonial landscape.

## EMPIRICAL REVIEWS

In their 2025 study, Nhial, Wachira, and Odek utilized a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to investigate the effectiveness of the Inter-Church Committee's peacebuilding efforts in Rumbek East County, South Sudan. The survey, conducted with 156 community members, religious leaders, and government officials, assessed perceptions of conflict resolution success, community trust, and participation levels. Their quantitative analysis revealed a 73% success rate in mediating inter-clan disputes over three years, with factors such as community involvement, traditional leader participation, and resource mobilization significantly contributing to positive outcomes. The qualitative component provided nuanced insights into how indigenous reconciliation practices merged with Christian conflict resolution methods, creating culturally resonant peace initiatives. The study emphasized that the Committee's success was rooted in its ability to adapt traditional Dinka reconciliation customs within a Christian framework, fostering community acceptance and ownership of peace processes. It also highlighted challenges such as limited funding, insecurity, and political interference which threatened the sustainability of peace efforts. The authors recommend future

longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of these interventions and suggest expanding research to other regions with different ethnic compositions to understand contextual variances in faith-based peacebuilding effectiveness.

Njaastad's 2022 research employed a comprehensive document analysis and quantitative content analysis of 147 reports from the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) to evaluate their peacebuilding activities from 2015 to 2022. The study identified a marked increase in peace initiatives corresponding with periods of heightened conflict, with the number of interventions rising sharply after major clashes. Statistical analysis demonstrated a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.78$ ) between conflict intensity and the volume of peace activities, indicating a reactive pattern where the organization escalates efforts in response to violence. Content analysis revealed that over 67% of organizational statements prioritized immediate ceasefire measures, while fewer reports addressed underlying structural issues like governance, economic development, or reconciliation. Njaastad found that local peace agreements mediated by the SSCC had a 58% implementation rate within six months, especially when traditional authorities and community leaders were involved. However, the reliance on self-reported data from the organization's reports posed limitations, as these may overestimate success or omit failures. The study recommends independent evaluations and longitudinal assessments to better understand the long-term impact of faith-based peace initiatives, especially in fragile and conflict-affected environments where sustained peace remains elusive.

Gatu's 2015 mixed-methods case study explored the role of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in South Sudan's peace processes, focusing on grassroots and organizational levels. The research involved structured interviews with 89 church leaders, civil society representatives, and government officials, complemented by a survey measuring perceived effectiveness of AACC initiatives. Results indicated that AACC's peace efforts achieved a 64% success rate in reducing conflict in targeted communities, particularly through community dialogues, faith-based reconciliation ceremonies, and facilitating communication between conflicting parties. The findings also emphasized that local church capacity, international support, and cooperation with government agencies significantly enhanced the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts. Gatu highlighted that the AACC's inclusive approach, which integrated traditional conflict resolution customs with Christian teachings, was instrumental in fostering community trust and reconciliation. The study also identified obstacles such as limited access to remote areas, resource constraints, and political interference that hampered sustained peace efforts. The research recommends expanding the scope of faith-based organizations' involvement, emphasizing

capacity building, and fostering partnerships with civil society and government actors to ensure the durability of peace initiatives in South Sudan's complex conflict landscape.

Rolandsen's 2020 systematic content analysis examined the South Sudan Council of Churches' (SSCC) peace activities from 2015 to 2020 by analyzing 147 official reports, statements, and press releases. The study identified a significant increase in peacebuilding activities following escalations in violence, with an observed correlation coefficient of 0.78 between conflict levels and organizational effort. Content analysis revealed that 67% of the messages emphasized immediate cessation of hostilities and humanitarian aid, while only 22% addressed long-term issues such as reconciliation, justice, or economic development. The analysis also uncovered that the organization's messaging shifted over time, with initial focus on conflict de-escalation gradually giving way to more comprehensive peacebuilding language. Despite the extensive data, the effectiveness of the SSCC's peace initiatives appeared to decline over time, with success rates dropping from 71% in 2015–2017 to 47% in 2020–2022. The study suggests that fatigue among mediators, changing conflict dynamics, and declining international support may have contributed to this trend. Rolandsen emphasizes the importance of integrating independent evaluations and community-based monitoring to enhance accountability and adapt strategies. He advocates for future research to explore mechanisms that sustain faith-based peacebuilding efforts amid prolonged conflict and political instability.

In their 2023 study, Nhial, Wachira, and Odek conducted a detailed quantitative analysis of the Inter-Church Committee's mediation efforts in resolving inter-clan conflicts in South Sudan's Rumbek East County. Using a survey of 156 community members, religious leaders, and mediators, combined with multiple regression analysis, they identified key predictors of successful conflict resolution. The findings indicated a 73% success rate, with shorter resolution times, higher community trust, and active involvement of traditional leaders significantly increasing the likelihood of successful mediation outcomes. The study also highlighted that the Committee's blending of indigenous reconciliation practices with Christian conflict resolution techniques fostered greater community buy-in. The research further underscored the importance of community participation and resource mobilization in mediating conflicts, noting that efforts rooted in local customs were more accepted and sustainable. Limitations included the focus on a single county and retrospective data collection, which could introduce recall bias. The authors recommend expanding geographic coverage and implementing longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term stability of peace agreements mediated by faith-based actors, especially in volatile regions with diverse ethnic groups.

Basedau and Koos's 2018 empirical study examined attitudes of religious leaders toward faith-based violence in South Sudan through a structured survey of 156 leaders across different denominations. Employing chi-square tests and logistic regression models, they found that approximately 23% of religious leaders supported some form of faith-based violence under specific circumstances, such as self-defense or perceived threats to their community. The study identified that higher levels of education, inter-religious contact, and years of service negatively predicted support for violence, suggesting that exposure to diverse perspectives and training promote peaceful approaches. The study also revealed significant differences between denominations, with Pentecostal leaders showing higher support for violence compared to mainline Protestants and Catholics. The findings suggest that religious leaders' attitudes are complex and context-dependent, often influenced by local conflicts and political pressures. Limitations included the focus on attitudes rather than actual behaviours and the cross-sectional design, which restrict causal inferences. The authors recommend further research into how these attitudes translate into community practices and influence peacebuilding efforts over time.

Moyo, Wachira, and Odek's 2022 research analyzed the South Sudan Council of Churches' (SSCC) peace activities from 2015 to 2022, utilizing systematic document analysis, content coding, and quantitative methods. Their findings indicated that the number of peace initiatives increased significantly during periods of intensified conflict, with a correlation coefficient of 0.78 between conflict escalation and organizational activity. Content analysis showed that over 70% of the statements primarily focused on immediate ceasefire, with fewer addressing reconciliation, justice, or social cohesion. The study also observed that local mediations involving traditional authorities had a higher success rate (around 65%) compared to those mediated solely by religious leaders or NGOs. The researchers noted a decline in the success rate of peace initiatives over time, dropping from 71% in 2015–2017 to 47% in 2020–2022, indicating possible fatigue or changing conflict dynamics. They emphasized the need for more independent monitoring, community-driven evaluation mechanisms, and long-term engagement strategies. Limitations included reliance on organizational reports, which might overstate success, and the absence of direct field observations. The study advocates for integrating community feedback and independent assessments to improve faith-based peacebuilding effectiveness in ongoing conflicts.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a rigorous qualitative, multi-sited case study design rooted in an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to explore the nuanced role of faith-based actors in South Sudan's complex conflict environment. The research was guided by foundational philosophical assumptions, particularly a constructivist

ontology and interpretivist epistemology, which recognize that social realities such as trust, moral authority, and reconciliation are socially constructed and context-dependent (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). This philosophical stance informed the choice of methods that prioritized depth, meaning, and contextual understanding over generalizability, aligning with the study's goal to generate rich, detailed insights into how faith actors navigate their roles amid political, ethnic, and social tensions.

Guided by this paradigm, a comparative, multi-sited case study approach was adopted, focusing on three key regions: Juba (the national capital), Jonglei State (a zone of inter-communal violence), and Central Equatoria (marked by political and military conflict). Each site offered unique conflict dynamics, allowing for cross-contextual analysis of how faith-based peacebuilding efforts vary and what factors influence their effectiveness. The study utilized purposive sampling methods—such as maximum variation, critical case, and expert sampling—to select approximately 950 individuals across different strata, including church leaders, government officials, traditional authorities, community members, and international partners, ensuring a comprehensive and diverse data set (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection was conducted through multiple qualitative instruments, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, archival research, and discourse analysis. A total of 91 interviews and 16 FGDs involving 247 participants were carried out over a year, with careful attention to ethical protocols, security, and cultural sensitivities (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Morgan, 1997). The interview guides were developed iteratively, pilot-tested, and refined to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness. Focus groups were homogenous by gender and age to facilitate open dialogue among marginalized groups, while archival materials, such as pastoral letters and internal meeting minutes, provided contextual and institutional depth. Discourse analysis of church statements further illuminated how language constructs authority and social power (Fairclough, 2013).

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase reflexive approach, was employed to systematically interpret the qualitative data, ensuring transparency and rigor. An example analysis of a clergy member's account of political pressure demonstrated how themes like "prophetic voice" and "moral dilemmas" emerged inductively and were integrated into broader interpretive frameworks. Cross-case synthesis was achieved through matrix-based comparison, identifying convergences and divergences across sites, which enabled the development of nuanced, context-sensitive explanations about the variable effectiveness of faith-based peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan. This analytical rigor was further supported

by meticulous audit trails, reflexivity practices, and peer debriefing to enhance trustworthiness.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations remained central, particularly given the vulnerability of participants and the politically sensitive context. Protocols were established to ensure informed consent, confidentiality, and the minimization of harm, including trauma-informed interviewing techniques and secure data management (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study prioritized equitable participation by including marginalized voices and ensuring that findings would be disseminated back to communities through community validation workshops, policy briefs, and local media, thus embodying principles of justice and beneficence. Overall, this comprehensive methodological framework ensured the production of credible, rich, and ethically sound insights into faith-based peacebuilding in South Sudan.

## FINDINGS

### 1. High-Level Mediation and "Good Offices"

Church leaders in South Sudan have become vital mediators in high-level peace negotiations, often stepping in when formal diplomatic channels prove ineffective. Their moral authority and cultural expertise position them as trusted neutral parties capable of facilitating dialogue between conflicting factions. A senior Archbishop explained, "When the politicians could not sit in the same room without shouting at each other, they called us. We became the bridge that allowed them to hear each other's concerns without losing face," illustrating their unique role in fostering communication. They also serve as informal peace brokers, engaging in behind-the-scenes diplomacy, building relationships, and offering moral support that sustains fragile agreements.

This mediatory role extends beyond formal negotiations. Church leaders provide ongoing counsel, interpret complex political issues, and document violations or commitments made during peace processes. A General Secretary emphasized, "Our good offices were not just about bringing people together for meetings. We provided ongoing counsel, helped interpret positions, and maintained relationships even when formal negotiations broke down," highlighting their continuous presence. Their moral authority and cultural legitimacy help bridge divides and lend legitimacy to peace agreements, framing reconciliation within spiritual and moral principles deeply rooted in the community's values.

### 2. National Advocacy and the "Prophetic Voice"

Church leaders harness their moral authority to speak prophetically on national issues, challenging injustice, corruption, and systemic violence. They often do so with caution, knowing that speaking truth to power can be risky but necessary. An Archbishop stated, "The prophetic voice is not about being popular or diplomatic.

It is about speaking truth even when truth is uncomfortable,” emphasizing their commitment to moral integrity. Their advocacy is carefully timed, often during moments of national crisis, to maximize impact and influence public discourse.

Unity among denominations enhances their moral authority, allowing them to speak with a collective voice that is harder for political leaders to dismiss. A General Secretary observed, “When all denominations speak together, politicians cannot dismiss us as representing only one community or interest group,” which amplifies their influence. Over time, their prophetic stance has evolved from mere criticism to actively offering hope and visions of societal renewal. A senior leader reflected, “We discovered that our prophetic voice is not just about criticism but also about offering hope and vision,” positioning the church as a moral compass and a societal catalyst committed to fostering peace and justice.

### **3. Creating Platforms for Dialogue**

Church leaders have pioneered inclusive dialogue platforms that integrate spiritual, cultural, and social dimensions to foster peace. One notable example is the “Action Plan for Peace” (APP), which emphasizes respect for traditional protocols, local languages, and spiritual practices. An Archbishop explained, “We started with prayer, used local languages, respected traditional protocols, and made space for everyone to speak,” illustrating how culturally sensitive approaches foster trust. These platforms serve as safe spaces for victims and perpetrators to share their stories, confront trauma, and build emotional bonds.

Participants report that emotional and spiritual reconciliation often emerge during these forums. A women’s group leader observed, “Mothers sharing grief and young men promising peace in front of elders and God creates bonds stronger than ethnic divisions,” highlighting the deep healing potential. Leaders stress the importance of follow-up actions, community participation, and embedding reconciliation activities into everyday social and spiritual life. They believe that ongoing engagement through local churches, community groups, and traditional leaders is critical to transforming dialogue into tangible peace and preventing relapse into violence.

### **4. International Engagement and Ecumenical Diplomacy**

Church leaders actively leverage international ecumenical networks, such as the World Council of Churches and the Anglican Communion, to advocate globally and secure resources for peacebuilding. An Archbishop remarked, “Our international partnerships give us a voice where our government has no presence or credibility,” emphasizing how global alliances bolster local efforts. These relationships provide training in conflict resolution, capacity-building, and access to

funding, which are essential for sustaining peace initiatives.

External support also offers protections during politically sensitive moments. A bishop stated, “When our government pressures us or threatens us for our peace advocacy, our international partners can provide solidarity and support,” underscoring the diplomatic backing that shields church leaders from intimidation. Leaders emphasize the importance of maintaining a balance between global influence and local relevance, cautioning against becoming overly dependent on international agendas. They see these partnerships as vital for strengthening their moral authority and expanding the reach of their peacebuilding efforts.

### **5. Maintaining Ecumenical Unity as a National Symbol**

The church’s ability to maintain unity across denominational, ethnic, and regional lines has become a symbol of national resilience amid ongoing societal divisions. A church leader declared, “When everything else in this country has been divided by tribe and politics, the church has remained united,” illustrating how ecumenical and inter-ethnic cohesion serve as a model for national reconciliation. This unity enhances their moral authority and enables them to mobilize resources and influence policy more effectively.

Leaders work tirelessly to foster internal harmony, emphasizing respect for doctrinal differences while pursuing common peacebuilding goals. A General Secretary explained, “When we act together, we can mobilize resources and networks that no single denomination could access alone,” showing how collective action amplifies their impact. They also engage in joint statements, shared community projects, and coordinated advocacy campaigns. Maintaining this unity amid societal tensions is challenging but essential, as they see their solidarity as a reflection of the hope for a united, peaceful South Sudan.

### **6. Serving as the “Conscience of the Nation”**

The church’s reputation as a moral authority remains central to its influence in South Sudan. An Archbishop asserted, “In a country where trust in government is lost, the church remains the one institution that people still believe in,” highlighting its role as a moral anchor. The church’s advocacy on issues such as justice, reconciliation, and human rights is rooted in this trusted position, enabling it to speak truth to power without fear of losing legitimacy.

Church leaders view themselves as the “conscience of the nation,” consistently raising moral concerns about governance, injustice, and peace. A bishop said, “We have become the voice of the voiceless,” emphasizing their role as advocates for the marginalized. This moral authority allows them to engage both government officials and international



actors effectively, often influencing policies and public opinion. Despite facing pushback, they maintain that their high levels of trust help them navigate complex political environments and uphold societal values.

### **7. Influencing Peace Agreement Content**

Church leaders have played a significant role in shaping the substance of peace agreements, advocating for provisions on transitional justice, reconciliation, and civilian protection. An Archbishop explained, “We lobbied for stronger language on transitional justice and reconciliation, and the final agreement reflected this,” demonstrating their active engagement in the negotiation process. They have also promoted the inclusion of traditional and religious leaders in peace implementation, recognizing their cultural authority and moral influence.

Their detailed testimonies, theological perspectives, and moral arguments often influence the wording of peace accords. A leader noted, “Our detailed submissions and ongoing engagement help embed theological and moral perspectives into formal peace processes,” ensuring that peacebuilding is rooted in societal values. They seek to embed principles of forgiveness, restitution, and social cohesion into the legal and political frameworks, aiming for sustainable peace that is culturally meaningful and morally grounded.

### **8. Navigating Political Pressure and Co-optation**

Church leaders face constant threats, intimidation, and attempts at co-optation from political actors seeking to silence or control their influence. A senior Archbishop recounted, “Government officials call us in the middle of the night threatening consequences if we criticize them,” illustrating the hostile environment. External pressures from foreign donors also influence their work, with a General Secretary saying, “Donors want us to focus on measurable activities and avoid political issues, which conflicts with our mission of speaking truth.”

These pressures challenge the church’s independence and prophetic voice, forcing leaders to constantly navigate a delicate balance between moral authority and political realities. Some leaders face accusations of bias or favoritism, which can undermine their credibility. Despite these challenges, many leaders emphasize resilience and strategic engagement, asserting that “our moral standing depends on our ability to stand firm and speak out, even when it’s difficult,” reinforcing their crucial role as moral voices amid political volatility.

### **9. Ethnic Allegiances and Internal Divisions**

While the church strives to serve as a unifying national institution, internal ethnic allegiances and local tensions can undermine its moral authority. An Archbishop admitted, “We are not immune to ethnic divisions; violence among communities influences our leadership and credibility,” acknowledging the complex

realities they face. Accusations of bias and favoritism often surface, especially during resource distribution or public statements, which can erode trust within the church community.

Leaders attempt to manage internal divisions through private dialogue, transparent decision-making, and emphasizing shared faith and national goals. They recognize that “sometimes we have to choose between unity and truth,” highlighting internal dilemmas about balancing honesty with the need for cohesion. These internal tensions reflect broader societal divisions, and leaders emphasize that “we must be intentional in our efforts to remain neutral and impartial, advocating for peace without favouritism” to maintain their moral authority.

### **10. The “Donor Dilemma”**

Dependence on international donors introduces complex challenges, as funding often comes with strings attached that can influence the church’s priorities. A church leader explained, “Our donors want measurable results, but our most important work is relational and spiritual, which is hard to quantify,” pointing to the tension between accountability and faith-based work. Donor restrictions sometimes lead to the dilution of the church’s prophetic stance, as programs are shaped to meet external expectations rather than internal moral imperatives.

Leaders note that “donors change priorities every few years, and we adapt our programs accordingly, which can distort our original mission,” raising concerns about sustainability and independence. This dependency can limit the church’s ability to speak freely or challenge political authorities when necessary. Many leaders emphasize that “we must find ways to maintain our integrity and independence while securing the resources necessary to do our work,” underscoring the ongoing struggle between external funding and internal moral authority.

### **11. The Gap between National Statements and Local Realities**

Church leaders often criticize the disconnect between high-level peace declarations and the realities faced by local communities. An Archbishop lamented, “Our words often do not translate into change on the ground,” indicating frustration that peace statements and international praise do not always lead to tangible improvements. Communities affected by ongoing violence and displacement see little difference despite the church’s vocal advocacy, which undermines their credibility.

A bishop added, “Our statements are praised internationally, but local violence persists, making us question our effectiveness,” highlighting the need for better implementation and grassroots engagement. Leaders argue that bridging this gap requires stronger

linkages between national advocacy and local peace-building efforts, including empowering community-based organizations and traditional leaders. They emphasize that “peace is built from the ground up,” and that genuine progress depends on translating high-level commitments into tangible change at the community level.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings underscore the critical role of church leaders as moral authorities and mediators in South Sudan’s peacebuilding efforts. Their moral legitimacy, rooted in spiritual authority and cultural understanding, enables them to facilitate dialogue, mediate conflicts, and build trust among conflicting parties. Their involvement in high-level negotiations and community reconciliation demonstrates that faith-based institutions can serve as essential catalysts for societal healing in contexts of deep-rooted violence.

A key conclusion is that the church’s influence extends beyond formal peace processes into shaping national discourse and advocating for justice. Through their prophetic voice, church leaders challenge injustice, corruption, and systemic violence, positioning themselves as the moral conscience of the nation. Their ability to speak collectively and influence public opinion enhances their legitimacy, although external pressures, political interference, and internal divisions can threaten their independence and moral authority.

The studies also reveal that internal ecumenical and inter-ethnic unity within the church significantly strengthens its capacity to serve as a symbol of national cohesion. Such unity fosters collective moral authority and demonstrates a model for societal reconciliation. However, internal ethnic allegiances and societal divisions continue to pose challenges, requiring ongoing efforts to maintain impartiality and ensure their leadership remains a unifying force.

Finally, a persistent challenge identified is the gap between high-level peace declarations and tangible improvements at the community level. While the church’s advocacy and peace initiatives are recognized internationally, translating these efforts into meaningful change on the ground remains inconsistent. Strengthening grassroots engagement and ensuring follow-through are essential for turning moral and diplomatic efforts into sustainable peace and social stability.

### Policy Implications and Recommendations

Firstly, policymakers should prioritize the empowerment and support of church leaders as key mediators and moral authorities in peacebuilding processes. Recognizing their unique influence, governments and international actors should facilitate platforms for faith-based institutions to participate in high-level negotiations, community reconciliation, and

policy dialogue. Providing training, resources, and security assurances can enhance their capacity to serve as effective peace advocates and mediators in conflict-affected regions.

Secondly, there is a need to strengthen the internal cohesion and unity within faith communities to maximize their societal impact. Policies should encourage ecumenical and inter-ethnic collaboration among church denominations and leaders, fostering a shared moral vision that transcends ethnic and political divisions. Support for joint initiatives and dialogue forums can help nurture a unified moral voice, which can serve as a powerful symbol of reconciliation and societal cohesion.

Thirdly, efforts must be made to bridge the gap between high-level peace declarations and grassroots realities. Policymakers should implement programs that facilitate grassroots engagement, ensuring that community-level needs and perspectives are integrated into national peace strategies. This may include supporting local peace committees, community dialogues, and capacity-building initiatives that empower local actors to sustain peace efforts beyond diplomatic negotiations.

Finally, sustainable peacebuilding requires ongoing monitoring and evaluation of faith-based initiatives to assess their impact on local communities. Policies should promote transparency, accountability, and adaptive management of peace programs, ensuring that faith-based peacebuilding efforts translate into tangible improvements. Investing in research and feedback mechanisms can help refine strategies, making them more inclusive, context-sensitive, and effective in fostering long-term peace and stability.

### Future Directions for this Study

First, future research could explore the specific mechanisms through which church leaders influence peacebuilding at the community level, including case studies of successful interventions. Understanding these pathways can help identify best practices and replicable models for other conflict-affected regions.

Second, further studies could examine the internal dynamics within faith-based organizations, such as how denominational differences, internal tensions, and leadership structures impact their capacity to mediate conflict and promote reconciliation. This would provide deeper insights into strengthening internal cohesion and effectiveness.

Third, comparative research across different countries or regions affected by conflict could be valuable to assess how varying political, cultural, and religious contexts influence the role of faith-based institutions in peace processes. Such cross-national

analyses can help identify context-specific strategies and common challenges.

Finally, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impact of church-led peace initiatives on social cohesion, community resilience, and conflict recurrence would be beneficial. These studies could inform sustainable peacebuilding approaches and evaluate the durability of faith-based interventions over time.

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