

Unrecognized, Unheard, Unengaged: The Relational Crisis Behind Church Conflicts

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Abstract: The church, though a spiritual entity, is not immune to conflict because it is also a human organization that involves social interaction. Many studies into the causes of church conflict have focused on theology, leadership style, or administrative structures, yet the deeper causes often lie in unmet relational needs and neglect of the informal social dynamics of the church. Using Human Relations Theory (HRT) as a theoretical framework, this work argues that church conflicts often emerge from people feeling unrecognized, unheard, and unengaged. This paper explores how constructing good interpersonal relationships, recognizing congregants, fostering informal networks, attending to the primordial sentiments of members, and listening to members' opinions can increase church effectiveness and also reduce unwanted and unnecessary conflicts. It further integrates organizational psychology with biblical theology to show that emotional recognition, active listening, participation, and relational bonding are not mere social science insights but are also deeply rooted in Christian values. Practical recommendations are offered for faith communities seeking to cultivate healthier, more peaceful relational environments. The article employed both the exploratory and analytical approaches in understanding nature and solutions to church conflicts.

Keywords: Church Conflict; Unrecognized; Unheard and Unengaged

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Introduction

Conflict is part of human relationships and religious organizations are not exempt from it. The Church, as a human organization with multiple relationship levels, has experienced conflict from the beginning. The bible provides several examples of conflict among God's children. Church conflicts have, in fact, shaped Christian history, influenced theology, practice, and relationships among different Christian groups. Though its fundamental missions revolve around faith and community, the dynamic that propels the church is not immune to complexities of human interaction, which include potential conflict. Resultantly, any efforts to understand the various factors that contribute to or mitigate conflict within the church is crucial for fostering healthy and productive environments and also the accomplishment of the larger purpose and mandate of the church which is the proclamation of the gospel and the building of members to be like Jesus.

Conflict in the Church can be caused by many factors, which include differences in doctrine and belief, personality clashes, differences in worship styles, disagreements over financial management, conflicting views on church missions, leadership, and leadership styles. Church conflicts are rarely sudden eruptions. They usually simmer beneath the surface, growing quietly through strained relationships, emotional dissatisfaction, and poor interpersonal engagement.² While theological disagreements may receive the most attention, the human side of ministry, like emotional needs, communication quality, and relational warmth, often play more decisive roles in creating or preventing conflict.

The Human Relations Theory (HRT) provides a powerful lens for understanding these dynamics. Emerging from organizational psychology, Human Relations Theory emphasizes the importance of emotions, informal relationships, motivation, communication, and participatory structures in shaping group behavior.³ Applying this theory to church life reveals that many

² I. S. Obiwulu, "Doctrinal divisions and church fragmentation in Pentecostal ministries in Nigeria," *International Journal of African Theological Studies* 13, no. 1 (2021): 25–39.

³ I. Eze, G. Adebayo, "Organizational culture and conflict resolution in Nigerian churches," *Journal of African Ecclesiastical Studies* 5, no. 4 (2018):

conflicts arise because individuals feel unrecognized, unheard, and unengaged within the faith community. Unfortunately, this is an area that is often neglected by churches and their leaders. Many times, the spiritual side and the strict organizational structure of the church are rated well at the expense of the informal structure. Yet, the theory resonates with the scripture. The Bible presents God as deeply relational, emphasizing listening, mutual care, honor, compassion, and reconciliation. Therefore, integrating Human Relation theory with biblical theology provides a holistic explanation for human dimensions of church conflict and a spiritually grounded roadmap for healing. The need to strike a balance between the spiritual, organizational, and the informal sides of the church therefore becomes imperative for the health and the ministries of the church

This article uncovers the relational crisis behind church conflicts and offers practical, theory-based solutions suitable for clergy, ministry leaders, conflict mediators, and church management systems. It presents the Human Relation Theory as appropriate for mitigating against many types of conflict in the church, emphasizing the need for members' engagement in the life of the church, placing attention on the primordial interest of congregants, and prioritizing inclusivity as a church management style. This article argues that relational deficiencies sit at the heart of numerous church conflicts and that both organizational theory and Christian theology affirm the significance of relational well-being. Applying the theory to the church helps not only with conflict prevention and resolution, but also in peace- building. It offers recommendations on how to use the Human Relation Theory to resolve conflicts, deepen listening culture, increase participation and inclusion, and strengthen informal relations among church members.

Human Relations Theory in Perspective

Human Relations Theory originated in organizational studies as a response to more mechanistic, overly structural, or

classical management theories. The proponents of this theory include Elton Mayo (Known as the father of human relations movement), Douglas McGregor, Abraham Maslow, Fredrick Herzberg and Mary Parker Follet. It emphasizes that people are not just inputs or "cogs" in the organizational process, but they have social, emotional, and psychological requirements, and meeting these requirements, constructing good interpersonal relationships, recognizing people, fostering informal networks, and listening to employees increase organizational effectiveness and reduce unwanted outcomes like conflict.⁴ The imperative of this to the church is that the theory is based on the argument that conflict often arises not only over theological or doctrinal matters or even issues of official administration, but as a result of unmet relational needs, inadequate communication, or the neglect of informal social dynamics.

Human Relations Theory stipulates that care, communication, recognition, trust and participatory leadership will help in reducing conflict. Leaders will create environments where people are heard, valued, and belong to a relational whole. For the congregational setting like the church; pastoral staff, elders, deacons, volunteers, and Church members are all part of that relational whole. If leadership is not sensitive to social or emotional cues (e.g. people feeling left out, unvalued, or unheard), frustration builds, there's much miscommunication, and conflict arises.⁵

Applying Human Relations Theory to the management of conflict means paying attention to the 'soft sides' of Church life like the pastoral care, inclusion in decision-making, the recognition of persons, mentoring, viewing conflict as opportunity for growth rather than just something to suppress. It further suggests that policies or conflict resolution systems are more successful if they include relationally sensitive practices such as small group dialogue,

⁴ C. Nwankwo, "Participatory governance and conflict mitigation in Nigerian churches," *Journal of Church Management and Leadership* 12, no. 1 (2018): 64–78.

⁵ C. Okafor, A. Obiefuna, "Communication, leadership, and conflict resolution in Nigerian religious organisations," *Journal of Church and Society* 14, no. 2 (2020): 201–19.

pastoral listening, peer reconciliation, feedback loops in a structured form, alongside formal disciplinary or hierarchical processes.⁶

Human Relations Theory could guide research questions such as how do Church members perceive relational treatment from leaders? Are certain groups (e.g. youth members, women, volunteers) feeling their relational or emotional needs are being overlooked? How do unwritten networks (friendships, family ties, mentorship) influence conflict emergence or resolution?⁷ In practice of conflict management, the theory suggests interventions like leadership development in interpersonal competence, creating space for informal exchange, feedback, recognition of volunteer contributions, conflict mediation that is sensitive to people and relations as well as the conflict itself.⁸

Among the strengths of this theory is that it focuses on relational, psychological and emotional dimensions too easily overlooked in more directly structural or rule-oriented models of conflict. It emphasizes that relationships count, individuals count, and conflict generally tends to be at the relational level. However, it is limited in that it can undermine structural issues (such as unbalanced power, resource deficits, institutional inequalities) also underpinning conflict. It can also lead to overstating harmony at the expense of pursuing systemic injustice or dupery and it can be culturally located.⁹ However, relational expectations varies across cultures, so that relational sensitivity in Ibadan, Nigeria can vary from other places.

Human Relations Theory stressed that people are not just workers; they are emotional beings whose productivity and behavior are shaped by emotional and relational needs, and that people need affirmation, belonging, respect, and acknowledgment. It is also

⁶ L. R. Pondy, "Organizational conflict: Concepts and models," in W. A. Pasmore & R. W. Woodman (eds.), *Research in organizational change and development*, Vol. 26 (Emerald Publishing, 2018), 135–62.

⁷ A. Oluwaseun, "Congregational governance and pastoral leadership in Nigerian Baptist churches," *African Journal of Theology* 38, no. 1 (2019): 67–85.

⁸ S. P. Robbins, T. A. Judge, *Organizational behavior*, 18th ed. (Pearson, 2018).

⁹ H. Tajfel, J. C. Turner, "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior," in S. Worchel, W. G. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Nelson-Hall, 1986), 7-24

about informal relationships that emphasize unspoken networks and friendships, influence decisions, morale, and conflict patterns. It further asserts that trust grows where communication is open and honest, and conflict thrives where communication is poor. Participation and involvement are also key to the idea of human relation theory. People support what they help to create. Inclusive decision-making builds ownership and reduces resistance. Churches, though spiritual in nature, still function as social systems.¹⁰ When these human needs are neglected, relational cracks begin to appear, cracks that often widen into conflicts. Critical issues addressed by the theory in relation to the church can be categorised into three and they are as follows;

Unrecognised: The Pain of Neglected Contributions

Recognition is not merely courtesy, it is a deep human need. In churches where most work is voluntary and sacrificial, recognition carries even more emotional weight. Many conflicts can be traced to people who feel their contributions are ignored, their sacrifices are overlooked, their identity is unappreciated, and their roles are taken for granted. When recognition is absent, emotional withdrawal begins. Members may reduce participation, grumble privately, join factions, or oppose leadership decisions.¹¹ Human Relation Theory teaches that affirmation boosts morale, strengthens loyalty, and builds a sense of belonging. Its absence produces the opposite. A choir member who serves faithfully yet receives no encouragement, or a ministry leader never acknowledged for years of work, may eventually interpret silence as rejection and conflict finds fertile ground.

¹⁰ K. W. Thomas, "Conflict and negotiation processes in organizations," in M. D. Dunnette, L. M. Hough (eds.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology. Consulting Psychologists Press*, Vol. 3 (1992), 651–717.

¹¹ M. Weber, *The theory of social and economic organization*, ed. T. Parsons (1947).

Unheard: The Strain of Poor Communication

Poor communication is one of the most persistent seeds of church conflict. Human Relation Theory insists that communication is the lifeblood of every healthy organization. Members feel unheard when their opinions are dismissed, leadership provides no channels for feedback, decisions are announced without consultation, complaints are ignored, leaders “talk at” people but seldom listen. In such contexts, rumors arise to fill the information vacuum, Suspicion grows and narratives form. Members begin to interpret even innocent actions as threats.¹² Once people feel unheard, they often conclude: “My voice does not matter.” That conclusion weakens unity and becomes a catalyst for serious conflict.

Unengaged: The Distance Created by Exclusion

Engagement is more than attendance. It is about participation, involvement, and meaningful inclusion. Human Relation Theory teaches that people trust and support what they help to shape.¹³ Church members become unengaged when key decisions are centralized in a small group, younger members are excluded from leadership, women are sidelined from strategic conversations, committees operate like closed societies, new members struggle to integrate, ministries are dominated by elites or long-time loyalists. There are churches with caucuses at the top leadership that determine who becomes a church officer and who will not. They are the powerful stakeholders who in a few cases control the pastor and limit the participation of others in the life of the church. Unengaged members become spectators rather than stakeholders. Spectators criticise more easily than they contribute. They develop apathy, resentment, or passive resistance. This

¹² A. E. Randel et al., “Inclusive Leadership: Realizing Positive Outcomes Through Belongingness and Being Valued for Uniqueness,” *Human Resource Management Review* 28, no. 2 (2018): 190–203, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2017.07.002>.

¹³ B. Weiner, “The legacy of an attribution approach to motivation and emotion: A no-crisis zone,” *Motivation Science* 4, no. 1 (2018): 4–14, <https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000082>.

disengagement creates relational distance that later erupts into conflict.

The Invisible Layer: Informal Relationships as Conflict Triggers

Human Relations Theory teaches that organizations have two structures: formal structure that emphasizes positions, hierarchy, and procedures; and informal structure that prioritizes friendships, alliances, influence circles, cultural habits, and hidden power blocs.¹⁴ Most church leaders focus on formal structures only. But conflicts often originate in the informal structure where we have choir factions, family-based influence blocs, friendship groups, age clusters, tribal or ethnic affinity groups, ministry “cliques”, and mentor–protégé alliances. When informal groups feel threatened or excluded, they often respond with subtle resistance which later becomes open conflict. Understanding informal systems is crucial for resolving and preventing conflicts.

How then do these relational crises become open conflicts? Church conflict rarely comes from one issue. Rather, it builds through stages of lack of recognition, leading to resentment: lack of being heard, producing mistrust; and lack of engagement, alienating people from the life of the church. These produce division, hostility, factionalism, and leadership challenges. Mistrust becomes gossip. Gossip becomes factions, and factions become fights. Relational wounds left untreated eventually manifest as spiritual and organizational crises.

Theological Reflection: Biblical Foundation for Human Relations Theory

The Bible clearly sets out the principles of the Human theory as precepts which every Christian should follow. For example, there is the biblical mandate for recognition. This is because the Scripture underscores honoring every member of the faith community. Paul

¹⁴ C. Ekeopara, “Inclusivity and Diversity in African Christian Leadership,” *International Journal of African Theology* 6, no. 1 (2018): 54–72.

teaches that the “weaker members” deserve greater honor, specifically to prevent divisions (1 Cor. 12:22–25). The writer of Hebrews affirms that God does not overlook the labor of His people (Heb. 6:10). Such texts parallel Human Relations Theory’s emphasis on acknowledging contributions to prevent resentment and conflict. The Bible also prioritizes the acts of listening and mutual communication. The Bible consistently affirms active listening as a relational discipline. James instructs believers to be “quick to hear” (James 1:19). Proverbs warns that answering before listening is folly (Prov. 18:13). In Acts 6:1–7, the apostles addressed ethnic tensions by listening to complaints and restructuring ministry. This early church narrative demonstrates that conflict is resolved not by spiritual authority alone, but by listening and institutional responsiveness which is the hallmark of Human Relations Theory.

There is also a biblical vision of engagement and participation. The scripture presents the church as a body in which every member actively contributes (1 Cor. 12:4–7). Ephesians 4:16 teaches that the body grows “as each part does its work.” Hence, Christian participation in church life is not optional. Therefore, churches that centralize ministry contradict the New Testament model, where leadership equips the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11–12). This aligns with Human Relation Theory’s principle that engagement fosters unity, purpose, and organizational health.

The Bible also affirms a direct relationship between faith Community, Fellowship, informal relationships, and the good health of the church. Acts 2:42–47 shows that informal fellowship (shared meals, mutual care, and hospitality) was essential to the early church’s strength. Philippians 2:1–4 emphasizes relational humility, unity, and mutual concern. John 13:34–35 positions love as the distinguishing mark of Christian identity. These biblical foundations mirror Human Relations Theory’s insight that informal relationships are powerful forces shaping organizational harmony.

How then can one practically integrate Human Relations Theory and theological reflection for church conflict prevention? A combined evaluation of Human Relations Theory and biblical teaching suggests several practical recommendations. Firstly, the church should institutionalize recognition where appreciation services are held, people’s efforts are publicly acknowledged, and inclusive leadership is made an essential part of church life. The

church must also be intentional about creating constructive listening structures where suggestion systems, conflict mediation committees, and transparent communication channels have been established. Additionally, the church should strive as towards having an engagement-driven leadership where delegation of ministry tasks, empowerment of youth and women, and participatory decision-making system are entrenched. Lastly, there should be a system that monitors informal dynamics.¹⁵ This will help in fostering cross-group fellowship, intentional relationship-building, and leadership presence in all relational clusters. The theory and theology affirm that the church is most peaceful when relationships are nurtured intentionally.

This study has demonstrated that many church conflicts stem not from doctrinal differences, but from relational breakdowns. The triad of feeling unrecognized, unheard, and/or unengaged provides a powerful analytical lens for understanding tensions within the church. Human Relations Theory offers a robust framework for analyzing these relational deficits, while scripture provides theological affirmation for the same principles. Addressing relational needs is therefore not merely an administrative strategy, but an expression of Christian discipleship and community life.

Resolving Church Conflicts through Human Relations Principles

The need to set strategies for resolving church conflict is imperative for the health of the church and her gospel message. The church must be healthy for her to fulfil her divine purpose as conflict is inimical to the physical and spiritual growth of the church. Conflicts diminish the image of church, reduces her membership and financial strength, and has the tendency to make young believers lose faith. Conflict also shapes the way a church lives out and shares the gospel in a few key ways. First, it is a distraction to the ministry and message of the church. When conflicts and disagreement turns personal, they pull attention away from the core

¹⁵ C. N. Chukwuma, "Shepherd leadership and church health: A contextual study in rural Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Theology and Ministry* 12, no. 3 (2021): 89–105.

message and can split a congregation, making it harder for outsiders to see a unified witness.

Conflict erodes the credibility of the church and her message. The world watches how Christians show the love they preach to one another. Therefore, public splits, lawsuits, and social media spats portrays the church as hypocritical which negatively affect how people are receptive to the gospel message. Also, when conflicts go unresolved, members stop sharing openly, fearing judgment or further fighting. That silence stifles authentic discipleship and weakens the community's ability to model the love Christ calls for. To avoid stirring the pot, ministers sometimes avoid sharing hard truth of the gospel, or become uncomfortable preaching or teaching from some Bible passages, watering down the gospel. Lastly, constant tension drains emotional energy that could be spent on prayers, outreach and service. The church mission stalls, and the light that is supposed to shine outward dims. Unchecked conflict can turn the church's public face from a beacon of hope into a source of confusion, making it harder for the gospel message to be heard and believed.¹⁶

One of the main strategies that the church can adopt in resolving issues of conflict using the Human Relations Theory, is to consciously build a culture of appreciation.¹⁷ At the core of Human Relations Theory is the belief that individuals desire to feel valued, respected, and recognized. Elton Mayo's findings revealed that productivity and cooperation increase when people sense genuine concern and appreciation. In the church context, failure to recognize members' sacrifices, spiritual labor, and contributions often breeds resentment, withdrawal, and silent opposition; while appreciation improves the opportunity of members working together in unity and as co-laborers in God's vineyard. This is because a culture of appreciation affirms the intrinsic worth of individuals, reinforcing their sense of belonging within the faith community. When Church members feel seen and acknowledged, emotional tensions are reduced, and the likelihood of destructive conflict diminishes.

¹⁶ R. Cheong, *Conflict and reconciliation in the church: A practical guide for leaders* (Baker Academic, 2019).

¹⁷ M. L. Branson & J. F. Martinez, *Churches, cultures, and leadership: A practical theology of congregations and ethnicity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

Hence, appreciation can serve as a tool for recognizing human dignity

Appreciation can also serve as a tool for meeting emotional and relational needs.¹⁸ Human Relations Theory highlights emotional satisfaction as a key driver of positive organizational behavior. Conflicts frequently emerge when emotional needs such as affirmation, respect, and inclusion are consistently unmet. In churches, this may manifest as passive resistance, gossip, factionalization, or open confrontation. Intentional appreciation expressed through verbal affirmation, public acknowledgment, and private encouragement helps meet these emotional needs. By addressing feelings of neglect or invisibility, appreciation diffuses emotional pressure that often fuels interpersonal and group conflicts.

Appreciation also strengthens informal social systems. Human Relation Theory recognizes the power of informal social groups within organizations, and every church has these informal relationships. In churches, informal relationships often shape influence, loyalty, and conflict dynamics more than formal structures. Usually, conflicts first filters through these system. When these informal networks feel ignored or undervalued, they may become channels of opposition or dissent.¹⁹ A culture of appreciation engages these informal systems positively. Leaders who acknowledge relational contributions such as mentoring, peacemaking efforts, and behind-the-scenes service, strengthen trust and align informal groups with the church's mission, thereby reducing conflict escalation.

An important Catalyst for Open and Healthy Communication is good appreciation culture. Poor communication is a recurring cause of church conflict. Human Relations Theory posits that people communicate more openly in environments where they feel respected and valued. Appreciation fosters psychological safety, making it easier for members to express concerns without fear of dismissal or retaliation. In appreciative cultures, feedback is

¹⁸ Cheong, *Conflict and reconciliation in the church: A practical guide for leaders*.

¹⁹ K.O. Gangel & S.K. Canine, *Communication and conflict management in churches and Christian organizations* (Wipf and Stock, 2002).

received less defensively, misunderstandings are clarified earlier, and conflicts are addressed constructively rather than suppressed until they explode.

Appreciation has a direct relationship with Conflict Transformation. Rather than merely managing conflict, Human Relations Theory encourages transforming relationships. Appreciation shifts the focus from blame to understanding, from hierarchy to mutual respect, and from control to collaboration.²⁰ In church settings, this transformation aligns closely with Christian values of love, humility, and mutual edification. By embedding appreciation into leadership practices, worship life, and organizational culture, churches can transform potential conflicts into opportunities for growth, reconciliation, and strengthened communal bonds.

From a Human Relations perspective, building a culture of appreciation is not a superficial or optional practice but a foundational conflict building and conflict-resolution strategy. It addresses the relational roots of church conflict by meeting emotional needs, strengthening informal relationships, improving communication, and fostering a sense of shared dignity and belonging. When appreciation becomes normative, the church is better positioned to embody peace internally and witness reconciliation externally. Hence churches should institute a culture of public recognition for service, sending of personal thank-you messages to deserving members, celebration of ministry milestones and fair acknowledgment of all contributions

For African churches, public acknowledgement carries important social weight. When appreciation is not well distributed, or biasedly administered or politicized, it can deepen divisions. On the other hand, consistent and inclusive appreciation practices such as testimonies of service, communal thanksgiving and symbolic gestures of honor can restore broken relationships and also prevent conflict by fostering emotional security and collective identity.

²⁰ M. P. Follett, "Constructive conflict," in H. C. Metcalf (ed.), *Dynamic administration: The collected papers of Mary Parker Follett* (Harper & Row, 1925), 30-49.

Dependent Listening Practices is another important culture that churches should adopt as a peace building and conflict resolution strategy. This is because dependent listening practices and conflict resolution are Siamese twins to the Human Relations Theory. Dependent listening often described in Human Relations literature as empathetic, active, or supportive listening, is a vital relational practice for resolving conflict within organizations, including the Church. Human Relations Theory emphasizes that conflict frequently arises not merely from structural or doctrinal disagreements, but from breakdowns in communication, unmet emotional needs, and feelings of exclusion or marginalization. Dependent listening directly addresses these relational deficits.

From the standpoint of Human Relations Theory, dependent listening affirms the intrinsic worth of individuals by recognizing their need to be heard, understood, and taken seriously. Elton Mayo's foundational insights from the Hawthorne Studies revealed that workers' morale and cooperation improved significantly when management demonstrated interest in their perspectives and experiences.²¹ Applied to church contexts, this suggests that conflict often escalates when leaders fail to listen attentively to congregants, co-workers, or ministry partners, thereby intensifying feelings of neglect and alienation.²² It is possible for church leaders to unintentionally silence dissenting voices in an African church culture that emphasizes the structure of hierarchical authority. However, church leaders can enhance conflict prevention and resolution by creating spaces for dialogue, all-church meetings known as the Church in Conference in the Baptist denomination in Nigeria, and pastoral conversations that allow members to express concern without fear. Such practices defuse tension and also rebuild trust and relational bonds.

Dependent listening helps de-escalate conflict by fostering psychological safety. This is only when individuals perceive that their voices matter, defensiveness is reduced, and openness to dialogue increases. According to Douglas McGregor's Theory Y assumptions, people are naturally inclined toward cooperation and

²¹ E. C. Eze, "Rethinking church leadership theories in African ecclesiology," *African Journal of Practical Theology* 9, no. 2 (2020): 56–68.

²² Ibid.

responsibility when relational conditions such as trust and respectful communication are present. Dependent listening creates these conditions by shifting interactions from authoritarian monologues to participatory dialogue, thus transforming adversarial relationships into collaborative ones.²³

Moreover, dependent listening facilitates conflict resolution by uncovering underlying emotional and relational issues that surface-level disputes often conceal. Human Relations scholars argue that many organizational conflicts are symptomatic rather than substantive. Dependent listening culture makes it easy for the symptoms to be discovered early before it turns to a full blown sickness. Through attentive listening, leaders can identify unmet needs related to recognition, belonging, or fairness needs that, when ignored, manifest as resistance, resentment, or passive aggression.²⁴ In church conflicts, doctrinal or administrative disagreements may therefore mask deeper wounds caused by long-term communicative neglect.

Additionally, dependent listening reinforces mutual respect and restores relational bonds essential for community life. Chester Barnard emphasized that effective organizations depend on cooperation, which in turn relies on meaningful communication.²⁵ In ecclesial settings, listening becomes not merely a managerial skill but a moral and spiritual practice that reflects communal values such as compassion, humility, and shared discernment. By listening dependently, church leaders model relational maturity and invite conflicting parties into processes of reconciliation rather than domination.

To sum it up, dependent listening, as articulated within Human Relations Theory, serves as a powerful conflict-resolution mechanism by validating persons, reducing emotional tension, revealing hidden relational needs, and strengthening cooperative relationships. For the Church, cultivating intentional listening practices is not only organizationally prudent but also essential to sustaining peace, unity, and authentic community thereby serving

²³ P. Hersey, K. Blanchard, D. Johnson, *Management of organizational behavior: Leading human resources*, 10th Ed. (Pearson, 2013).

²⁴ Eze, "Rethinking church leadership theories in African ecclesiology."

²⁵ Ibid.

as a peace building tool. Therefore, every church need a regular feedback forum, an open-door leadership style, an anonymous suggestion channel, and a conflict mediation team trained to listen.

Increased participation and inclusion of church members in the life of the church is also imperative for peace building and effective conflict resolution in the church. This is because it is impossible to separate increasing participation and inclusion from the Human Relations Theory. The theory emphasizes that organizational harmony and effectiveness depend largely on the extent to which individuals feel involved, valued, and included in decision-making processes. In the context of church life, conflict often emerges when members are excluded from key decision making processes of the church, when they feel marginalized, or dominated by a few voices, particularly in leadership structures.²⁶ Increasing participation and inclusion therefore serves as a critical mechanism for addressing relational tensions and fostering peace within the church.

From a Human Relations perspective, participation satisfies fundamental psychological and social needs, including belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation, as articulated by Abraham Maslow.²⁷ When church members are invited to contribute to discussions, planning, and ministry decisions, they experience a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. This reduces feelings of alienation and resentment that often underlie church conflicts. Inclusive participation transforms members from passive recipients of decisions into active stakeholders in the church's mission, thereby strengthening relational bonds and mutual trust. This is particularly relevant to African churches where churches thrive on communal participation of groups like the choir, women's group, youth fellowship, elders' council, and other informal associations. Strengthening these participatory platforms enhances informal relationships and creates shared ownership of the church mission and projects. Conflicts are more likely to be addressed

²⁶ C. Eze, "Leadership and conflict management in Nigerian churches," *Nigerian Journal of Theological Studies* 19, no. 2 (2021): 88–104.

²⁷ E. M. Uka, "Conflict and ministry: The case for conflict resolution education in theological training," *African Journal of Pastoral Theology* 11, no. 4 (2022): 56–70.

collaboratively rather than confrontationally when members feel included.

Elton Mayo's insights further suggest that informal group dynamics significantly influence behavior and morale. In churches. Where participation is limited to formal leadership roles, informal groups may form around grievances, leading to polarization and factionalization. By intentionally broadening participation through consultative forums, ministry teams, and open dialogue platforms, church leadership can positively engage informal social networks rather than allow them to become sources of resistance and conflict. Inclusion thus becomes a preventive strategy against destructive informal alliances.

Moreover, participatory practices promote fairness and transparency, which are essential for conflict resolution. When members' understand how decisions are made and feel their perspectives are genuinely considered, even unpopular outcomes are more readily accepted. Human Relations Theory holds that perceived procedural justice often matters more than the decision itself²⁸. In church settings, inclusive processes reflect biblical principles of mutual submission and communal discernment, reinforcing both relational harmony and spiritual legitimacy.

Increased participation and inclusion also enhance communication quality as more voices are heard, misunderstandings are clarified, assumptions are challenged, and empathy is cultivated across diverse groups. This aligns with Human Relations principles that view conflict not merely as a structural problem but as a relational breakdown that can be healed through interaction and collaboration. By creating inclusive spaces where differences are acknowledged rather than suppressed, churches can transform conflict into opportunities for growth and reconciliation.

In sum, increasing participation and inclusion, as advocated by Human Relations Theory, addresses the relational roots of church conflict by meeting psychosocial needs, strengthening informal relationships, enhancing trust, and promoting shared

²⁸ K. Emerson, T. Nabatchi, *Collaborative governance regimes* (Georgetown University Press, 2015).

ownership. Such practices contribute to a healthier church environment where peace is sustained not by authority alone but by meaningful relational engagement. Hence, every church must broaden leadership representation, promote participatory decision-making, engage youths, women, and new members; and also learn to delegate tasks meaningfully, not symbolically if it must institute a peace building and conflict resolution mechanism.

All of the above points to the need to strengthen informal relationships within the church. This is because informal relationships serve as social capital that sustains unity and resilience during periods of tension, especially in many parts of Africa where communal identity, respect for elders, kinship ties, and social life are deeply embedded in cultural consciousness.²⁹ Churches in such environment should be sensitive to the informal relationships. This is because the breakdown of this level of relationships can be experienced as a profound personal and spiritual injury. In many African churches, shared meals, prayer groups, visitation practices, naming ceremonies, weddings, and funeral services are not merely cultural activities but relational spaces where trust is built. The emotional feelings attached to them by African congregants makes them a possible avenue for conflict. Many pastors have in fact been accused of failure in ministry because they are lacking in one or two of those pastoral assignments.

Therefore, neglecting these relational aspects of church ministry in an African church in favor of rigid structure weakens the church's conflict-handling and peace-building capacity. Strengthening the informal relationship therefore requires deliberate pastoral intention and attention to social life, cultural expression and relational rituals that reinforce belongingness and mutual care.

It is important for leaders of churches to come to terms with the truth that conflict prevention and resolution are not achieved only by doctrinal teaching and disciplinary measures. Instead, they require the cultivation of healthy informal relationships rooted in appreciation, active listening, participation and inclusion. This is

²⁹ A. Ukah, *The management of conflict in African churches: Structures, power, and negotiation* (Peter Lang, 2020).

why the Human Relations Theory opines that emotionally satisfied and relationally connected members are less prone to conflict and are more willing to pursue reconciliation. In the African church environment, this perspective agrees with both cultural values and biblical principles of fellowship (*koinonia*), mutual honor, and love. Thus, strengthening informal relationships becomes not only a managerial strategy but a theological and pastoral mandate. As a result, it is recommended that churches should make use of the small-group systems like the cell groups, mentoring, discipleship relationships, social events that build fellowship, and integrative ministry structures that break cliques to strengthen the informal relationships. When relationships are strengthened, conflicts diminish naturally.

Conclusion

Church conflicts cannot be fully addressed through doctrinal clarity or administrative restructuring alone. At their core, many conflicts are relational. When people feel unrecognized, unheard, and unengaged, their emotional wounds eventually surface as organizational crises.

Human Relations Theory reminds us that healing relationships is essential for sustaining ministry unity and peace and that a church that nurtures appreciation, listening, participation, and fellowship becomes not only conflict-resistant but spiritually flourishing.

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