



Research Article

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Sunday school as a conflict resolution mechanism in churches of the Nigerian Baptist convention

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Abstract: The world is full of conflicts of many kinds. The churches of the Nigerian Baptist Convention are not exempted as many of the churches are confronted with many of these conflicts. These conflicts have to be resolved. This paper identifies some of the types of conflicts common in the churches of the Nigerian Baptist Convention. The paper presents Sunday School as a mechanism to resolve these conflicts and prevent and deescalate them. These are done by giving a brief definition of Sunday School, tracing its history to its origin in the eighteenth century, and then explaining how Sunday School can be used as a conflict resolution mechanism. The paper concludes with some recommendations. Amongst these recommendations are: stakeholders in the church should pay more attention to Sunday School activities in order to use the activities to prevent, deescalate, and resolve

conflicts consciously; church leaders should, as much as possible, live exemplary lives devoid of conflicts; and the society in general and governments, in particular, should explore how to adapt Sunday School in resolving conflicts.

Keywords – Christian education, Conflict resolution, Conflict resolution mechanism, Nigerian Baptist convention, Religious education, Sunday school

1. INTRODUCTION

Sunday School is likely one of the prominent activities of most Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Out of the time used in worship service on Sundays, especially in the Nigerian Baptist churches, which ranges between two and half hours to four hours, Sunday School takes at least one hour of intensive teachings with opportunities for active participation and interactions of everyone (Babalola, 2019: xi). Against the backdrop that conflict is inevitable in any society or organization (Afolaranmi, 2021a: 11), if handled properly, Sunday School is likely a veritable mechanism to prevent, deescalate and resolve conflicts among church members. The scope of this work is committed to seeing how society can utilize Sunday School as a mechanism to resolve conflicts and prevent and deescalate them.



2. HISTORY OF SUNDAY SCHOOL

Historically, “Sabbath School,” later known as Sunday School, “was an offshoot of the social change in the life of the English people in the second half of the eighteenth century, which brought about the ‘Industrial Revolution’ (Babalola, 2019: 1). There were crime, violence, debt, disorderliness, and all sorts of vices in the society then. This made Robert Raikes start the Sunday school programme in 1780 in Gloucester in Britain (Loetscher, 1955: 56). Initially, the programme was confined to only children. Nonetheless, young adults and older adults were later included in the programme (Babalola, 2019: 1). Western Christian missionaries introduced Sunday School in Africa as they brought Christianity to the continent. They used Sunday School to gain new converts (Mumo, 2016: 49-50). On records, in the history of Baptist works in Nigeria, Mrs Laurena Bowen started Sunday School at Ijaye-Orile on January 22, 1854. The seed sown with seventeen persons that day has grown to become productive today, and it has become a prominent teaching ministry of many Baptist churches in Nigeria (Ayo-Obiremi & Konyehi, 2019: 2-3).

3. BRIEF HISTORY, OPERATIONS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION

The Baptist work in Nigeria began with the arrival in Badagry, Nigeria, on the 5th of August 1850 of Rev. Thomas Jefferson Bowen, a missionary of Southern Baptist Convention of America (SBC). He later settled in Ijaye-Orile, near Ibadan (Afolaranmi, 2021b: 3). The Nigerian Baptist Convention (a faith-based organization) started officially as Yoruba Baptist Association on March 11, 1914 at First Baptist Church, Idikan, Ibadan, with late Reverend Mojola Agbebi as its first President (Afolaranmi, 2021b: 3). Its headquarters is in the Baptist Building, Obafemi Awolowo Road, Oke Bola, Ibadan.

The Nigerian Baptist Convention functions through officers, boards, conferences, annual sessions, committees, churches, associations, and other institutions. These officers, committees, and boards usually report the Convention during its annual sessions that have sponsored messengers from churches that cooperate with it. The Convention is led by a president who is also the chief executive officer of the organization. However, there is a ceremonial head of the Convention known as the ‘Convention Chairman’ who presides over meetings of the Convention (Afolaranmi, 2021b: 3). There are various ministries of the Convention (as departments) under the leadership of directors. Some of the ministries are Christian Education, Youth and Students Ministries, Medical Services, Social Ministry, Publications, and Global Missions. There are various divisions or units in each of these ministries through which the ministry functions (Kristilere, 2014: 13). Sunday School ministry of the Convention is under the Christian Education Department (Ayo-Obiremi & Konyehi, 2019: 37).

At the local Nigerian Baptist church level, the pastor theologically trained (and possibly ordained) is the spiritual and administrative head. He oversees the affairs of the church. With the recommendation of a nominating committee and the pastor's advice, the church approves the selection of the Sunday School superintendent and other church officers for years as stipulated in the constitution of the local church. The Sunday School superintendent works with Sunday School teachers/workers that are enlisted to lead the activities of each Sunday School class. These Sunday School classes may be categorized by age or gender. The pastor, Sunday School superintendent, and Sunday School teachers/workers usually have a meeting known as Sunday School preparatory class before a Sunday where they brainstorm together about the Sunday School lesson for the coming Sunday.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Sunday School has been defined as “the church exercising its teaching function through church-related officers and teachers with the four-fold purpose to reach, teach, win and develop” (Miller, 1991: 11). Sunday school classes used to come first before a Sunday church service, and they are used to provide Bible teachings to worshippers. While

traditionally, it has been held before Sunday worship, many churches no longer follow that nowadays. Basically, the Bible is the textbook used for learning; some teachers may have prepared a teaching outline.

It may be difficult to give a precise definition of the word conflict. Nonetheless, some scholars have attempted to define it. One of such definitions is conflict is a “state of disharmony or disagreement between two or more oppositions which can arise in any social institution, religion inclusive” (Ifezue, 2021: 353). In the words of Folarin and Adelokun (2016: 20), conflict is “a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interests or concerns.” As these two scholars analyzed their definition: conflict is a disagreement; people are involved in any conflict (with the exemption of intrapersonal conflicts that are unique conflicts and take place within a person); the threat is supposed in the conflict; and, needs, interests, or concerns are involved in the conflict (Folarin and Adelokun, 2016: 20-42). Conflict can occur at any time. Conflict is normal. It is inescapable. It is part of human nature. The occurrence of conflicts is becoming more common, complex, and destructive these days. Almost all theories of conflict address issues like reason(s) for the occurrence of conflicts; manner(s) of the occurrence of conflicts; the active and passive actors in conflicts; motivation for continuation or cessation of conflicts; resources for the continuation of conflicts; intended and non-intended consequences of conflicts; and the likes (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2017: 30). In the words of Alade (2020: 112), “conflicts are resolved when both conflicting parties are satisfied with the outcome of the resolution in terms of their basic needs being met and all fear dismantled.” Against the backdrop that conflict resolution is concerned with all the methods that aim at dealing with the vital foundations of direct, cultural, and fundamental violence (Wani, Suwitra & Fayeye, 2013: 35), one has to resolve these conflicts and find mechanisms of preventing or reducing them. Sunday School is likely to be one of such mechanisms.

5. TYPES OF CONFLICTS COMMON IN CHURCHES OF THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION

Hussein and Al-Mamary (2019: 10-12) had identified and explained six different basic types of conflicts thus: intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict, intragroup conflict, intergroup conflict, intra-organizational conflict, and inter-organizational conflicts. Apart from intrapersonal conflicts that happen within a person, other types of conflicts are bound to happen wherever there is more than one person. So, as an organization with diverse kinds of people, churches of the Nigerian Baptist convention experience diverse kinds of conflicts as well. These conflicts that are interpersonal include marital conflicts, parent-child conflicts, church leadership conflicts, conflicts among church members, conflicts between church members and non-church members, church society/organization conflicts, conflicts between pastors, conflicts between pastors' wives, doctrinal conflicts, business conflicts, domestic conflicts, conflicts in the community, and others. These types of conflicts common in churches of the Nigerian Baptist convention as identified in this research, are presented in a graphic form in Figure 1. Some examples of these conflict situations would have been given here, but that would be beyond the scope of this paper. This may be good for further study.

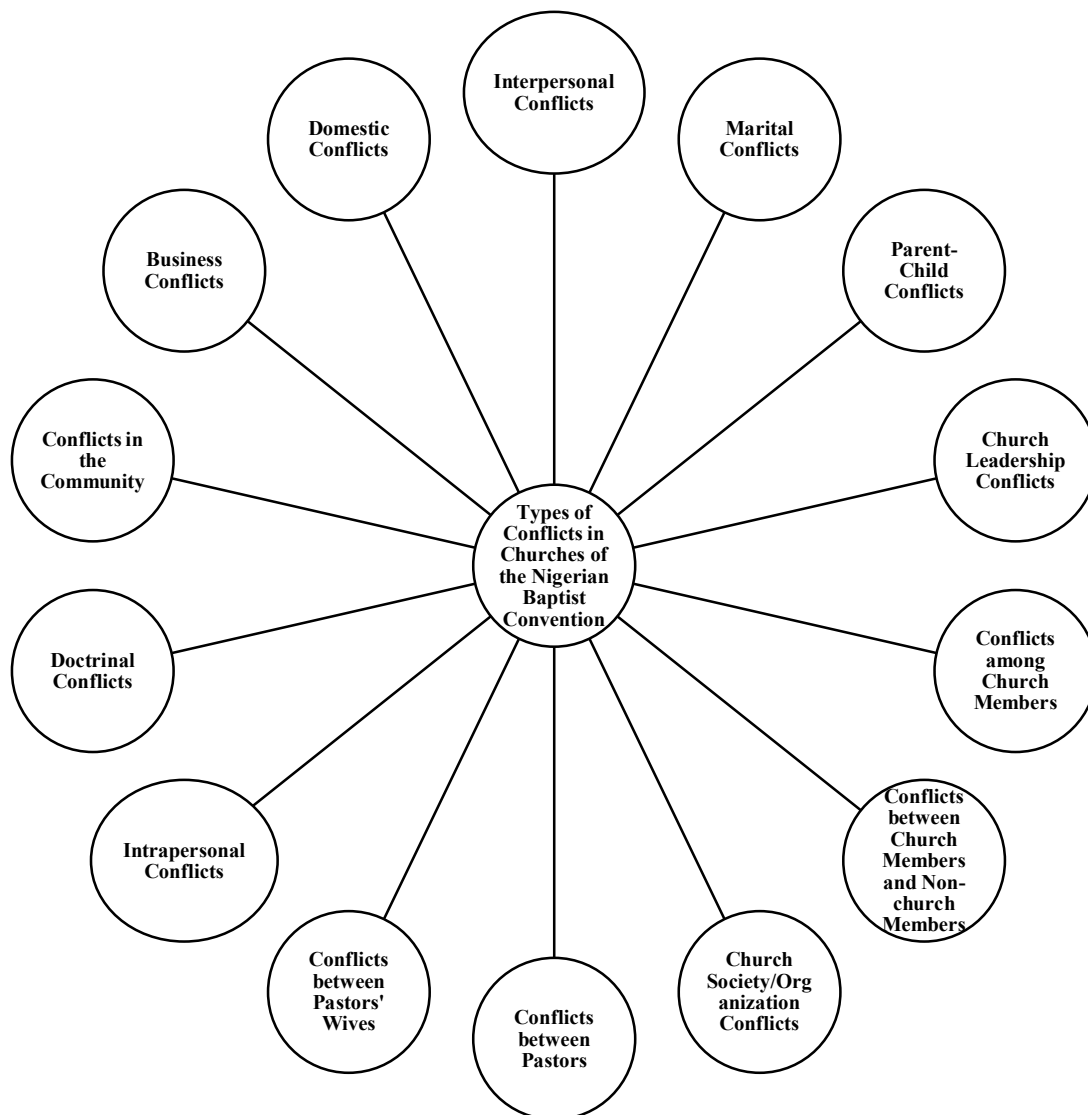


Figure 1: Types of conflicts common in churches of the Nigerian Baptist convention

Source: Author's construct

Despite all these types of conflicts, Sunday School can likely be used as a veritable tool to deescalate these conflicts and even prevent them from occurring.

6. THE NEED TO ADOPT SUNDAY SCHOOL AS A CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISM

Sunday school as an activity is likely to make people become better people in avoiding, reducing, and resolving conflicts. Elucidating more on the Miller (1991: 11)'s definition above, Babalola (2019: 6-9) asserted that Sunday school is: to reach out to people and lead them to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ; to consciously teach the tenets of the Bible to people that have been reached for Christ; to win the people through the teaching and make them be convinced of what they have been taught; and to develop people to be able to come to maturity in Christ and make them people that will be able to go out to reach other people, teach them, win them and develop them



also to be able to reach out to others. As these people are being reached, taught, won, and developed, they become better church members. As they become better church members, they become better people in the society that promote peaceful coexistence and avoid (as much as possible) conflicts and deescalate conflicts when they arise.

Furthermore, as learners of the Bible, Sunday School could help members of Sunday School classes to prevent conflict, deescalate conflict, and resolve conflict easily. Many books of the Bible are written about conflicts. Conflict is something essential to spiritual growth and the key is responding correctly to it. It has to be responded to through the teachings of the Bible. The Bible has advocated some ways to evade conflicts and live peacefully with other people in society. Jones (2000) summarized these ways into three ideologies. According to him, God has 1) called people to pursue peace in all their relationships, 2) communicated to people on the opinion they should have about conflicts, and 3) instructed people on how to resolve conflicts. Against this backdrop, a regular and active Sunday School member will be well-versed in these tenets and mirror them in his/her conduct in society. The reason is that Sunday School could help in providing the place and opportunity to study the many biblical passages on conflict, and an active Sunday School member could learn to respond to them correctly.

Even though Sunday School teachers are usually people with no theological or pastoral training who are selected for their role in the church yet, the lifestyle of a Sunday School worker/teacher has a great impact on the lives of members of a Sunday School class. This is reiterated by Towns (2001: 15-19) when he emphasized that a Sunday School teacher can make a difference in the lives of the members of his/her Sunday School class. As members of a Sunday School class observe and emulate the good lifestyle of their Sunday School teacher, they are likely to shun anything that may cause conflicts and try to resolve any unavoidable conflict as soon as possible.

One original concern of Sunday School was to meet the needs of the less privileged in society (Miller, 1991: 12). This concern should not be neglected by Sunday School members. As they are going out to reach people for Christ, they should be ready to meet the material, financial, and most especially the spiritual needs of the people. An African proverb says, "A hungry man is an angry man." A needy person that has his/her needs met will likely not cause conflicts and will likely yield to any attempt to end a conflict he/she is involved in. The more people are reached with the total gospel, taught, convinced, and developed; the more society is likely to be less of conflicts and more peaceful coexistence. By this, Sunday School has become a means of conflict prevention as well as conflict resolution.

Furthermore, Sunday School is a tool to catch the younger generation in the church and imbibe the culture of peaceful coexistence in society. In the words of Wade (2019: 2), "Outside of family, the church is an important social and educational setting where young children are socialized in an understanding of Christianity, where their experiences help them make meaning (i.e., understand the world)." Through Sunday School, by reaching out to these children, teaching them the tenets of the Bible on conflict resolution and peaceful coexistence in the society, convincing them to as much as possible avoid conflict, as to pursue peace with other people, and developing them to reach out to other children, the society will likely become a more peaceful place to live in devoid of conflicts.

While most of the means described above are basically on conflict prevention, the means can also be applied to conflict resolution. This can be done as people that are attempting to resolve any conflict can make activities in Sunday School as reference points to the conflicting parties. The conflicting parties, if they are active participants of Sunday School programmes in the church either as Sunday School teachers/workers or as members of a Sunday School class, should be easily persuaded to deescalate or end a conflict based on what they have learnt through Sunday School activities.



7. AREAS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

As identified from this paper, the following areas need further research:

1. There is a need to conduct research on why there are still conflicts in some Nigerian Baptist churches in spite of the fact that many of the church members are active members of Sunday School classes in their churches.
2. There is a need to conduct research on how Sunday School can be used to resolve some specific conflicts in the church.
3. There is a need to conduct research on why some church leaders, especially pastors and other church members, are not active members of Sunday School classes.
4. There is a need to conduct research by the government and its educational agencies on they can adapt Sunday School methods and incorporate them into the school curricula in attempts to resolve conflicts and promote peaceful coexistence in the society.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Conflicts are inevitable in society. Sunday School has been presented in this paper as one of the veritable tools in order to curb these conflicts. Therefore, it is recommended that,

1. In spite of the fact that many churches with conflicts still have Sunday School, stakeholders in the church should pay more attention to Sunday School activities in order to use the activities to consciously prevent, deescalate, and resolve conflicts;
2. Church leaders like pastors, officers, and most especially Sunday School teachers/workers should, as much as possible, exemplary live devoid of conflicts so that their teachings and activities through Sunday School will really lead others to avoid conflicts or end conflicts, if possible; and
3. The society in general and governments, in particular, should explore how to adapt Sunday School in resolving conflicts. This will likely make people live more peacefully in society.

If these recommendations and others can be carried out, Sunday School will likely be a mechanism to prevent, deescalate and put an end to any existing conflicts among churches; Baptists in particular, and within the society in general.

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