

INTEREST-BASED RELATIONAL APPROACH FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN A CONGREGATIONAL SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT: Conflict is an inevitable aspect of any organizational setting, including ecclesiological ones. When poorly managed, it has been a major root cause of organizational stagnation and inefficiency. In the context of the church organization, conflict accounts for many church splits, a perpetual crisis, and, in some cases, constant judicial battles. This paper examines an interest-based related approach as a tool for conflict resolution in the congregational system of church governance. Finally, it proposes recommendations for using the interest-based relational (IBR) approach to resolve conflicts in the congregational system.

Keywords: *Interest-based relational approach, conflict resolution, congregational system*

1. Introduction

The church is a heterogeneous setting in which people share diverse cultures, worldviews, beliefs, values, demographic characteristics, and behavioral patterns that may lead to conflicts. It will not be an exaggeration to assert that when people work together in a group, conflict is one of the most predictable outcomes (Madalina, 2016, p. 808). Nihinlola & Oloyede ed. (2021, p. 57-59) identify that elements such as attitudinal problems, blindness, communication deficit,

domestic neglect, ethical misconduct, and failures of all sorts constitute part of the causes of conflict. It is worth noting that some conflicts may occur not because of any defects, but because the organization is in dire need of change (Olaleye, 2022, p. 47). Whatever the case may be, conflict is not bad in itself but can become a stumbling block if not well understood and managed. Unfortunately, Olaleye opines that many churches are springing up, while others are growing amid conflict, and others are dwindling, plateauing, entering a comatose state or dying (ibid., p. 3). Matthew 16:18 does not promise the church a conflict-free environment, but assures her of victory if conflict and challenges are well apprehended and responded to.

The key question remains: why are some churches able to cope with conflicts and continue to strive and make progress, while others are folding up? Better still, since not all churches have the same governance system, what strategy or conflict-management approach is suitable for churches that use the congregational system, like the Baptists? The interest-based relational approach is suggested as the best approach to conflict resolution in the congregational system. Secondary sources, including books, journal articles, and online resources, will be used to answer the questions raised.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

Interest-based relational approach: Every conflict requires a specific approach based on its nature, setting, and outcomes. Conflicts are a part of every organization and often emerge when least expected and in less predictable ways (Lewis et al., 2025). Therefore, preparing to tackle conflicts is a key aspect of organizational leadership. Hence, leadership should consider a systemic approach to identify the source and outcomes while maintaining a respectful and professional demeanor (ibid). Adham (2023, p. 154) argues that the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) offers many approaches to conflict resolution that can help address diverse conflicts. These different approaches include: avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, collaborating, negotiating (Interest-based relational), mediating, and arbitrating. The writer's major concern is the interest-based relational approach (negotiation) as a tool for conflict resolution.

According to Fisher & Ury (1981), the interest-based relational approach to conflict resolution focuses on underlying interests rather than fixed positions, while preserving relationships and striving for mutually beneficial outcomes. They advocated that the core principles of IBR are: separating people from the problem, focusing on interests rather than positions, generating options for mutual benefit, and using objective criteria. The goal of IBR is to resolve conflict collaboratively, striving to maintain relationships and reach agreements that satisfy both parties. Oyandokun (2015, p 41), on the other hand, highlighted that, "Relational approach as a concept suggests an avenue of relationship, friendliness. It suggests further connection, openness, communication, and the elimination of fears, as well as the challenges and how the interests of others are considered." It justifies why this approach is suitable for the church context and especially the congregational system.

Conflict Resolution: When a leader leads an organization, challenges will inevitably arise, and the leader has a duty to identify and resolve them (Ishola & Oyeniyi, eds., 2024, p. 250). They suggested that these challenges could be psychological, ministerial, administrative, spiritual, or financial. It could also stem from the organization's structure, with power unevenly distributed, as well as from interpersonal relationships. Conflicts are bound to arise when these challenges are associated, thus making it imperative for the leader to develop the ability to manage conflicts in the work environment. Conflict resolution, therefore, is the process of finding a solution to a problem or challenge to create an enabling environment for the organization to continue making progress (Boateng, 2014, p. 3). Nahavandi & Malakzadeh (1998, as cited in Boateng, 2014) suggested that conflict resolution can be approached either behaviorally or attitudinally. Behavioral methods include enforcing rules, separating employees, assigning clear tasks, increasing resources or rewarding cooperation. The attitudinal method focuses on having a common enemy, team building, and organizational development. When conflicts are resolved, it leads to trust and commitment in the organization.

Congregational System: Every church organization has criteria that distinguish it from other similar organizations. This distinction is what determines how the organization is structured, the hierarchical order, how decisions are made and executed, and how the organization is evaluated. The congregational system of

church governance holds that the local church is independent, self-financing, and self-governing. Grudem (1994) argues that, the congregational form of church government is more varied and about five different types of congregational governments have been practiced namely: the Single-Elder, The Pastor and Deacons, Plural Local Elder Government, Corporate Board Model of Church Government, and Pure democracy but, the common element in each of the type is that accountability lies with the congregation. Ahmady, Mehrpour & Nikooravesh (2016, p. 456) define organizational structure as the way in which activities are divided, organized and coordinated to achieve organizational goals. They further asserted that organizational structure affects all the organization's processes, including the way change is conceived and implemented and that organizational structure has three dimensions: hierarchy, functional and inclusion. The Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC), as a church organization, practices congregational church governance. Budi & Laila (2020, p. 855) believe that Congregationalism, as practiced by the CBC, holds that earthly authority rests with the local congregation. They further stressed that the CBC adheres to scriptural Congregationalism, which is based on three major assumptions: the headship of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, and the practice of the early church (Matt 23:8, Luke 22:25-27, Acts 15:22-25). Luo (2023), on his part, opines that Congregationalism affirms that the highest authority of a local church is vested in the entire congregation, not the leaders and that, in practice, the local church is autonomous and democratic. Kavanaugh (2020, p. 1) equally adds in strong terms that, leading change, managing conflicts or transformation in a church with a congregational system of church governance always comes with a lot of anxiety that can lead to resistance. He, however, recommended that if congregational systems running churches must change, then that must be done with care through a process that does not "result in broken relationships and damaged testimonies". It explains why an interest-based relational approach is the option for conflict resolution in a congregational system like the CBC.

3. Characteristics of the Interest-Based Relational Approach in Conflict Resolution

Conflicts are present everywhere there is human interaction and, consequently, can lead to damaging outcomes if not well handled. Adeniyi & Victor (2024, p. 3052) have noted that, in the past, traditional conflict resolution methods, which typically

focused on tangible outcomes and compromises, were used at the expense of emotional and psychological aspects. Moreover, there is a need for a transformative approach that undermines the limitations of the traditional approach to conflict resolution. The contemporary approach to conflict management should align with Karl Marx's conflict theory, which emphasizes addressing systemic inequalities and power imbalances (ibid). Conflicts are not just to be resolved; they must be proven effective and durable. It explains why the interest-based relational approach (IBR) is highly sought after for resolving conflicts where relationships are highly at stake. According to Banister (2025, p. 14), the interest-based relational approach in conflict resolution holds that it is crucial to maintain and respect the relationship involved in resolving a conflict. This idea was developed by the work of Fisher & Ury (1981) entitled "Getting to Yes". The IBR seeks to avoid rigid positions while encouraging the exploitation of the interest associated with those positions. What are those attributes of the IBR that give it an edge above other conflict resolution approaches, or better still, what characteristics render IBR suitable for conflict resolution in the congregational system?

People, not position-oriented: Fisher & Ury (1981) postulated that one of the key distinctions of the IBR from other approaches to conflict resolution is that it separates the people from the problem. According to them, in conflict management, two key variables are at play. On the one hand, there is the substantive problem, the bone of contention or the actual disagreement; on the other hand, there is the people's problem, which concerns their emotions, misunderstandings, and fears. Other approaches will blend the actors' emotions with the issues at stake, thus leading to a masking of the problem and a focus on the emotions. IBR seeks to separate the problem from the people, thus creating an enabling environment for the de-escalation of the conflict and, hence, a lasting solution. The church organization has people, and their concerns are at the center of its activities, thus making IBR more suitable for conflict resolution. Olaleye (2022, p. 15) describes the church as a congregation of God's people, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, to carry out the mandate of Christ, not as a tradition, building, or program. Any approach that puts people and their worries at the center will fit in the church and congregational system.

Interest-based, not position-based: In every setting of conflict, there are often demands in which parties lay claims that might be diverse depending on the interests of those parties. IBR, as an approach to conflict resolution, focuses on the demands or positions and emphasizes the interests of the parties. It transcends the position on the surface of the conflict to dig into the depths and uncover the needs, fears or desires. Onyejiaku et al. (2018, p. 38) have opined that when the interests, values, and goals of individuals and groups are incompatible, frustration sets in, leading to conflict. They argued that, to resolve conflict successfully in an environment with diverse viewpoints, the focus should be on the needs of those involved (ibid., p. 42). Fortunately, the church exists to meet the needs of the people, not their demands or wants (Prov 20:5, Phi 2:3-4, James 1:19).

Relational, not positional: Human relationships are the cornerstone of the success of any organization, including the church. Odeleye et al ed. (2024, p 87) suggest that, for anyone to be able to educate, nurture, and show others the way to go, such an individual must be relational. In other words, human beings are relational social beings that depend on each other to have needs met. Again, interpersonal relationships are the lifeblood of every organization, especially the church. Its necessity cannot be overemphasized because it demonstrates Christ's love and grace, builds a supportive community, enhances teamwork and productivity, improves collaboration, and helps with conflict resolution (ibid). IBR embraces a relational approach rather than emphasizing the positional point and the advantage of this approach for the church and congregational system over other approaches.

Collaborative problem solving and mutual gain: One of the essential characteristics of the IBR is its collaborative approach to conflict resolution. According to Fisher & Ury (1981), parties in a conflict are considered partners, not opponents. In fact, both parties make efforts to see that the conflict is dealt with, simply because the challenge is shared and not one-sided. Unfortunately, other approaches will involve avoidance, competition, accommodation or compromise. Contrary to these approaches, IBR values both the issue and the people, places a high premium on the relationships, and allows time for discussions in which collaborative steps are taken to address the root cause. Again, since IBR uses a collaborative

problem-solving approach, mutual gain is the expected outcome. The interests of both sides are taken into consideration, thus making the situation a win-win. Kotter (1996) has postulated that successful organizations must strive to align the interests of people, build collaboration rather than competition, and create shared victory rather than victory on one side. The collaborative, mutually beneficial approach of IBR in conflict resolution has given it an edge as a choice in most organizations. It isn't especially important for the church because both parties are seeking a solution, the root cause is being addressed, and everyone benefits from the outcome.

4. The Nature of the Congregational System.

To be efficient and achieve goals and objectives, many denominations have adopted governance systems that best support productivity. Grudem (1994), in his book "Systematic Theology," has observed that there are three principal types of church-governing systems: Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational. Erickson (1998) has defined Congregationalism as a church-governing system in which each local church is independent and decision-making is done by the church members, not by any external body. In fact, Congregationalism is a system of church governance that draws its authority from Acts 6:1-6 and Matthew 18:17. Leaders in this setting are considered servants under the authority of the local church. What are those attributes of the congregational system that render IBR a suitable approach for conflict resolution?

Congregational autonomy: Congregational autonomy in church governance refers to the independence of the local church. In fact, it upholds that the church takes its decisions regarding leadership, discipline, finances or worship order without any external interference (Matt 18:17, Acts 15:22, 1 Cor 5:4-5). It is important to note that congregational autonomy does not undermine the authority of Scripture. In simple terms, it is autonomy that is exercised under the authority of God or His word (Acts 13:2-3). It can be concluded that, though the congregational system practices congregational autonomy, that autonomy is not absolute. Crum (2023) has emphatically stated that, though most local Baptist churches enjoy complete autonomy, if a severe or unbiblical issue arises, the association to which the church is affiliated has the duty to protect the congregation by relying on the Bible as the

standard. This association should support the local congregations, and delegates from these congregations can come together to take decisions that will benefit their welfare. The principle of congregational autonomy favors IBR as a conflict-resolution approach in a congregational system. The rationale is that members collaborate to find solutions to their conflicts without being dictated to by any external position.

The Scripture as the Final Authority: Grudem and Erickson both agree that Congregationalism and "sola scriptura" (Scripture alone), though different, are closely related. To them, Congregationalism depends on sola scriptura. It is worth noting that in Congregationalism, there is no authority above the Bible (Isa 8:20, 2Tim 3:16-17, Heb 4:12). The Bible has other qualities that place it in such a privileged position, such as it is sufficient for matters of life and faith (Deut 4:2, Ps 119:105, Rev 22:18-19). The Scripture is clear, with no ambiguity, which means it can be understood and applied (Ps 119:130). Scripture is endowed with the quality of being a necessity for life and faith (Matt 4:4). With all these attributes, the Bible serves as the final authority in a congregational system. Consequently, Scripture dictates the members' interests and needs within a congregational system. IBR postulates that, in conflict resolution, the interests of the people should be taken into consideration. Considering that Scripture is of interest to the members of the church, it is but logical that Scripture is applied as a means to enforce peace in a conflict. Every member will likely align with Scripture's verdict; hence, IBR will resolve conflicts within a congregational system.

Priesthood of all believers: one of the cardinal points of the congregational system is that every member is a priest. This Christian doctrine highlights that every believer has access to God through His Son, Jesus Christ and can serve Him without needing the assistance of a mediator (1 Pet 2:8-9). Erickson (1998) argues that, since all believers have direct access to God, they should share in the ministry of the church. Christ alone in this scenario remains the only mediator between man and God (1 Tim 2:5, Heb 7:25). The priesthood of all believers is supposed to be a blessing to the church, though it has been abused in most circles. Dreyer (2020) has suggested that one of the challenges with the use of the terminology of the priesthood of all

believers arises when it is regarded as an office rather than a service performed to God. IBR upholds that all parties in a conflicting situation participate in seeking ways to resolve the challenges that fit the narrative of the concept of the priesthood of all believers. Every member's decision is considered through a democratic process. The decision taken thus reflects the people's interest in the congregation.

5. Interest-Based Relational Approach in Resolving Conflicts in a Congregational System.

A meticulous understanding of the interest-based relational approach and the congregational system has indicated that the two can blend. In fact, the IBR is closely related and draws heavily on its principles from the Bible. It explains why it can fit perfectly in resolving conflict situations in the church context, especially in the congregational system. What are the practical recommendations of how IBR can be used to resolve conflicts in a congregational system?

1. First and foremost, all the members should air their opinions regarding the conflict. In fact, they should be permitted to state their understanding of the crisis's facts and emotions, and what they think will be in their best interest as the way out. To reach a consensus, the will of the majority should be solicited to ensure that the decision is in the best interest of the church.
2. The unity of the church in every given situation should be maintained. It will be of no use to take a decision that favors a position, as relationships will be jeopardized. If unity is maintained, then the relationship has been valued above position, which is the stand of IBR and the congregational system.
3. Scripture should inform every decision, recognizing that the Bible is the final authority in matters of faith and practice. Christians are out to serve God, and every idea anchored in Scripture is in the interest of all believers. The Bible should be held to a very high standard when it comes to handling conflicts in a congregational system.

6. Conclusion

When people come from diverse backgrounds and hold different worldviews and interests, conflicts are expected. Since leadership is about influencing others to

achieve goals, one key obstacle in this process is resolving conflicts. The interest-based relational approach appears to be the most suitable for conflict resolution in a congregational system.

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