



**FROM PULPIT TO PLANET: EVALUATING AN INTEGRATED CHRISTIAN ETHICAL
FRAMEWORK FOR RESOURCE CONFLICT MEDIATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL
STEWARDSHIP IN PLATEAU STATE**

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Abstract

In Plateau State, Nigeria, conflicts over resources, intensified by climate change, have heightened due to environmental degradation and competition between farmers and herders, compounded by ineffective governance. While traditional conflict resolution strategies often prioritize political and security measures, there is a lack of emphasis on faith-based ethical frameworks that merge environmental stewardship with peacebuilding. This research presents and assesses the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) as a Christian ethical approach for mediating resource disputes while fostering environmental responsibility. Grounded in the Integrative Relational-Ecological Christian Ethical Framework, it combines Christian stewardship, *Ubuntu* ethics, and Just Peace Theory. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were gathered from 384 survey participants and through in-depth interviews with 40 individuals across six conflict-affected Local Government Areas. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings indicate strong community trust in the Church as a moral authority, widespread support for church-led peace initiatives, and highlight the importance of merging ecological stewardship with justice-oriented conflict resolution. The REM offers a valuable framework for enhancing community resilience, promoting environmental care, and achieving sustainable peace. The study concludes that integrating principles of Christian stewardship, *Ubuntu* ethics, and Just Peace Theory creates a relevant ethical framework for addressing climate change-driven resource conflicts while advocating for sustainable environmental practices in Plateau State. The study recommends that churches, theological institutions, peacebuilding organizations, and government bodies implement the REM as a collaborative framework for



conflict mediation, environmental education, and peace initiatives in Nigeria and similar conflict-affected regions.

Keywords: Climate-induced conflict; Christian ethics; Environmental stewardship; Just Peace; Plateau State; Relational-Ecological Model; *Ubuntu*.

Introduction

Plateau State, Nigeria, stands at the epicenter of one of the country's most enduring and deadly resource-based conflicts, as recurrent violence between indigenous farmers and nomadic herders continues to claim thousands of lives and displace entire communities (Higazi, 2016; Krause, 2019). While these clashes are often attributed to competition over land, water, and grazing corridors, research reveals that the crisis is rooted in a complex interplay of ecological degradation, climate-induced migration, and the breakdown of relational and institutional trust (Brottem & McDonnell, 2020; Efobi, Adejumo & Kim, 2025). Climate change has accelerated desertification in northern Nigeria, pushing pastoralists southward into farming territories where land is deeply connected to ancestry, survival, and sociopolitical identity (Ochonu, 2014; Efobi, Adejumo & Kim, 2025). This migration has heightened tensions, transforming once-cooperative relationships into existential struggles for space and sovereignty (Brottem & McDonnell, 2020).

Despite numerous interventions, including state peacebuilding initiatives, grazing reserve policies, and security operations, Plateau State's conflict remains unresolved. State-led forums often lack legitimacy and inclusivity, resulting in forums dominated by grievance rather than genuine dialogue (United States Institute of Peace, 2021; Cambridge Core, 2024). The failure of Western-oriented peacebuilding frameworks, which privilege institutional reforms over communal values, further demonstrates the need for locally grounded, culturally resonant solutions (Mfugale, 2026; Simmons, 2020). Scholars contend that sustainable peace in communal societies requires not only legal and political reform but also the restoration of moral and relational bonds severed by conflict (Murithi, 2006; Simmons, 2020).

Amidst these challenges, the Christian Church possesses unique moral authority and community trust, with field data indicating that 78% of respondents in Plateau State view the Church as the most trusted institution in their communities (Wilson Center, 2023). Yet, the Church's involvement in peacebuilding has been inconsistent, hindered by a lack of coherent, theologically grounded frameworks and limited integration of environmental stewardship into its teachings (Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012; Ojeifo, 2022; Nwankwo & Adebayo, 2023). The potential of the Church as a transformative agent in resource conflict mediation and ecological restoration thus remains largely untapped (Wilson Center, 2023; Adamu & Ugwueze, 2021).

This research addresses this critical scholarly and practical gap by developing and evaluating the Relational-Ecological Model (REM): an integrated Christian ethical framework that synthesizes the virtues of Stewardship, *Ubuntu*, and Just Peace as tools for conflict mediation and environmental stewardship in Plateau State. By grounding this model in empirical fieldwork and contemporary scholarship, the study aims to move the Church from passive observer to active peacebuilder, offering a replicable paradigm for faith-based engagement in complex conflict environments.

Statement of the Research Problem

The farmer-herder conflict in Plateau State is one of sub-Saharan Africa's most persistent resource crises, rooted in competition over land, water, and grazing corridors and intensified by climate change (Higazi, 2016; Efobi, Adejumo & Kim, 2025; NEMA, 2025). Despite its scale, existing responses have proven inadequate: state-led initiatives have been undermined by institutional capture and political partiality (Cambridge Core, 2024; Krause, 2019), security interventions have addressed symptoms while leaving structural causes intact (United States Institute of Peace, 2021), and Western-oriented frameworks have failed to resonate with the moral and relational world of affected communities (Mfugale, 2026). A critical gap persists in both scholarship and practice: the Church, which commands the greatest community trust in



the region, lacks a coherent, theologically grounded ethical framework for conflict mediation and environmental stewardship (Ojeifo, 2022; Nwankwo & Adebayo, 2023). Faith-based engagement has remained reactive, episodic, and theologically underdeveloped (Wilson Center, 2023; Adamu & Ugwueze, 2021), and environmental stewardship remains insufficiently integrated into Church teaching (Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012; Simmons, 2020). This study responds to this gap by developing the Relational-Ecological Model (REM), whose construction and deployment constitute both a scholarly necessity and a pastoral imperative.

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to develop and evaluate the Relational-Ecological Model (REM), a comprehensive framework grounded in Christian ethical principles, aimed at mediating conflicts stemming from climate change while promoting environmental stewardship in Plateau State, Nigeria. This investigation specifically examines the ecological, relational, and institutional dynamics that lead to resource-based conflicts, assesses local community perceptions regarding the Church's role in fostering peace, and analyzes how the integration of Christian values such as stewardship, *Ubuntu*, and Just Peace can offer a substantial and effective strategy for achieving sustainable peace and ecological restoration.

Research Question

Central to this study is the key inquiry: How can the Relational-Ecological Model (REM), founded on Christian ethical values such as stewardship, *Ubuntu*, and Just Peace, effectively mitigate resource conflicts triggered by climate change and enhance environmental stewardship in Plateau State, Nigeria? To address this inquiry, the research will investigate the ecological and relational factors that contribute to these conflicts, examine community perspectives on the Church's participation in peacebuilding efforts, and assess the practicality and significance of the REM as a model for the Church's leadership in both conflict resolution and environmental stewardship.

Theoretical Background

Contemporary research on resource conflict and peacebuilding in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that fragmented or imported theoretical models fail to address the full complexity of land-based violence, particularly in settings where social, ecological, and spiritual factors are deeply intertwined (Murithi, 2006; Simmons, 2020; Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012). To respond to this gap, this study adopts an Integrative Relational-Ecological Christian Ethical Theory as its foundational lens.

This theory posits that enduring peace and environmental stewardship are best achieved through an ethical paradigm that is simultaneously relational (prioritizing communal bonds and reconciliation), ecological (addressing justice through care for creation), and theologically grounded (drawing from Christian virtue and African indigenous wisdom). The Relational-Ecological Theory synthesizes the following core insights:

1. The Christian concept of stewardship frames human beings as caretakers of the earth and one another (Habel & Trudinger, 2008; Bouma-Prediger, 2020).
2. The African relational ethic of *Ubuntu* emphasizes interconnectedness, restorative dialogue, and shared responsibility for social harmony (Murithi, 2006; Murove, 2009).
3. The Just Peace tradition integrates justice, reconciliation, and proactive, nonviolent transformation of relationships (Stassen, 2008; Little, 2022).

Rather than treating these as discrete or competing theories, the Integrative Relational-Ecological Theory operationalizes their synthesis as a single, context-sensitive framework. It provides both a normative foundation and a practical guide for church-led mediation and environmental restoration in Plateau State. By grounding the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) in this integrative theory, the research ensures that the framework is not only doctrinally and culturally legitimate but also empirically suited to the realities of resource conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of this study rests on the Integrative Relational-Ecological Christian Ethical Framework, which amalgamates insights from Christian Stewardship Theory, *Ubuntu* Ethics, and Just Peace Theory to examine the complex interrelationships among environmental degradation, resource-based conflict, and the pursuit of sustained peace in Plateau State. This framework posits that conflicts induced by climate change are not solely ecological or political challenges but also ethical and relational dilemmas that require justice-driven, reconciliatory, and responsible approaches to environmental stewardship.

The initial component, Christian Stewardship Theory, originates from biblical injunctions to respect and care for God's creation (Genesis 1:26–28; 2:15). Stewardship encompasses more than just environmental conservation; it entails the mindful management of natural resources, social relationships, and the collective welfare of communities. Within the context of Plateau State, this theory advocates for the ethical promotion of sustainable land management, ecological restoration, and judicious resource use as fundamental strategies to avert conflict.

The second component, *Ubuntu* Ethics, is grounded in African moral philosophy, emphasizing communal interdependence, the intrinsic dignity of all individuals, reconciliation, and shared responsibility. The concept of *Ubuntu*, commonly articulated as “I am because we are,” encourages dialogue, mutual respect, forgiveness, and collaborative problem-solving. This perspective is particularly pertinent in addressing farmer-herder disputes, as it prioritizes the reconstruction of relationships over adversarial tactics, thereby enhancing community cohesion and resilience.

The third element, Just Peace Theory, serves as a theoretical basis for establishing sustainable peace through justice, reconciliation, inclusive participation, and the redress of systemic inequalities that frequently give rise to violent conflict. Rather than merely aiming to halt hostilities, Just Peace endeavors to tackle the foundational causes of conflict, such as environmental injustices, unequal resource distribution, and shortcomings in governance. This theory complements the notions of Stewardship and *Ubuntu* by linking ecological accountability with social equity and long-term peace efforts.

Integrating these three perspectives results in the Integrative Relational-Ecological Christian Ethical Framework, which underpins the proposed Relational-Ecological Model (REM) in this study. It posits that lasting peace in Plateau State is most effectively achieved when environmental stewardship, relational reconciliation, and justice-oriented peacebuilding are pursued in concert rather than in isolation. Consequently, the REM offers a relevant Christian ethical framework that empowers churches, local communities, and policymakers to address the ecological and relational dimensions of resource conflicts driven by climate change while promoting environmental sustainability and peaceful coexistence.

Conceptual Map of the Relational-Ecological Model (REM)

The REM translates the Integrative Relational-Ecological Christian Ethical Theory into action through four interrelated components. Each component directly expresses a core dimension of the integrative theory:

- i. **Ecclesial Preparation:** Embodies the Christian ethical and relational pillars by building the Church capacity for principled leadership in mediation and stewardship. This involves training clergy and laity in ethical discernment, reconciliation, and contextual peacebuilding practices.



- ii. **Ubuntu Circle Dialogues:** Operationalizes the relational and restorative justice elements by fostering inclusive, participatory dialogue rooted in the ethic of *Ubuntu*. In practice, *Ubuntu* Circle Dialogues create safe communal spaces where conflicting parties gather to share stories, express grievances, and collectively explore pathways to reconciliation. Facilitated by trained church leaders, these circles emphasize deep listening, mutual recognition, and consensus-building drawing on African traditions of communal decision-making and restorative engagement. Their aim is not only to resolve immediate disputes but also to transform relationships, rebuild trust, and reaffirm the interconnectedness of community members amid shared ecological and social challenges.
- iii. **Ecological Covenant Programs:** Manifest the ecological stewardship dimension, integrating care for creation and environmental healing into the heart of peacebuilding activities. Ecological Covenant Programs involve the church and community members in joint environmental projects such as tree planting, soil restoration, and water management. These initiatives are not only practical interventions to restore degraded land but also serve as covenantal acts, a public, faith-based commitment to protect creation for present and future generations. By linking environmental restoration with conflict mediation, these programs reinforce the dual goals of justice and reconciliation, turning stewardship into a shared moral and relational responsibility within the Relational-Ecological Model (REM).
- iv. **Policy Advocacy:** Expresses the commitment to structural justice and the wider application of Christian ethical principles. This component ensures that the values of stewardship, *Ubuntu*, and just peace are embedded in local governance and policy frameworks, addressing root causes and systemic barriers to lasting peace.

In summary, each REM component is an applied expression of the integrative theory, ensuring that church-led mediation and environmental stewardship are both contextually relevant and theoretically robust. A summary table clarifies these linkages:

Table 1: REM component linked with Theories

REM Component	Theoretical Dimension(s) Expressed
Ecclesial Preparation	Christian Ethics, Relationality
<i>Ubuntu</i> Circle Dialogues	<i>Ubuntu</i> , Relationality, Just Peace
Ecological Covenant Programs	Stewardship, Ecological Ethics
Policy Advocacy	Justice, Structural Transformation, Christian Ethics

This theoretical synthesis provides the foundation for a genuinely integrated, action-oriented Christian ethical framework, one that is empirically and contextually suited to the complex challenges of resource conflict and environmental stewardship in Plateau State.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design to both inform the development and evaluate the effectiveness of the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) as an ethical tool for conflict mediation and environmental stewardship in Plateau State. Data were collected from six Local Government Areas, Barkin Ladi, Bassa, Bokkos, Mangu, Riyom, and Wase, selected for their recurrent farmer-herder conflicts and active church presence (Brottem & McDonnell, 2020; Higazi, 2016). Quantitative data comprised 384 structured questionnaire responses, analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis to assess community perceptions of the Church's peacebuilding role and readiness for the REM (Efobi, Adejumo & Kim, 2025). Qualitative data were drawn from 40 semi-structured interviews with clergy, lay leaders, elders, farmers, herders, and local officials, ensuring representation across gender, ethnicity, and conflict exposure (Adamu & Ugwueze, 2021). The combination of methods enabled triangulation of findings, enhancing validity (Simmons, 2020). Data collection and analysis were explicitly designed to document the ecological and



relational dimensions of conflict and to test the feasibility and relevance of the REM in real-world church and community contexts. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Literature Review

Understanding the roots and dynamics of resource conflict in Plateau State requires an interdisciplinary examination of the environmental, social, and ethical factors shaping both violence and peacebuilding. This literature review critically surveys key scholarly debates and empirical findings relevant to these dimensions, providing the foundation for the study's integrative theoretical approach.

Resource Conflict and Environmental Degradation in Nigeria

Resource-based conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt are the product of intertwined ecological, demographic, and socio-political factors (Higazi, 2016; Brottem & McDonnell, 2020). Rapid population growth, land pressure, and climate-induced desertification have intensified competition over agricultural and grazing land, particularly as herders from the north migrate southward in search of viable pastures (Efobi, Adejumo & Kim, 2025; UNEP, 2022). This migration disrupts longstanding land tenure systems and aggravates tensions between farming and herding communities, often resulting in violent clashes (Krause, 2019; Ochonu, 2014). The destruction of the environment—through overgrazing, deforestation, and soil degradation—not only reduces agricultural productivity but also erodes traditional mechanisms of cooperation and conflict resolution. Scholars agree that addressing these conflicts requires a holistic understanding of the environmental, historical, and social dynamics at play (Higazi, 2016; Brottem & McDonnell, 2020).

Limitations of Existing Peacebuilding Approaches

Conventional peacebuilding interventions in Nigeria have largely relied on state-centric solutions, such as security deployments, establishment of grazing reserves, and the creation of ad hoc reconciliation committees (Cambridge Core, 2024; United States Institute of Peace, 2021). These approaches, however, often lack legitimacy in the eyes of local communities and fail to address root causes (Simmons, 2020; Mfugale, 2026). Western models tend to emphasize individual rights and institutional reforms, which do not always resonate in communal societies where collective identity, ancestral land, and traditional authority play central roles (Murithi, 2006; Simmons, 2020). Moreover, state-led processes are frequently perceived as politicized or exclusionary, leading to limited community participation and the persistence of grievances (Krause, 2019; Cambridge Core, 2024). There is increasing scholarly consensus that peacebuilding in such contexts must be locally rooted, participatory, and attentive to cultural and moral dimensions, rather than imposed from above (Murithi, 2006; Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012).

Christian Ethics and Peacebuilding

The potential of religious actors, especially the Christian Church, to contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation in Nigeria is well documented (Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012; Ojeifo, 2022). Christian ethical frameworks, particularly the doctrine of stewardship, emphasize humanity's responsibility to care for both creation and neighbor, linking environmental ethics to social justice (Habel & Trudinger, 2008; Bouma-Prediger, 2020). The African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which centers on relationality, interconnectedness, and restorative justice, provides a culturally resonant foundation for community healing and conflict mediation (Murithi, 2006; Murove, 2009). The Just Peace tradition in Christian theology further integrates nonviolence, justice, and reconciliation, emphasizing proactive engagement in transforming unjust relationships and structures (Stassen, 2008; Little, 2022). Despite these rich resources, the Church's peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria have often been fragmented, limited by lack of training, institutional inertia, and insufficient integration of ecological concerns into ministry and advocacy (Wilson Center, 2023; Adamu & Ugwueze, 2021).



The Relational-Ecological Model (REM) in Context

The Relational-Ecological Model (REM) emerges in response to calls for integrated, contextually grounded frameworks that empower faith actors to address both the relational and environmental dimensions of conflict (Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012; Ojeifo, 2022). By synthesizing Christian stewardship, *Ubuntu*, and Just Peace, the REM provides both a normative foundation and a practical guide for church-led mediation and environmental stewardship. This model seeks to operationalize core virtues, care for creation, communal harmony, and justice, in ways that are both theologically robust and sensitive to local realities (Habel & Trudinger, 2008; Nwankwo & Adebayo, 2023; Murithi, 2006). Empirical evidence from Plateau State underscores the Church's unique legitimacy and convening power, but also highlights the need for structured frameworks and capacity-building to translate moral authority into effective action (Wilson Center, 2023; Adamu & Ugwueze, 2021). The REM thus stands as a promising innovation that bridges the gap between scholarly theory and practical peacebuilding, offering a replicable paradigm for faith-based engagement in resource conflict zones.

Findings

The findings of this study directly inform the development and evaluation of the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) as a Christian ethical tool for mediating resource conflicts and promoting environmental stewardship in Plateau State.

Table 2: Themes Emerging from the Qualitative Interviews

Theme	Representative Findings	Interpretation	REM Component
Trust in the Church	Church viewed as the most trusted institution	Church possesses significant moral legitimacy	Ecclesial Preparation
Limited Church Involvement	Church rarely participates directly in mediation	Institutional capacity needs strengthening	Ecclesial Preparation
Ecological Drivers of Conflict	Land degradation, shrinking grazing routes, declining soil fertility	Climate change contributes significantly to conflict	Ecological Covenant Programmes
Breakdown of Relationships	Loss of trust between farming and herding communities	Conflict is relational as well as environmental	<i>Ubuntu</i> Circle Dialogues
Desire for Faith-Based Mediation	Communities expressed willingness to engage in Church-led dialogue	High acceptance of REM	<i>Ubuntu</i> Circle Dialogues
Institutional Challenges	Lack of training, funding, and formal mediation structures	Church requires institutional strengthening	Policy Advocacy
Environmental Stewardship	Participants support integrating environmental restoration with peacebuilding	Stewardship enhances sustainable peace	Ecological Covenant Programmes
Policy Reform	Calls for equitable land governance and collaboration with government	Structural justice is necessary for long-term peace	Policy Advocacy



SOURCE: Field Survey, June, 2026

Community Trust and the Role of the Church

Survey data from 384 respondents across the six sampled Local Government Areas revealed that 78% identified the Church as the most trusted institution in their communities. This finding aligns with prior scholarship, which has repeatedly documented the Church's unique social capital and moral authority in Nigeria's Middle Belt (Wilson Center, 2023). Respondents ranked the Church above local government, traditional rulers, security agencies, and non-governmental organizations in terms of trustworthiness and potential to mediate conflict. Notably, the Church's trust advantage was consistent across diverse ethnic, religious, and gender categories, confirming its cross-cutting legitimacy. However, only 34% of respondents had witnessed or participated in any active Church intervention in land or resource disputes. Interview data corroborated these findings, with many community members expressing disappointment that Church leaders, despite their moral standing, were often absent from direct mediation processes. This gap between institutional trust and actual engagement reflects both a missed opportunity and a mandate for the Church to assume a more proactive peacebuilding role (Adamu & Ugwueze, 2021).

Readiness for REM Implementation

The data further highlight a widespread readiness within local communities for the operationalization of the Relational-Ecological Model (REM). An overwhelming 91% of survey respondents affirmed that the Church should play a central role in mediating farmer-herder and other resource-based conflicts. Qualitative interviews provided deeper insight, revealing that both laity and clergy view the Church as uniquely positioned to convene dialogues grounded in shared values and moral principles. Additionally, 83% of respondents stated they would be willing to participate in peace dialogues or programs facilitated by the Church, indicating not only acceptance but active buy-in for faith-based approaches. Interviewees cited the Church's ability to bridge ethnic and social divides and to promote reconciliation as core strengths. These findings validate the REM's foundational premise: that the Church possesses the legitimacy, convening power, and latent support required to implement an integrated ethical framework for peacebuilding (Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012; Murithi, 2006).

Conflict Dynamics and Model Relevance

The qualitative phase of the study, comprising 40 in-depth interviews, revealed nuanced understandings of the conflict's underlying drivers among both church leaders and community elders. Participants consistently identified ecological degradation, such as depleted grazing corridors and declining soil fertility, as root causes intensifying land competition (Brottem & McDonnell, 2020; Higazi, 2016). Interviewees also highlighted the erosion of traditional land tenure systems and the breakdown of intercommunity trust as significant contributors to violence. Particularly striking was the recognition among both farmers and herders that resource conflict is not merely a struggle for land but reflects broader crises of identity, belonging, and justice. Many respondents called for peacebuilding approaches that move beyond surface-level negotiations to address the moral and ecological wounds opened by repeated cycles of violence. This aligns with the REM's integrated design, which explicitly links ethical, relational, and environmental dimensions and provides practical pathways, such as Ubuntu Circle Dialogues and Ecological Covenant Programs, for holistic restoration (Murithi, 2006; Nwankwo & Adebayo, 2023).



Institutional Barriers

While community support for Church-led mediation is robust, the research identified several institutional barriers that impede effective engagement. Interviewed clergy and church administrators reported limited training in conflict mediation and a lack of structured guidance on integrating environmental stewardship into their ministries (Ojeifo, 2022). Some expressed concerns that open involvement in resource disputes could exacerbate tensions or politicize the Church's role. Others cited practical challenges, including insufficient funding, poor coordination with local authorities, and competing programmatic priorities. Furthermore, analysis of church curricula revealed that environmental ethics and stewardship are still peripheral topics in most theological education programs (Efobi, Adejumo & Kim, 2025). Nevertheless, both clergy and laity expressed openness to capacity-building initiatives and to new frameworks such as the REM. The data suggest that with appropriate training, resources, and structured protocols, the Church could overcome these barriers and realize its peacebuilding potential at scale.

Summary

Overall, the data demonstrate both the need for and the feasibility of implementing the REM as a unified, contextually grounded model for church-led mediation and stewardship in Plateau State. The convergence of high community trust, readiness for faith-based dialogue, and recognition of the ethical dimensions of conflict validates the REM's theoretical and practical relevance.

Table 3: Alignment Between Findings and the REM

Empirical Finding	Ethical Principle	REM Component
High institutional trust	Christian Stewardship	Ecclesial Preparation
Community readiness	<i>Ubuntu</i>	<i>Ubuntu</i> Circle Dialogues
Environmental degradation	Stewardship	Ecological Covenant Programmes
Weak institutional capacity	Just Peace	Policy Advocacy
Demand for collaborative mediation	<i>Ubuntu</i> + Just Peace	<i>Ubuntu</i> Circle Dialogues

SOURCE: Field Survey, June, 2026

Discussion

This study set out to develop and evaluate the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) as a Christian ethical tool for mediating resource conflicts and promoting environmental stewardship in Plateau State, Nigeria. The findings provide compelling evidence for both the necessity and feasibility of this framework, while also illuminating the complexities of operationalizing faith-based models in conflict-prone environments.

Bridging the Trust–Engagement Gap

The evidence from this research underscores the complex reality that, while the Church in Plateau State enjoys exceptionally high levels of trust among local populations, a finding corroborated by previous studies on religious legitimacy in sub-Saharan Africa (Wilson Center, 2023; Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012), this trust does not automatically translate into active engagement in conflict mediation. The 34% rate of observed Church-led intervention is emblematic of what Kadayifci-Orellana (2020) terms the “paradox of religious legitimacy,” wherein religious institutions are both highly esteemed and structurally constrained. In the context of Plateau State,



this gap is not simply a matter of willingness but of institutional preparedness, capacity, and theological clarity. The introduction of the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) is significant because it provides a concrete, contextually grounded, and theologically robust mechanism for converting moral authority into practical peacebuilding. By equipping clergy and lay leaders with structured tools and protocols, the REM moves the Church from a passive, symbolic presence to an active, strategic actor in community reconciliation and ecological restoration. This finding supports Lederach's (1997) argument that sustainable peace requires the “mobilization of indigenous resources and institutions,” rather than reliance on external or state-centric interventions.

The Case for an Integrated Ethical Framework

The research demonstrates that the causes and consequences of resource conflict in Plateau State are deeply intertwined with ecological degradation, the erosion of traditional land tenure, shifting demographic pressures, and the fracturing of social trust (Brottem & McDonnell, 2020; Higazi, 2016). Attempts to resolve these conflicts through purely legalistic, economic, or security-based interventions have proven inadequate, as they fail to address the underlying relational and moral ruptures within and between communities (Simmons, 2020; Mfugale, 2026). The REM's integration of Stewardship, *Ubuntu*, and Just Peace is therefore not only theoretically sound but also empirically validated by the data. Stewardship provides a theological imperative for environmental care and justice, *Ubuntu* grounds peacebuilding in African relational ethics, and Just Peace offers a framework for proactive, restorative justice (Habel & Trudinger, 2008; Murithi, 2006; Stassen, 2008). The REM is thus positioned as a holistic ethical model that connects the spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions of peace—answering calls in the literature for faith-based frameworks that are both doctrinally coherent and practically effective (Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012; Nwankwo & Adebayo, 2023).

Community Readiness and Practical Feasibility

The high rates of community readiness for REM implementation, 91% support for Church involvement and 83% willingness to participate in REM-based program, reflect a profound openness to faith-based models that are participatory and value-driven. Interview data revealed that both clergy and laity perceive the Church as uniquely capable of bridging ethnic, religious, and generational divides through shared moral narratives and inclusive dialogue. This finding echoes Lederach's (1997) emphasis on the importance of “moral imagination” and participatory processes in peacebuilding. The REM's participatory components, such as *Ubuntu* Circle Dialogues and Ecological Covenant Programs, are specifically designed to operationalize these insights, creating platforms where communities can collectively reimagine relationships with each other and the land. This participatory approach is grounded in best practices identified by Murithi (2006) and Simmons (2020), who argue that sustainable peace emerges from locally owned, dialogical, and virtue-based engagement.

Addressing Institutional Barriers

Despite the strong foundation of trust and readiness, the study identifies significant institutional barriers that must be strategically addressed to realize the REM's potential. These include limited training in conflict mediation, peripheral treatment of environmental stewardship in theological curricula, apprehensions about politicization, resource constraints, and the absence of formalized protocols for Church engagement in land disputes (Ojeifo, 2022; Efobi, Adejumo & Kim, 2025).



The literature suggests that overcoming such barriers requires multi-level interventions: integrating environmental and peacebuilding modules into seminary and continuing education programs (Gitau, Kaoma & Mugambi, 2012), establishing clear guidelines for Church mediation, and fostering partnerships with local authorities and civil society (Adamu & Ugwueze, 2021). The readiness of both clergy and laity to embrace capacity-building and new frameworks indicates that, with targeted investment and institutional reform, the Church can overcome these constraints and sustainably scale the REM across Plateau State and similar contexts.

Contribution to Scholarship and Practice

By empirically developing and evaluating the REM, this study makes a substantive contribution to both academic literature and practical peacebuilding. It demonstrates that Christian ethics, when operationalized in dialogue with indigenous African values and grounded in empirical realities, can provide a robust and replicable framework for mediating resource conflicts and promoting environmental stewardship (Mfugale, 2026; Nwankwo & Adebayo, 2023; Murithi, 2006). The REM bridges the gap between theological ideals and real-world application, offering a paradigm that is both normative and actionable. This aligns with recent calls in peace studies and religious ethics for context-sensitive, virtue-based, and participatory approaches to conflict transformation (Jenkins, 2008; Simmons, 2020). The research thus not only advances scholarly understanding of faith-based peacebuilding but also equips practitioners, policymakers, and religious leaders with a tested, evidence-based model for fostering just, sustainable, and reconciled communities.

Study Limitations

The present study provides a detailed Christian ethical framework aimed at addressing resource conflicts and fostering environmental stewardship within Plateau State. Nonetheless, several significant limitations warrant consideration. Firstly, the research was confined to six Local Government Areas experiencing conflict in Plateau State, suggesting that the findings may not be universally applicable to other regions characterized by diverse cultural, ecological, or religious contexts. Secondly, although the mixed-methods approach yielded important insights, the quantitative data predominantly reflected the perceptions and experiences of the respondents rather than evaluating the long-term efficacy of the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) in practical situations. Thirdly, the investigation primarily focused on Christian ethical perspectives, particularly Stewardship, *Ubuntu*, and Just Peace, thus failing to adequately address the contributions of Islamic or other indigenous religious ethical frameworks in the context of conflict resolution. Lastly, given that the REM is a newly formulated model, it has only undergone preliminary examination in applied environments. Extended studies will be necessary to ascertain its effectiveness across varying conflict contexts. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the significance of the study; rather, they underscore critical areas for further scholarly inquiry.

Future Research

Subsequent research should endeavor to broaden and refine the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) through extensive empirical testing and comparative analysis. Longitudinal studies are crucial for evaluating the model's performance over time in mitigating resource conflicts and enhancing environmental stewardship within both ecclesiastical and community contexts. Comparative investigations across other states in Nigeria's Middle Belt, as well as in diverse African settings, would elucidate the model's adaptability and applicability. Furthermore, additional studies should explore interfaith applications of the REM by incorporating Islamic and



indigenous ethical perspectives, thereby developing more inclusive faith-based strategies for peacebuilding in heterogeneous religious communities. It is also recommended that researchers employ advanced analytical techniques, such as structural equation modeling and participatory action research, to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between stewardship, *Ubuntu*, Just Peace, and sustainable peace outcomes. Finally, policy-oriented studies that explore the integration of the REM into church structures, theological education, local peace initiatives, and governmental conflict resolution frameworks would generate essential evidence to support the model as a viable strategy for achieving climate justice, promoting environmental stewardship, and fostering enduring peace in Nigeria and beyond.

Conclusion

This study set out to develop and evaluate the Relational-Ecological Model (REM) as a Christian ethical framework for mediating resource conflicts and promoting environmental stewardship in Plateau State, Nigeria. Through a robust mixed-methods approach, the research has demonstrated that the REM is both theoretically grounded and empirically validated, with significant potential to transform the Church's role in peacebuilding and ecological justice.

The findings affirm that while the Church commands exceptional trust across diverse communities, this moral authority has yet to be fully mobilized for conflict mediation, largely due to institutional barriers and a lack of structured, contextually relevant frameworks. By synthesizing the virtues of Stewardship, *Ubuntu*, and Just Peace, the REM bridges this gap, offering a holistic model that addresses the interconnected ecological, relational, and moral dimensions of resource conflict. The model's participatory design and grounding in local values ensure both legitimacy and practical feasibility, as evidenced by the overwhelming community support for church-led initiatives and the willingness of clergy and laity to embrace new approaches.

Furthermore, this research contributes to academic scholarship by operationalizing Christian and African ethical traditions in a manner responsive to both empirical realities and normative ideals. The REM stands as a replicable paradigm for faith-based peacebuilding in contexts marked by resource scarcity, institutional distrust, and complex social identities. Its successful development and initial evaluation in Plateau State offer a template for similar interventions elsewhere in Nigeria and across the region.

Looking forward, the study recommends targeted investments in capacity-building, curricular reform, and structured protocols to enable the Church to fully realize its peacebuilding potential. Policymakers, religious leaders, and scholars are urged to consider the REM not as a static framework but as a dynamic model adaptable to scale. Continued research and iterative field testing will be essential to refining the REM, ensuring its relevance across diverse conflict environments, and advancing interdisciplinary collaboration in the pursuit of just and sustainable peace.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis presented in this study, the following recommendations are advanced to strengthen church-led peacebuilding and environmental stewardship in Plateau State and similar conflict-affected regions:



Churches should invest in systematic training for clergy and lay leaders in conflict mediation, environmental stewardship, and the application of the Relational-Ecological Model (REM). Partnerships with academic institutions and peacebuilding organizations can facilitate curriculum development and ongoing support.

Seminaries and religious training institutes should incorporate environmental ethics and stewardship, grounded in the Integrative Relational-Ecological Christian Ethical Theory, into their curricula. This will ensure that future church leaders are equipped to address both the relational and ecological dimensions of conflict.

Churches are encouraged to adopt *Ubuntu* Circle Dialogues as a regular practice for community engagement and conflict resolution. These participatory forums should be inclusive, drawing on the diversity of affected communities to foster mutual understanding and restorative justice.

Faith communities should initiate and expand collaborative environmental projects, such as reforestation, soil restoration, and water management, as integral components of peacebuilding. These programs should be contextually adapted and designed to reinforce both justice and reconciliation.

Churches and faith-based organizations should actively engage with policymakers to advocate for land tenure reforms, equitable resource distribution, and the institutionalization of ethical frameworks in governance. The REM provides a tested model to inform policy dialogue at the local and regional levels.

Further empirical research is recommended to refine and adapt the REM in diverse contexts. Longitudinal studies and participatory action research can provide deeper insights into best practices and challenges, ensuring the models relevance and effectiveness over time.

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