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Article

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THE ROLE OF EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS IN BUILDING SUSTAINABLE PEACE WITHIN THE CHURCH

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Abstract

While churches are divinely instituted as communities of reconciliation and peace, they remain vulnerable to conflict arising from leadership struggles, doctrinal differences, ethnic sentiments, and governance failures. Many times, conflicts escalate due to delayed recognition and reactive responses to conflict situations. This article examines the growing challenge of internal conflicts within Christian churches and argues for the adoption of an Early Warning Systems (EWS) as a preventive framework for sustaining peace in ecclesial communities. Drawing from the Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach and Conflict Transformation Theory, the study conceptualises the church as a socio-spiritual system in which unresolved tensions serve as early indicators of potential conflict escalation. Through biblical and theological reflection, the article demonstrates that early warning and preventive action are deeply rooted in the Scripture and pastoral responsibility. Contextualising the discussion within African church realities marked by ethnic diversity, charismatic authority, communal values, and socio-political pressures, the paper proposes that church-based early warning mechanisms can prevent conflict escalation, strengthen internal cohesion, and enhance the church's peacebuilding witness in the society. This work further proposes a contextualised church-based early warning model that integrates spiritual discernment, relational sensitivity, and participatory leadership structures. It concludes that intentional early warning mechanisms are essential for nurturing a sustainable peace environment within the church and enhancing its moral witness in society. The research design combines three complementary approaches; biblical-theological analysis,

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interdisciplinary dialogue approach, and contextual case study approach. They are utilised to explore how issues of unity, diversity, and peace manifest within African church contexts.

Keywords: Church Conflict, Early Warning System, Sustainable Peace, Interest-Based Relational Approach, Conflict Transformation Theory.

Introduction

Christian churches all over the world have continue to play important roles of spiritual formation, social cohesion, moral guidance, and community development. Beyond their religious involvement, they have also serve as informal institutions for conflict mediation, and peacebuilding in a plural societies. Unfortunately, many churches experience persistent internal conflict that undermine their unity, public witness and credibility. Sometimes, this conflicts seems to defy solutions and they are prolonged for years. Some of the issues that escalate into crisis include leadership disputes, financial accountability issues, doctrinal disagreements, ethnic and generational tensions, and governance failure. Relational issues of lack of recognition, complain of not being heard and problem of inclusiveness are other serious areas of church conflicts¹. Sadly, this conflicts sometimes result in schisms, prolonged litigation and even the collapse of the congregation. It is impossible to have sustainable peace in such environment no matter how spiritual the church claims to be. The challenge is that despite the prevalence of such conflicts and its negative consequences on the mission of the church, church response have largely remained reactive than preventive and proactive. Interventions are many times initiated only after tensions have reached destructive levels by setting up peace committees, raising special prayers for the resolution of the conflicts, church elders moving from one meeting to the other looking for resolution and many other actions. By this time, relationships have been seriously damaged and trust eroded. The African context produces unique reactions where conflicts are over- spiritualised, suppressed in the name of societal unity and solidarity, or even personalised around charismatic leaders. This delays timely engagement with underlying issues. This is not consistent with theological identity of the church as a community of peace and reconciliation.

The importance of the Early Warning System as projected by the field of peace and conflict studies is a mechanism for identifying and responding to emerging risks before they escalate into systemic crisis. This system has proven to be effective in areas such as politics, traditional and human security, and humanitarian studies. The Early Warning System is focus on detecting indicators, analysing patterns and initiating timely preventive actions². Though the system has worked well in state and community – level conflict prevention, their application within ecclesia contexts remains underexplored despite that churches are human organisations that are also susceptible to conflict dynamics that can be anticipated and mitigated through deliberate early warning practices.

As a result, this paper argues that churches must develop and also institutionalise contextual Early Warning systems as a strategy for cultivating a sustainable peace environment. Such system do not negate the spiritual character of the church. It rather enhances pastoral discernment, relational accountability, and organisational resilience. Drawing from the Interest- Based Relational (IBR) Approach, and Conflict Transformation

¹ Adewale, A. (2019). *Mediation and peacebuilding in African church conflicts*. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 49(2), 2019, 157–176.

² Davies, John L. *Preventive Measures: Building Risk Assessment and Crisis Early Warning Systems*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998, 54-55

Theory, the article provides an interdisciplinary framework for understanding how conflict emerges and escalate within church setting. These theoretical framework is complimented by biblical and theological reflection that demonstrate that vigilance, discernment and preventive intervention are deeply rooted in the Bible and Christian pastoral responsibility. The study further applied the analysis to African ecclesia realities where communal values, ethnic identities, charismatic authority and social political influences shape church life in many ways.

Conceptual Clarification

Ecclesiology and the Nature of the Church: There is the need to put the concept of the Church into contemporary Christian perspective. This is particularly necessary as the Christian Church today does not have the exclusive ownership of that name. The word is used for wide varieties of religious groups such as the Mormons, Church of Satan and Jehovah witness³. A lot of people also see the Church as a type of building in which a variety of religious groups meet in order to have their services. It becomes imperative to clarify the concept of Church as it is used in this study. The Christian community in Jerusalem was the first to call itself the *ekklesia tou theou*, meaning Church of God (Gal. 1:13). This is a reflection of the community's awareness that they are a company of those called as the centre and core of the end time people of God. In general, the Church should be understood as an assembly of people, congregation of people that gather to worship God⁴. The Encyclopaedia Britannica assert that the Christian view of the Church was influenced by the Old Testament concept of the *tahal* which means the elected people of God of the end time, and by the expectation of the coming of Messiah in Judaism. *Ekklesia* is the Greek word used for Church and it means an assembly of people coming together for a meeting.

According to Karl Bath, the existence of the Church is only a response to the work that God has done. God had first revealed Himself to man and the revelation is received and appreciated by humanity through and in the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, a community is established to proclaim God's self-revelation as confirmed in the Bible. The church is therefore a testifying response to the self-revelation of God⁵. The Church must first acknowledge that it does not exist by its own power but by God's work. Though the human elements cannot be denied in Church history, it must however be emphasised that the Church did not come to existence because of itself. The Church is the work of God in the first instance and then the activity of man⁶. At the heart of this study lies an ecclesiological understanding of the church as *koinonia*, a communion of believers united in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The church is not merely an organisation but a living body whose unity is grounded in its participation in the life of God. Pauline metaphors of the body (1 Cor. 12:12–27) emphasise both interdependence and diversity, suggesting that difference is essential to the church's vitality.

Ecclesial cohesion, within this framework, refers to the capacity of the church to sustain relational bonds, share identity, and common mission amid internal plurality. Peace

³ Friesan, Doug J. *The Nature and Function of the Church*. A Seminar Paper at Providence Theological Seminary, 2017.

⁴ Shekha, K. "The Concept of the Church in Christianity." *Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (IJIR)* Vol. 3, issue-2. 2017. <http://www.onlinejournal>.

⁵ Barth, Karl. (1956). *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance. Translated by H. Knight & G. T. Thomson Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956, p. 466

⁶ Ibid.

is understood not as the absence of disagreement but as the presence of just and reconciled relationships that reflect the reconciling work of Christ. Hence, ecclesia unity should be understood as a spiritual oneness that is rooted in Christ. This also include unity in the way the church carry out the mission of the church.

Early Warning Systems (EWS)

The Early Warning Systems is from the field of Peace and Conflict studies and has been effectively used in political, security and humanitarian context to prevent violent conflicts by identifying early signs of tension and enabling timely preventive actions⁷. Essentially, it refers to a structured process of “anticipating, detecting, analyzing, and responding to indicators of potential conflicts or crisis before they escalate into destructive outcome”⁸ Its application to church context implies a pastoral, relational, and organisational framework through which the church exercises discernment, vigilance, and responsible stewardship of not only church cohesion but also communal peace. This is predicated on the truth that the church is both a spiritual body and a social institution and therefore subject to conflict dynamics that can be observed, interpreted, and addressed in a proactive manner. The rationale for Early Warning Systems in church context is not only because it is a human institution but also because church conflicts rarely emerge suddenly. The tendency is for conflict to develop gradually through patterns of unmet expectations, unresolved grievances, power imbalances, and suppressed disagreement⁹. The unique situation of the African context suggest that such tensions are often spiritualised, ignored, or even deferred in the name of societal solidarity and respect for authority. While these measures may give a temporary peace situation, many times, what they present is the peace of the graveyard.

An Early Warning Systems addresses this challenge by shifting church leadership from reactive conflict management to preventive peacebuilding. It also create a safe spaces for identifying and articulating interests before positions harden. The system further strengthens trust, accountability, and transparency within church structure¹⁰. It is however important to identify areas of early warning that the church should pay attention to. They are the specific domains where early signs of conflicts commonly emerge and which the church must pay attention to for effective ecclesia early warning system. Seven indicators are identified in this paper. The first in this regard is the *Relational and Interpersonal indicators* such as declining trust among leaders, withdrawer from fellowship, committees and leadership meetings, formation of informal factions and cliques, increase in gossip, rumour- spreading and indirect communication¹¹. Often times, relational breakdown are the earliest and most visible warning signs of impending conflict. Another type is *governance and leadership indicators* characterised by increasing centralisation of authority, exclusion of people in decision making process of the church, leadership resistance to accountability and

⁷ Lund, Michael S. “*Preventive Violent Conflict: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy*”. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998. P. 99

⁸ Nyheim, David. *Preventing Violence, War and State Collapse: The future of Conflict Early Warning and Response*. Paris: OECD, 2013.

⁹ Adekunle, A. T., & Akinwale, A. A. *Leadership style and conflict management in church settings: A study of selected churches in southwestern Nigeria*. *Journal of African Leadership and Development*, 5(1), 2019, 33–47.

¹⁰ Chukwuma, E., & Okon, B. *Spiritual maturity and conflict resolution strategies in church leadership*. *International Journal of Theological Studies in Africa*, 11(2), 2022, 100–117.

¹¹ Musavi, Syed Hyder Abbas. *Early Warning – Based Multihazard and Disaster Management Systems*. Boca Raton: CRC Press/ Taylor & Francis Group, 2020, 218- 222

financial transparency, power struggle and anxieties attached to leadership succession¹². There is no doubt that leadership play an important role in conflict prevention and its escalation. It is possible in African context for charismatic authority to ignore these warnings

Interest and position dynamics is another important indicator. It focuses on interest rather than position. It warns against hardening of theological or administrative positions without dialogue. There is also the moralisation of disagreement like hastily dropping the name of God in defense of certain positions¹³. It is not uncommon in African churches to hear statements like “This is God’s will” when God has not spoken or “This is rebellion” in order to spiritually blackmail the opposing view. It stresses the willingness of church leaders to sufficiently articulate underlying issues to gain support instead of using the pulpit and spiritual authority to blackmail people. When position replace interests, negotiation becomes difficult and conflict escalation becomes likely. There is also the *theological and doctrinal indicators*. Sometimes, theology and doctrine are weaponised to either control others or exclude some. There can be selective or inconsistent use of scripture to justify authority. It is also possible to suppress legitimate theological questions¹⁴. There had been situations in the history of the church when people were wrongly and without due process labeled heretics. Early theological dialogue and interpretive humility are essential to prevent doctrinal differences from becoming divisive.

African churches are deeply embedded within complex socio- cultural environments that influences internal dynamics. Hence, *socio- cultural identity indicators* that include ethnic and tribal favouritism in leadership selection, gender and generational marginalisation, and external community conflicts spilling into church relationships are important indicators for churches in Africa. *Structural and communication indicators* talks to weak institutional structure that often allow minor disagreements to escalate to bigger conflicts. This include the absence of clear conflict mediation or management procedures. Breakdown of communication channels between leadership levels and overreliance on informal power brokers are other examples. There is also the lack of safe mechanism for feedback or grievance reporting¹⁵. Finally, *spiritual practices* can also signal early warning signs. This indicators include decline in communal prayer and shared spiritual discipline and moral inconsistency among leaders. Sometimes, church leaders use the instrumentation of prayer and prophecy to silence disagreements. It is also possible for a church to lose her shared vision and spiritual purpose¹⁶. An effective church-based Early Warning Systems integrate these indicators into a continuous cycle of observation, interpretation, and response. The system should be seen as an opportunities for dialogue, reforms and reconciliation. Early Warning Systems require early warning response.

Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in Interest- Based Relational (IBR) Approach and Conflict Transformation Theory, which together provide a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding conflict emergence, escalation, and prevention within church organisations.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Clarke, Richard A. & Eddy, R. P. *Warning: Finding Cassandras to Stop Catastrophes*. New York: Harpercollins Ecco, 2017, 124- 126

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Heffelfinger, Curtis. *The Peacemaking Church: 8 Biblical Keys to Resolve Conflict and Preserve Unity*. USA: Baker, 2018

¹⁶ Poirier, Alfred. *The Peacemaking Pastor: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Church Conflict*. Peacemaker Ministries, 2018

While the Interest- Based Relational Approach operates at the micro levels which is the interpersonal and organisational conflict level, Conflict Transformation Theory operates at the macro and long term level, addressing structural and cultural changes. As a result, Interest- Based Relational Approach is suitable for handling early stage conflict detection and negotiation while Conflict Transformation Theory ensures lasting peace and institutional reform.

The Interest-Based Relational Approach also known as Principle Negotiation, provides a constructive framework for managing conflict while preserving relationships. Developed by Fisher and Ury in 1981, is grounded in the assumption that conflict escalate often when parties adopt rigid positions rather than engaging underlying interests. Hence, it is a conflict management theory that includes managing conflict by addressing underlying interests rather than firm positions, separating people from the problem, attempting to maintain or rebuild relationships, looking for mutual benefit options, and using objective criteria rather than imposed authority or positional power to reach an agreement over conflict¹⁷. By prioritising relationships and mutual understanding, it offers a preventive and restorative model for conflict management within relational institutions such as the church. This approach is suitable for the church because church conflicts are largely relational and moral. Church conflicts are rarely about doctrinal and administrative issues alone but are deeply connected to underlying interests such as recognition, authority, identity, and theological legitimacy. It is also suitable because it is important for the church to protect relationships and unity even while addressing disagreement. Early warning signs of conflict often appear when positions harden, dialogue brake down, and relational trust erodes. Additionally, sustainable peace in the church require processes that allow parties to articulate interests without fear of marginalisation or spiritual judgment¹⁸. Most importantly, the Interest – Based Relational Approach aligns strongly with biblical reconciliation ethics.

There are certain principles of the Interest- Based Relational Approach that serves as lenses through which church leaders can detect and interpret emerging conflicts. First is that the approach separates the people from the problem. In many church conflicts, disagreements and misunderstanding are quickly personalised. This often leads to character attack, spiritual labelling and even ethnic stereotyping. The approach encourages church leaders to identify the issues as distinct from the people involved. Early warning signs emerge when issues are either personalised or moralised rather than being discussed objectively¹⁹. The Interest- Based Relational Approach helps in unmasking deeper interests that are covered under theological, doctrinal and moral discussion²⁰. Many times, you hear people in churches talk about what is biblical or what is the will of God whereas there are hidden personal or group interests that are the real issues. Some of those interests include the desire to control, fear of change, or ethnic and generational insecurity. It is important for churches to be able to articulate these underlying interests as early warning indicators of emerging conflicts.

¹⁷ Fisher, Roger, and Danny Ertel. *Getting Ready to Negotiate: The Getting to Yes Workbook*. USA: Harvad Negotiation Project, 1995

¹⁸ Diamomd, Stuart. *Getting More: How You can Negotiate to succeed in Work and Life*. New York: Penguin Random House Imprint, 2010, 77-82

¹⁹ Shell, G. Richard. *Bargaining for Advantage: Negotiation Strategies for Reasonable People*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006, 122- 126

²⁰ Ibid.

The approach also generate options for mutual gain by emphasising creativity and flexibility in problem solving. It makes it imperative for the church to consider various possible and available options while considering how to protect the various interests in the congregation. The church should not descend to the level of *bad faith* which is the opposite of *authentic existence* in existentialism. Bad faith in the philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre is a situation where an individual reduces himself to only one option thinking, he does not have an alternative²¹. A breakdown in the willingness to explore alternatives in leadership and governance or even worship practices signals escalating conflict risk. This is why some churches understudy how things are being done in other churches. Lastly, the Interest-Based Relational Approach despite being concerned about protecting interests insist on objective criteria. Church conflicts usually escalate due to ambiguity in the interpretation of the constitution and doctrinal contents or even leadership succession process. The approach emphasis the use of agreed standards about the scripture, statement of faith, denominational policies and ethical norms as stabilising reference point²².

The Conflict Transformation Theory on the other hand is articulated prominently by Lederach (1997) who reframes conflict as a dynamic social process rather than a discrete event. It represents a paradigmatic shifts in the understanding of conflict, moving beyond traditional approaches of conflict resolution and management towards a holistic and relational perspectives. 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 suppression²³. 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. By integrating Conflict Transformation Theory, this article frames Early Warning Systems as tools for peace cultivation, enabling the church to intervene at the formative stages of conflict and prevent destructive outcomes.

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 from conflict because it is also a human organisation. The church must as a result restrained from seen conflict solely as signs of failure and sin. Another important assumption is that conflict has constructive potentials. It can lead to growth, reforms and unity when engaged in a positive manner. 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 fixes²⁴.

²¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Translated by Carol Macomber, edited by John Kauka. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

²² Ury, William. *Getting Past No: Negotiating with Difficult People*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991, 201

²³ Rupesinghe, Kumar (ed.). *Conflict Transformation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995, 86

²⁴ Jeong, Ho- Won (ed.). *Conflict Intervention and Transformation: Theory and Practice*. London: Rowman & Littlefield/ Bloombury Academy, 2019, 102- 107

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 levels²⁵.

Conflict Transformation theory like 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 delayed response increases relational damage and institutional fragmentation²⁶. 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 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 dialogue mechanism that prevent relational breakdown²⁷. It is sometimes refer 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 nebulous constitution, institutionalising acceptable leadership succession and accountability mechanism. Needed structural reforms will prevent recurring crises. *Cultural transformation* 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 change²⁸.

For churches in Africa, it is imperative to state that conflict transformation does not only align with the Bible, it also align with African approaches to conflict resolution which emphasise restoration of relationships over punitive outcomes, community involvement in 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

²⁵ Sande, Ken. *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004

²⁶ Dayton, Bruce & Louis Kriesberg (ed.). *Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding: Moving from Violence to Sustainable Peace*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, 235- 245

²⁷ Lederach, John Paul. *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*. USA: Good Books, 2003, 64- 72

²⁸ Ibid.

indigenous practices. This will enhance their applicability with contemporary church structure.

The integration of the Interest- Based Relational Approach and Conflict Transformation Theory offers a holistic framework for Early Warning Systems in the church. While the Interest- Base Relational Approach offers practical tools for early stage negotiation and relationship preservation, Conflict Transformation Theory provides the broader vision for long time changes. While the Interest- Based Relational Approach focuses on immediate engagement with interest and relationships, Conflict Transformation Theory addresses structural, cultural and relational transformations that will happen over time. The application of the two into the church system provide a coherent framework for church-based Early Warning Systems that are preventive and transformative. In African churches where authority structures, charismatic leadership, and communal identity intersect, this integrated framework enables leaders to detect early signs of tension, interpret their deeper causes, and intervene constructively before conflicts escalate. Thus, these theories collectively justify the development of early warning mechanisms as essential instruments for sustaining peace within ecclesial communities.

Biblical and Theological Reflection

Theologically, the concept of Early Warning Systems resonates deeply with biblical notions of vigilance, discernment, and pastoral responsibility. Scripture consistently affirms that leaders are entrusted with the task of safeguarding communal well-being through timely warning and proactive intervention. One of the most compelling biblical foundations for early warning is the watchman metaphor in Ezekiel 33:1–7. The watchman is appointed to observe approaching danger and issue timely warning to the people so that the community may take preventive actions. . Failure to do so results in moral accountability before God²⁹. This imagery establishes vigilance as a non-negotiable spiritual leadership responsibility. The watchman monitors the environment, interprets the signs of danger, communicates the warning through a recognised signal, and thereby enables preventive action. Ezekiel in that passage thus offer a theological blueprint for early warning that is preventive rather than reactive. It is important to take note that the watchman’s accountability is not tied to the outcome of the threat but to the faithful execution of the warning³⁰. Failure to warn constitute moral negligence while faithful warning transfers responsibility to the hearers. Church leaders are appointed by God as watchmen to institutionalise Early Warning System for the church against the danger of destructive conflicts and crisis. It is an essential part of the prophetic ministry of a pastor. These leaders will be held responsible by God if they fail to do so. The church on the other hand will be held responsible if they reject the peace ministry of the pastor. The passage therefore establishes a link between early warning and moral responsibility.

In church contexts, conflicts many times escalate because warning signs are ignored, spiritualised or minimized. Ezekiel challenge such negligence and warn the church to take note. The watchman in the passage is not a distant observer but a guardian of communal well- being. In the same vein, church- based early warning mechanism should function as the expressions of pastoral care and institutional responsibility. Every church should have a watchman or group of watchmen that will be responsible for the peace of the church. In the New Testament, Jesus rebukes religious leaders for their inability to discern the “signs of the

²⁹ Taylor, John B. *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009, p.224

³⁰ Stuart, Douglas K. *Ezekiel, Preacher’s Commentary*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004, 304-305

times” (Matt. 16:2–3), highlighting discernment as a spiritual discipline. He rebuked the Pharisees and the Sadducees for being able to interpret weather signs but failed to interpret the signs of the times. The church many times have been able to successfully handle many tasks like raising funds for church projects, organising successful outreach, hosting of conventions of global standard, building of cathedrals and so many others. Sadly, many churches have failed in institutionalising early warning systems and peacebuilding structure against conflicts. No wonder some churches collapse after years of successful ministry in other areas. I once belong to a church of over four hundred membership but later reduced to about eighty membership after years of suppression of people’s feelings and leadership highhandedness.

Similarly, Apostle Paul exemplifies early warning pastoral leadership when he cautions the Ephesian elders about internal and external threats to the church (Acts 20:28–31). The dimension of the future threat of crisis is that the actors that will be responsible for the external threats were described as “Wolves”, an animal with sharp teeth and powerful jaws for tearing meat and crushing bones to demonstrate how dangerous the threat would be to the church. To compound the danger, some within the church will arise to distort the gospel truth which will end up in theological and spiritual disagreement. Paul warned the church to “Keep watch “in verse 22 and to “be on your guard” in verse 31. These warnings are in tandem with the spirit of the early warning signs to anticipate, detect, analyse, and positively respond to impending treats. In African church settings, where leaders are often revered as spiritual authorities, these texts challenge clergy and lay leaders alike to move beyond charisma toward discernment-informed leadership. Spiritual authority without vigilance risks enabling conflict rather than preventing it. Jesus’ parable of the wise and foolish builders in Luke 6: 46- 49 also offers profound theological framework for understanding the logic and necessity of the Early Warning System. In that parable, Jesus contrast two builders who hears his words but responded differently. One builds a house on a solid foundation after deliberate preparation, while the other builds without a foundation. When the flood comes, the difference in outcomes is not determined by the severity of the storm but by the quality of their preparation before the storm. Their levels of preparation is preemptive of future calamity or sustainability³¹.

The teaching underscore anticipation, foresight, and obedience prior to crisis which are foundational principles of early warning. The wise builder anticipates future risk and acts preventively. The foolish builder on the other hand ignores latent vulnerabilities that only become visible when disaster strikes. This distinction projects the difference between preventive peacebuilding thorough Early Warning Systems and reactive crisis management after conflict escalation. Disasters can indeed be mitigated or avoided if warning are heeded. This aligns with biblical conception of peace (*Shalom*) as proactive preservation of life and community rather than mere recovery after destruction. Biblical peace (*shalom*) is holistic, encompassing justice, relational harmony, and communal well-being (Isa. 32:17). It is not merely the absence of visible conflict but the presence of right relationships³². The concept of shalom challenge the church to preventively institutionalise the culture of justice, relational harmony and communal well-being within the church. Jesus’ instruction to reconcile with one’s brother or sister before worship in Mathew 5: 23-24 focuses on

³¹ Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1949

³² Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, 93

preemptive reconciliation as a core Christian ethics³³. From a theological perspective, this implies that Peace must be cultivated intentionally, delayed response to conflict contradicts the gospel's call to love, and Preventive action is a sign of spiritual maturity, not weakness. In African churches, where open confrontation is often avoided for the sake of surface harmony, this theology challenges leaders to distinguish between true peace and suppressed tension. Early Warning Systems enable churches to address issues constructively before they become destructive.

Designing an Early Warning System for the Church

This work has established that church conflict rarely emerge suddenly but develop through identifiable indicators, situations and events. We have also established that conflict is a process which requires intentional mechanism that enables early detection, interpretation and preventive response. The need therefore for a church- based Early Warning Systems that will translate theological vigilance and peacebuilding theory into institutional practice. Such a system must be context sensitive, relationally grounded, and theologically informed. Hence, this paper propose a dynamic, participatory, and spiritually discerning system aimed at achieving ecclesia sustainable peace and unity. This proposed design is anchored on some core principles. The first principle is that it prioritises prevention over reaction. That is, early engagement is the rule over crisis management. The design is also anchored on the preservation of relationships. It seeks to address issues without damaging relationships. Participation and inclusivity is another principle of the design. This is because peace is sustained when multiple voices are heard including that of the minority and the marginalised. The principle of accountability and transparency is important in order to reduce suspicion and rumour- driving conflict. Most important is the principle of spiritual discernment because the church is first and foremost a spiritual body³⁴.

The structural components of this church- based Early Warning Systems is divided into four segments. The first segment is that of *Detection* which is meant to identify early warning signals. It has to do with the intentional monitoring of early warning indicators across key domains of church life. It encourages structured attentiveness rather than relying on informal intuition. Regular detection mechanism to be put in place include; regular leadership and ministry team meetings for review, congregational feedback avenue, pastoral visitation report, confidential grievance- reporting channels and observation of participation pattern. Special attention should also be paid to identity- based grievance, theological polarisation, relational breakdown, communication failure and leadership exclusion. Some congregants like elders, ministry leaders and trusted laypersons can be made to function as relational sensors in line with the biblical role of watchman. The next segment is that of *analysis and discernment*. The responsibility here is on the interpretation of signals that have been gathered in the first segment. The church at this stage must be able to differentiate between surface issues and underlying interests. Questions to be answered include; What interests are being threatened? What positions are being hardened? Which relationships are most affected? And are structural or cultural issues involved? It is recommended for the church or the denomination to have a Peace and Discernment team of a small representative of people trained in mediation, theology, and conflict analysis.

³³ Coward, Harold & Gordon Smith (ed). *Religion and Peacebuilding*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004

³⁴ Ibid

The third is the *Response segment* which is about preventive and transformative intervention. Early Warning System call for an early response system. Intervention is the heart of the Early Warning System. It involve the facilitation of dialogue sessions, interest-mapping conversions, mediation using neutral facilitators, clarification of policies or doctrines, pastoral counseling and reconciliation process. Under interest mapping, there should be the Identification and differentiation of primary stakeholders, secondary stakeholders and shadow parties. The primary stakeholders are the direct participants in the emerging issues or conflict while the secondary stakeholders are the sponsors, sometimes they are also participants. Shadow parties hide their identity but are like the secondary stakeholders³⁵. The aim of this segment is not to merely settle disputes but to transform relationships and structures that generate recurring relationship. The last segment is on building sustainable peace through *learning and institutionalisation*. Learning from early interventions must inform future practice. Without institutional learning, the church risk repeating the same conflict cycle. Important leaning mechanism relevant for this stage include; post intervention reflection sessions, documentation of conflict patterns which should be confidential, leadership training updates, policy and constitutional review, and congregational peace education³⁶. It is imperative for roles to be clearly defined if an Early Warning System must function effectively and according to the identified segments. As a result, the following roles are recommended;

- i. Pastors/ Church Leaders should function primarily as watchmen responsible for vigilance and moral leadership
- ii. There should be a Peace and Discernment Team that will facilitate, analysis and respond to what has been detected.
- iii. The congregation should be active participants in feedback and reconciliation
- iv. There should be External Advisors (where necessary) to provide neutral expertise

In all of these, it is important to anticipate challenges which include resistance from entrenched leadership, fear of confrontation, misuse of spiritual authority and limited conflict – resolution capacity. This should necessitate strategies to mitigate the challenges. These include peace education, leadership formation, gradual insitutionalisation and external accountability mechanism. It is expected that this system will strengthens trust, enhance leadership credibility, and equip the church to withstand inevitable storms without collapse.

Conclusion

It has been established that the persistence of internal conflicts within the church reveals the limitation of reactive and crisis- driven approaches to conflict management. This paper therefore contend that ecclesia sustainable peace requires intentional, preventive and theologically grounded Early Warning Systems that enables timely discernment and constructive intervention. It further conceptualised conflict as a dynamic process with identifiable early stages rather than a sudden event using the Interest- Based Relational Approach and Conflict Transformation Theory. By integrating these perspectives, the study demonstrates that early warning is not just a technical tool but also a spiritual, relational and ethical practice aimed at preserving relationships, addressing underlying interests and reforming structures that perpetuate recurring conflict. Using biblical and theological reflections, it was established that early warning and preventive actions are strongly

³⁵ Heffelfinger,

³⁶ Coward,

embedded in Christian tradition. The watchman metaphor in the book of Ezekiel and Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish builders were among others used to underscore the necessity of preparation and foundational strength before crisis occur. These texts provide a compelling theological rationale for institutionalising early warning mechanisms as expression of faithful discipleship, pastoral responsibility and obedience to Christ. The paper proposed a structured model of a Church- Based Early Warning System to guide in the detection and analysis of conflict signs. The paper affirms that early warning is not an optional administrative innovation but a theological and pastoral imperative for the church. Future research may explore empirical case studies, denominational variations, and training frameworks that deepens the practical application of Early Warning Systems in diverse ecclesia contexts. The need for churches to incorporate the early warning mechanism into church ministry is urgent. The paper calls church pastors and leaders to be faithful stewards of church peace.

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