

Conflict Resolution and the Autonomy of the Local Baptist Church: A Critical Review

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Abstract

One peculiar distinctiveness of the Baptists is the autonomous status of a local Baptist church from other churches and even higher authorities of the religious denomination. This paper reviews this church polity in tandem with conflict resolution mechanisms in a local church. Semi-structured interviews were used to determine how the polity affects resolving conflicts in a local church. Some available documents and literatures are reviewed and analysed in relation to the autonomy of a local Nigerian Baptist church and conflict resolution mechanisms. It is discovered that while the church polity has its benefits, there are some impediments it has against smooth conflict resolution mechanisms in the local church. Therefore, it is recommended that the Nigerian Baptist Convention, as a faith-based organisation, and churches cooperating with it should revisit the principle of autonomy of a local church. Responsible and regulated autonomy should be considered as total autonomy of a local church can lead to disorder and anarchy in the organisation.

Keywords: *autonomy of a local church, church polity, conflict resolution mechanisms, Nigerian Baptist Convention*

Introduction

Every organisation has its uniqueness. A local Baptist church is a religious organisation where people gather to worship God and fellowship with one another. One of the distinctiveness of a local Baptist church is its autonomy from other churches and higher authorities. Against the backdrop of the inevitability of conflict in any organisation, how does the autonomy of a local Baptist church affect the conflict resolution mechanisms of, and in, the church? This is the thrust of this paper.

Methodology

This paper reviews the autonomy of a local church as a church polity in tandem with conflict resolution mechanisms in a local church. Semi-structured interviews with some Baptist pastors were used to find out how the polity affects resolving conflicts in a local church. Some available

documents and literatures are reviewed and analysed in relation to the autonomy of a local Nigerian Baptist church and conflict resolution mechanisms.

The Baptists

Baptists are a set of Christians who form a major branch of Protestant Christianity distinguished by baptising the professing believers only and doing so by complete immersion. The Nigerian Baptist Convention is a group of Christians of the Baptist faith, mostly in Nigeria, that come together to cooperate in fulfilling the mandate of the Great Commission, preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, in taking care and in developing churches to be involved in all-inclusive ministries of evangelism, social services and healing, and by cooperating with other Christian organisations throughout the world. A local Baptist church is an independent body accountable to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is believed to be the head of the church. All human authority governing a local Baptist church resides within the local church. Consequently, the church is autonomous or self-governing. No religious hierarchy outside the local church may dictate a church's beliefs or practices.¹

Baptists throughout the world believe in many doctrines. Some of these doctrines are shared with other Protestant groups, while some of the doctrines are distinct to Baptist traditions. Certain beliefs like baptism by immersion, congregational polity, and local church autonomy are some beliefs and practices that are endemic to Baptist identity.² Imasogie (2006) went further to explain more Baptist distinctives. Some of these distinctives are the supremacy of the Bible as the inspired Word of God in all matters of faith and practice, the work of the Holy Spirit, the fellowship of believers, believers' baptism by immersion, church membership, the priesthood of all believers, Lord's Supper, religious freedom, congregational church polity, separation of the Church and the State, competency of the individual soul to relate with god and other people, and the autonomy of a local Baptist church.³ The autonomy of a local Baptist church is the pivotal point of this paper.

The Autonomy of a Local Baptist Church

The autonomy of a local church is one peculiar distinctive of the Baptists that has affected many facets of the life of many local Baptist churches as entities and members of these churches as individuals.⁴ According to Babalola-Jacobs (2021), the autonomy of a local church means a church that is "self-governing, self-propagating, [and] self-supporting... based on the principle of congregational self-rule and the absolute independence of the local church from external control."⁵ In Ishola-Esan (2021) words, "There cannot be autonomy of the local church without the separation of church and state, and we have separation of church and state because of soul liberty."⁶ However, to be autonomous does not mean to be isolated. A Baptist church may fellowship with other churches around mutual interests and in an associational or cooperative tie. Hence, a local Baptist church is expected to voluntarily cooperate with a Baptist association, a Baptist conference, the Nigerian Baptist Convention, and other ecumenical bodies like the Bible Society of Nigeria, the Christian Council of Nigeria and the Christian Association of Nigeria.⁷ The biblical basis for this is found in Colossians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 8:1-6, 16-24; 2 John 1-4; Matthew 16:18-27.

In explaining what a local Baptist church is, Ottuh & Thikan (2015) described how the autonomy of a local church is operated in a typical Nigerian Baptist church,

The Local Baptist Church is autonomous in terms of authority and polite but cooperates with the Nigerian Baptist Convention based on mutual and documented terms of understanding. No single individual dictates to a local Baptist Church. The local Baptist church governs herself democratically (although, controversially called pneumatocracy). Decisions are taken by simple majority vote (O'Donovan, 1995:170). The local Baptist church has a Church Council (CC) which reports and recommends to the Church in Conference (CIC) which is the highest authority for all decisions making. The local Baptist church chooses her own pastor trained from the Baptist Seminary. The Local Baptist church pastor is the chairman of both the Church Council and Church-in-Conference. The local Baptist Church officers form the Church Council, while all the baptised members of the church form the Church in Conference (business meeting).⁸

There are some benefits of the autonomy of a local church as highlighted by Ayankeye (2022). These benefits include, but not limited to: 1) upholding of biblical truths, 2) promoting members' sense of responsibility, 3) fostering unity, 4) enhancing creativity and advancing productivity, 5) reducing chaotic system, and 6) cementing Baptist beliefs and policies.⁹

Conflict Resolution

Various groups of people have views on what conflict means. Conflict is a clash of interests, different values, opinions, needs, interests, or a serious disagreement or argument between two or more people that may lead to violence, war, and lack of peace. While Ifezue (2021) opined that conflict is a much-needed tool whereby coexistence could be likely in any society,¹⁰ Akanji (2021) thought that conflict, being “a product of human relationships [is] an inevitable and integral part of human life.”¹¹ A pastor philosophically referred to conflicts among his church members and other people in the society as a “challenge” that every human has to manage.¹² Bao, et al. (2016) opined,

Conflict is inevitable. It is negative when it leads to violence, undermines the communication relationship between the parties involved in the conflict, stimulates people to become uncooperative, or prevents the parties from addressing real issues or problems. However, the conflict can be a positive creative force, when it increases communication, releases stored feelings, leads to the solution of problems, results in the growth of the relationship between parties in conflict, or improves performance.¹³

Like any human organisation, local Baptist churches are plagued with many conflicts. In recent research conducted by this researcher among Baptist pastors in the Ibadan metropolis, some nature and types of these conflicts were by the pastors. These are represented graphically in Figure 1 below.

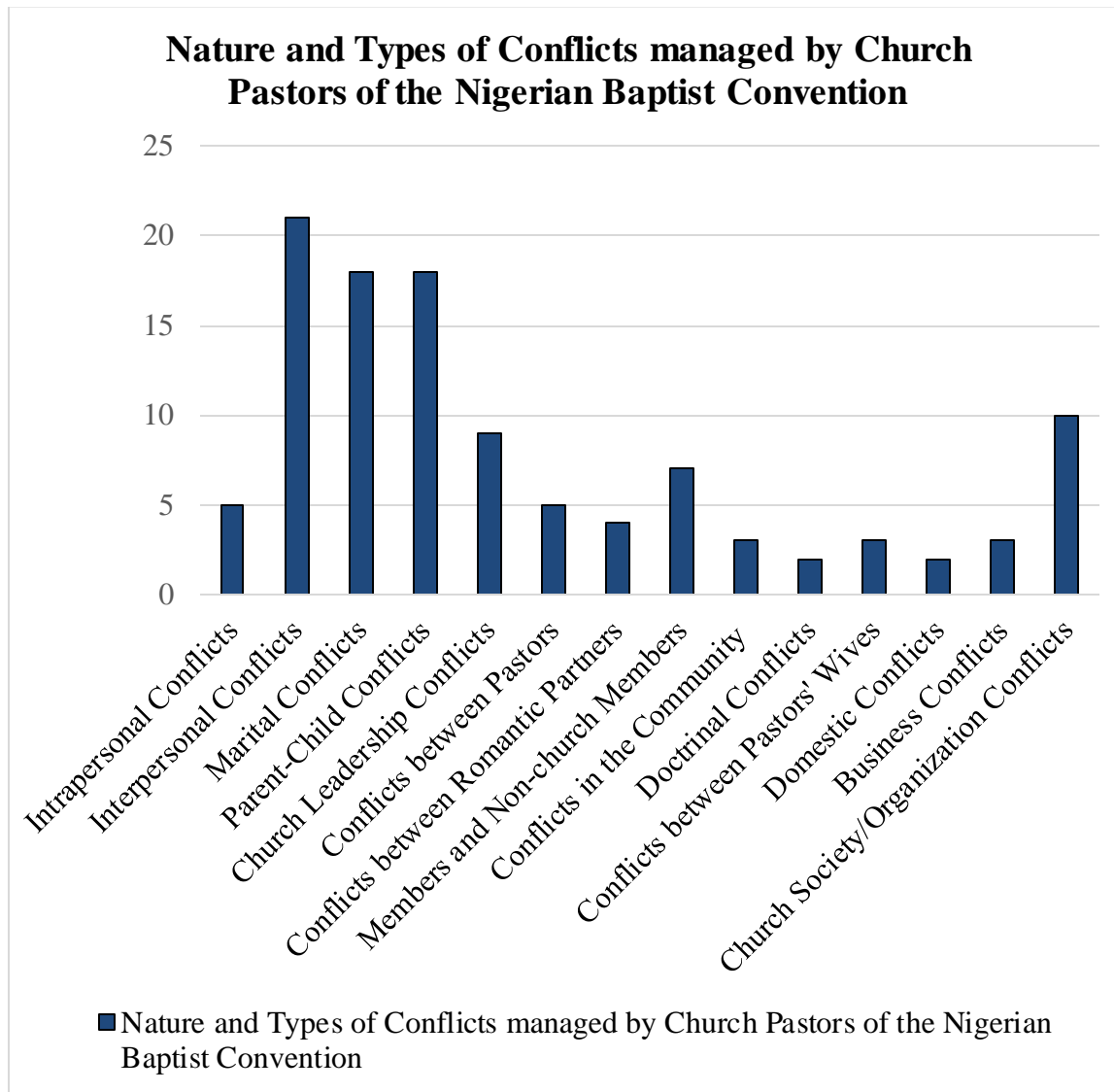


Figure 1: Nature and Types of Conflicts managed by church pastors of the Nigerian Baptist Convention

Source: Researcher’s Construct 2021

It has to be noted that these nature and types of conflicts “vary because of the nature of each church.”¹⁴ A respondent believed that many churches are multi-cultural, with people of different cultures and backgrounds as members. So, there are bound to be conflicts in such churches.¹⁵ Afolabi (2018) has summarised all types of conflicts managed by Baptist pastors in an earlier empirical study.¹⁶ In another study from east Africa, seven different types of conflict occur in churches. These include: “inter-personal, intra-personal, ideological, moral, health, financial and cultural conflicts.”¹⁷

Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Baptist Churches

This researcher has earlier explored and written extensively on the conflict management mechanisms through social media that the pastors of the Nigerian Baptist Convention are using in their churches.¹⁸ This paper will not discuss the findings in the earlier paper but will reproduce the findings in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2: Conflict Management Mechanisms by the Nigerian Baptist Pastors
Source: Researcher's Construct 2021¹⁹

The Interplay between Conflict Resolution and the Autonomy of the Local Baptist Church

As explained above, the Nigerian Baptist Convention consists of churches that come together to cooperate to fulfil certain religious obligations. It operates through officers, annual sessions, boards, committees, conferences, associations, churches, and other institutions. Oludele (2014) has affirmed that the “Nigerian Baptist Convention in general and its local churches, in

particular, have experienced different forms of conflicts. From the early history of the Convention, dispute has been a recurring issue.”²⁰ This has made the Convention have procedures for settling conflicts.²¹ The Convention recently produced a document that “clearly state procedures to follow in the discipline of an erring church or pastor and the disciplinary measure to be taken.”²² However, as one pastor observed, the principle of autonomy of a local church as believed and practised by the Nigerian Baptist Convention and its churches sometimes renders the Convention and its other bodies powerless to exercise any authority on any un-cooperating churches, pastors, and members.²³ It is a misconception of what autonomy of a local church really is. This hinders the Convention, its representatives or its bodies from interfering in any local church conflict without the concerned church's expressed invitation or permission. Situations of dissociation by local churches from the Convention and its bodies have occurred during conflicts within a church.

Nevertheless, Pierce (1998) opined, “Autonomy of the local Church does not exclude a degree of accountability, and Churches too need to be brought to account for their actions.”²⁴ One of the Convention leaders thought that the autonomy of a local is beautiful and good when the members are under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.²⁵ This is against the backdrop that the church is “...a congregation of believers who have been translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light [with the infilling of the Holy Spirit].”²⁶ Osuigwe (2019) reiterated when he stated that some of the hindrances to healthy practice of the autonomy of a local church are loss of Baptist vision for regenerated church membership and loss of emphasis on producing Christ-like believers.²⁷ It is the opinion of an elderly pastor that this principle should be revisited.²⁸ Responsible and regulated autonomy should be considered, as the total autonomy of a local church can lead to disorder and anarchy in the organisation. The idea of responsible and regulated autonomy made the Christian Education Department of the Nigerian Baptist Convention commission the writing of a booklet on responsible autonomy during the department emphasis week for 2022.²⁹

Conclusion and Recommendations for the Nigerian Baptist Convention

The principle of autonomy of a local church is good and biblical. However, if the recommendations below are implemented, they will likely enhance peaceful coexistence and resolution of many conflicts that exist or about to start in the churches and the society. These recommendations are:

1. The principle should be revisited.
2. Responsible and regulated autonomy should be considered as total autonomy of a local church can lead to disorder and anarchy in the organisation.
3. Membership of a local Baptist church should be based on people that have had genuine personal encounter with, are truly led by, the Holy Spirit. This may be relative. However, the church leadership should find ways to determine this. Individuals and churches should be ready to really cooperate with other churches and higher authorities.
4. There should be more awareness about what responsible autonomy means and how it should be practiced.

Endnotes

¹ M. O. Oladeji (2012). *The People Called Baptists and their Distinctive Beliefs*. (Ibadan: Bounty Press Limited), 145.

² Bill J. Leonard (2005). "4. Baptist Beliefs and Practices" (pp. 65-90). In *Baptists in America*. (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press), 65.

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³ Osadolor Imasogie (2006). *The People Called Baptists: A Summary of Their History and Distinctive Christian Beliefs*. (Benin City: Kolashina Graphics), 30-50.

⁴ Akintoye Babalola-Jacobs (2021). "The autonomy of Baptist local Churches and its implications." *Tropical Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(1), 44, 2021.

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⁵ Babalola-Jacobs, 45.

⁶ Helen Olomu Ishola-Esan (2021). "Pastors' Leadership Behaviour and the Sustenance of Baptist Heritage in the Nigerian Baptist Convention". *IAR Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 2(4), July 2021, 1-12. Retrieved on 21 October 2022 from

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⁸ John Arierhi Ottuh & Nathan Doutimiwei D. Thikan (2015). "A New Testament View on Church and State Relations in the Modern World: Challenges for the Contemporary Baptist Church in Nigeria". *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*. June 2015, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 96-104 <http://dx.doi.org/10.15640/ijpt.v3n1a13>, 97.

⁹ Stephen O. Ayankeye (2022). *Responsible Autonomy: The Local Autonomy of the Local Baptist Church Explained*. (Ibadan: Baptist Press [Nig.] Ltd), 16-18.

¹⁰ C. F. Ifezue (2021). "Georg Simmel and the Study of Religious Conflicts." *Journal of Religion and Human Relations*, 13(1), 2021, 353.

¹¹ Israel Adelani Akanji (2021). *Towards a Theology of Conflict Solution: Understanding Religious Conflict in Contemporary Nigerian Society*. (Abuja: Elis Associates), 45.

¹² Kayode Oyedemi, interview by the researcher, Ibadan, May 17, 2021.

¹³ Y. Bao, F. Zhu, Y. Hu, & N. Cui. "The Research of Interpersonal Conflict and Solution Strategies." *Psychology*, 7, 2016, 541-545. Retrieved on 21 October 2022 from

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/psych.2016.74055>

¹⁴ Edward Alabi, interview by the researcher, Ibadan, May 27, 2021.

¹⁵ Dickson Madoghwe, interview by the researcher, Ibadan, July 27, 2021.

¹⁶ O. O. Afolabi. "Church Conflict and its Management: The Experience of the Nigerian Local Baptist Churches." *African Notes: Bulletin of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan*, 42(1&2), September 2018, 179-194. Retrieved on 21 October 2022 from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327962476_Church_Conflict_and_its_Management_The_Experience_of_the_Nigerian_Local_Baptist_Churches

¹⁷ C. J. Nabwire, M. Chepchieng, A. Sindabi, & R. Wepukhulu. "Types of Conflicts that Require Management by Pastoral Counseling in the Mainstream and Pentecostal Churches in Nakuru County of Kenya." *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, 4(5), May 2015, 2885-2890. Available Online: <https://www.ijer.net/archive/v4i5/SUB154793.pdf>

¹⁸ See Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi (2022). "Conflict Management Mechanisms through Social Media among the Nigerian Baptist Pastors." *IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences* (ISSN 2455-2267), 18(1), 1-12. Retrieved on 21 October 2022 from <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jmss.v18.n1.p1>

¹⁹ This figure was first published in Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi (2022). "Conflict Management Mechanisms through Social Media among the Nigerian Baptist Pastors." *IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences* (ISSN 2455-2267), 18(1), 1-12. Retrieved on 21 October 2022 from <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jmss.v18.n1.p1>

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²¹ Oluwaseun O. Afolabi. "Alternative Dispute Resolution: A Tool for Managing Leadership Conflict in a Church." *Journal of Leadership Studies* 12, Number 4 2018.

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²³ Joseph O. Afolabi, interview by the researcher, Ibadan, June 1, 2021.

²⁴ Stephen Brian Pierce. "The Exodus of Baptist Pastors." A Master thesis submitted to the University of South Africa in 1998, 15. Retrieved on 21 October 2022 from https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/15781/dissertation_pierce_sb.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

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²⁶ S. A. Oloyede (2014). "The Church, Justice and Peace: Scriptural Theological Bases." *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology (OJOT)*, XIX(1), 2014, 107-122.

²⁷ Nkem E. Osuigwe (2019). *Autonomy of the Local Churches and Denominational Loyalty: A Call for a Balanced Understanding of the Baptist Polity*. (Ibadan: Publication Department), 56.

²⁸ Gold Anie, interview by the researcher, Ibadan, June 3, 2021. (Rev. Dr Anie – a retired Baptist pastor – was a former Vice President [Ministerial] of the Nigerian Baptist Convention. Anie was a vanguard of "responsible autonomy of local church" during his active years in service.)

²⁹ See Stephen O. Ayankeye (2022). *Responsible Autonomy: The Local Autonomy of the Local Baptist Church Explained*. (Ibadan: Baptist Press [Nig.]).

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