

Ecumenical Leadership and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding in Liberia: A Critical Analysis of LCC and IRCL

Roger Garwoh
St. Paul's University

Abstract

Liberia's fourteen-year civil conflict (1989-2003) produced devastating political, economic, social, and psychological consequences, eroding the country's institutional capacity and fragmenting its social fabric. Amid the collapse of governance systems, religious institutions particularly the Liberia Council of Churches and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia emerged as influential actors capable of mediating disputes, advocating for human rights, shaping political discourse, and facilitating reconciliation. While the role of faith-based institutions in African peacebuilding continues to be recognized in global scholarship, there remains a limited body of academic work that systematically assesses the long-term contribution, challenges, and evolving role of ecumenical leadership in Liberia's post-conflict transformation. This study critically examines the historical and contemporary engagement of Liberia Council of Churches and Inter-Religious Council of Liberia in post-war Monrovia, highlighting their effectiveness, constraints, and prospects for sustainable peacebuilding.

Drawing from Conflict Transformation Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Theology of Reconciliation, thirty-five purposively selected participants including ecumenical leaders, clergy, government officials, civil society actors and community beneficiaries, were interviewed and participated in focus group discussions. Findings indicate that while Liberia Council of Churches and Inter-Religious Council of Liberia made significant contributions to mediation, civic education, trauma healing, and social cohesion, their influence is increasingly challenged by political co-optation, denominational fragmentation, resource limitations, and declining public trust, particularly among youth. Nevertheless, ecumenical leadership remains a vital pillar in Liberia's fragile peace architecture. Strengthening theological depth, enhancing institutional capacity, and deepening inter-denominational collaboration are necessary to maximize their transformative potential.

Keywords: Ecumenical Leadership, Peacebuilding, Interfaith Dialogue, Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Liberia, Faith-Based Organizations

1.0 Introduction

Liberia's civil wars (1989-1997; 1999-2003) are widely considered among the most destructive conflicts in West Africa, leaving over 250,000 people dead and displacing nearly half the population (Ellis, 2006; Moran, 2008). Entire communities collapsed under violence, armed factionalism, ethnic polarization, sexual violence, and the breakdown of

essential services. The wars did not simply destroy infrastructure, they dismantled trust, weakened governance, and ruptured long-standing cultural and religious relationships. The collapse of state capacity created what Reno (1998) describes as a “shadow state,” where political elites exploited natural resources and war economies thrived.

The signing of the 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) marked a turning point but did not immediately resolve the deeply embedded structural and relational issues that fueled the conflict. Post-war Liberia faced enormous challenges: rebuilding political institutions, restoring justice systems, repairing social cohesion, reintegrating ex-combatants, and addressing trauma that continues to affect Liberian society (Sawyer, 2015; Ismail, 2019). While the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) contributed significantly to stabilizing the country, sustainable peace required actors with moral legitimacy and deep community roots capable of bridging fragmented social groups and restoring trust.

Religious institutions, especially the Liberia Council of Churches and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia, emerged as these actors. Historically, churches and mosques have functioned as Liberia’s most resilient and trusted institutions, often outlasting political administrations. Their influence stems not only from their spiritual authority but also from their extensive social networks and moral credibility (Appleby, 2000; Gifford, 2002). During the wars, clergy risked their lives to negotiate ceasefires, provide sanctuary, and advocate for human rights. Post-war, they continue to shape political discourse, public morality, and reconciliation initiatives.

The peacebuilding literature emphasises the dual role of religion as both a driver of conflict and a powerful instrument of peace (Hayward & Marshall, 2015; Rudloff & James, 2016). In Liberia, religion served primarily as a stabilizing force. While some individual religious leaders were politicized, the major ecumenical bodies consistently advocated for nonviolence, accountability, dialogue, and justice. Yet, the influence of these institutions has not been without controversy. The post-conflict era has exposed internal weaknesses, including denominational fractures, inconsistent political neutrality, and declining public

trust, particularly among Liberian youth who increasingly question religious authority (Norris & Inglehart, 2011; Yillah, 2020).

Despite these tensions, scholarship on Liberia continues to under-analyze the long-term role of ecumenical leadership in national reconciliation. Most existing studies emphasize wartime interventions, with limited attention to how LCC and IRCL contribute to or struggle within the evolving political, generational, and economic landscape of post-war Monrovia. This study, therefore, addresses a critical gap by providing a comprehensive and analytical review of ecumenical leadership in Liberia's peacebuilding processes.

2.0 Purpose of the Study

This article examines how LCC and IRCL promote peace and reconciliation in Monrovia, assessing their impact and future potential.

This study contributes to ongoing academic debates in peacebuilding, theology, and African conflict studies by offering empirically insights into the evolving role of religion in post-conflict governance, expanding theoretical discussions on faith-based and ecumenical leadership in fragile and transitional states, providing context-specific and actionable recommendations for strengthening ecumenical engagement in peace and reconciliation processes, and positioning Monrovia, Liberia as a critical case study of interfaith cooperation in post-war societies, while also generating policy-relevant findings for government institutions, religious bodies, non-governmental organizations, international peacebuilding agencies, and scholars working at the intersection of conflict, religion, and social transformation.

3.0 Historical Role of Ecumenical Leadership in Liberia

Understanding the role of the Liberia Council of Churches (LCC) and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia (IRCL) in post-conflict peacebuilding requires a careful examination of their evolution across three critical periods: pre-war Liberia, the civil war era, and the post-war reconstruction phase. Ecumenical leadership did not emerge overnight it developed

through decades of theological engagement, social advocacy, and gradual recognition as a national moral authority. Let us examine them below:

3.1 Pre-War Foundations: Religion as a Moral and Social Anchor

Prior to the outbreak of civil war, Liberia's religious institutions, particularly Christian churches, played prominent roles in education, health care, and social welfare. Mission schools and hospitals established by Protestant and Catholic denominations were among the country's most trusted institutions (Gifford, 2002). Churches helped cultivate literacy, leadership, and civic consciousness, shaping many of Liberia's political elites.

However, during the 1970s and 1980s, tensions grew between church leaders and the state. The LCC increasingly criticised corruption, ethnic favouritism, and authoritarian governance under Presidents Tolbert and Doe (Haynes, 2007). These critiques laid the groundwork for later church-based advocacy during the Civil War. Religious leaders were becoming more vocal in demanding democratic reforms, social justice, and accountability.

The Inter-Religious Council of Liberia emerged in 1990, at the onset of the First Liberian Civil War, as violence escalated in Monrovia. Its formation reflected growing recognition that Liberia's religious landscape included both Christians and Muslims who needed a unified voice for peace.

Before its formal establishment, as early as late 1989 and early 1990, Muslim clerics and Christian leaders were already collaborating informally in community mediation efforts. For example, during the initial outbreak of fighting in Nimba County (1989) and the spread of violence into Monrovia in mid-1990, local religious leaders organized joint prayer meetings and mediated disputes between displaced communities. These early efforts laid the groundwork for structured interfaith peacebuilding and directly influenced the creation of the IRCL as a formal body later in 1990.

3.2 Ecumenical Leadership During the Civil War

When Liberia descended into chaos in 1989, governance structures collapsed, and violence became widespread. Churches and mosques remained among the only functioning

institutions capable of providing humanitarian support and moral leadership. As civil society organizations disintegrated under violence, religious institutions filled the vacuum by engaging in four areas described below:

I. Mediation and Negotiation Efforts

Religious leaders played significant roles in peace negotiations across West Africa including the Lomé talks (1991), the Yamoussoukro peace accords (1991-1992), the Abuja I and II agreements (1995, 1996), and the 2003 Accra Peace Talks, where their involvement enhanced impartiality, exerted moral pressure, and appealed to the conscience of warlords and political leaders, leading scholars to argue that religious institutions frequently function as “moral guarantors” in African peace processes (Appleby, 2000; Adogame, 2013).

II. Humanitarian Support and Protection

Churches sheltered civilians fleeing armed groups. Many pastors risked their lives to negotiate safe passage for displaced populations. Mosques also opened their doors to non-Muslims a powerful example of interfaith solidarity.

III. Public Advocacy Against Atrocities

Ecumenical bodies, particularly the LCC and IRCL, issued pastoral letters and public statements condemning extrajudicial killings, the recruitment of child soldiers, sexual violence, and the exploitation of natural resources by armed factions (Gifford, 2009; Haynes, 2007; Gizelis & Joseph, 2020). These statements formed part of a broader pattern of faith-based advocacy in Liberia, where religious leaders used their moral authority to challenge impunity and call for accountability during the civil war. For example, documented interventions by religious actors consistently appealed to warring factions to respect human rights and adhere to peace agreements, while also drawing regional and international attention to ongoing abuses (Appleby, 2000; Bouta et al., 2005). Through this form of prophetic advocacy, ecumenical institutions not only condemned violence but also

contributed to shaping national and international discourse on justice and reconciliation.

IV. Mobilizing Prayer, Fasting, and Community Vigil Initiatives

While often underrepresented in mainstream peacebuilding literature, religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and community vigils contributed to psychological resilience and social cohesion. Scholars such as Appleby (2000), Bouta et al. (2005), and Hayward and Marshall (2015) note that secular approaches tend to overlook these spiritual resources. In Liberia, these practices strengthened collective identity at a time when ethnic and political divisions were intensified.

3.3 Post-War Engagement: From Crisis Response to Reconstruction

After the CPA in 2003, the role of LCC and IRCL evolved from emergency response to long-term peacebuilding. Their interventions can be categorized into governance advocacy, social healing, and institutional bridge-building (TRC Report).

Governance and Electoral Engagement Ecumenical institutions were central to election monitoring in 2005, 2011, 2017, and 2023, to nationwide voter education campaigns, and to sustained advocacy for peaceful political transitions, roles that closely mirror religious engagement in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle and Kenya's post-election reconciliation processes (De Gruchy, 2002; Galtung, 2011). While the Trauma Healing and Psychosocial Reconstruction give Liberia's massive trauma burden, churches and mosques emerged as primary sites for grief counseling, reconciliation workshops, restorative justice dialogues, and healing circles that integrated biblical and Qur'anic teachings, a role that scholars widely acknowledge as crucial because religious rituals and spiritual practices provide culturally resonant pathways for post-conflict healing and psychosocial restoration (Herman, 2015; Kelsall, 2005), moreover the the Liberia Council of Churches and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia established joint platforms for Christian-Muslim cooperation such as peace caravans, interfaith youth forums, community dialogues, and collaborative humanitarian initiatives which significantly. This collaboration reduced

religious tensions and strengthened national unity in a context where identity divisions were easily politicized.

3.4 Contemporary Challenges Emerging in Post-War Liberia

Over time, ecumenical institutions have faced mounting pressures, including increasing political co-optation as elites seek religious endorsement, fragmentation within Christian denominations that weakens a unified ecumenical voice, growing youth disengagement driven by generational and cultural shifts, and heavy dependence on inconsistent and unsustainable foreign funding; nevertheless, the LCC and IRCL continue to function as central pillars of Liberia's peace architecture, and their evolving role therefore demands deeper theoretical interrogation.

4.0 Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Conflict Transformation Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Theology of Reconciliation as complementary analytical lenses; however, unlike earlier descriptive applications, this study critically interrogates the limitations, tensions, and contextual adaptability of these frameworks within Liberia's post-conflict environment.

Conflict Transformation Theory, as developed by Lederach (1997; 2003), emphasizes relational change, structural justice, and long-term peacebuilding. While the theory remains foundational, recent scholarship suggests that its application in African contexts often underestimates the political economy of post-conflict states, where elite capture, donor dependency, and institutional fragility shape outcomes (Chigudu, 2024; Okoroafor, 2025). In Liberia, ecumenical actors operate within this constrained environment, raising critical questions: To what extent can middle-range actors remain neutral when embedded in politicized systems? And how sustainable is relational peacebuilding in the absence of structural reform?

Recent studies on digital peacebuilding further complicate Lederach's framework by demonstrating that peace processes are increasingly mediated through digital platforms, social media, and transnational networks (John, 2026; Ndawana, 2026). These

developments suggest that ecumenical leadership in Liberia must evolve beyond traditional face-to-face mediation to engage digital spaces where narratives of conflict and reconciliation are increasingly shaped.

Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) remains useful in explaining how religious institutions generate trust and networks; however, contemporary research critiques its tendency to romanticize cohesion while overlooking exclusionary dynamics and generational fragmentation (Deopa & Rinaldo, 2023; Ali et al., 2024). In Liberia, while bridging capital between Christians and Muslims remains strong, bonding capital within younger populations appears to be weakening, indicating that social capital is not static but contested and unevenly distributed.

The Theology of Reconciliation, informed by Tutu (1999) and Volf (2005), provides a normative framework for forgiveness and healing. Yet recent African scholarship emphasizes that reconciliation must be critically examined in relation to justice deficits, memory politics, and socio-economic inequalities (Du Toit et al., 2023; Munyao, 2021). In Liberia, the emphasis on forgiveness has sometimes outpaced accountability, raising concerns about “cheap reconciliation” where structural injustices remain unresolved.

Thus, this study moves beyond theoretical application to offer a contextualized critique, arguing that ecumenical leadership operates at the intersection of moral authority, political constraint, and evolving socio-digital realities.

5.0 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study with supportive descriptive survey, reflecting the complex and multidimensional nature of peacebuilding in post-conflict societies. Ecumenical leadership involves theological, relational, political, and institutional dynamics that cannot be fully captured using quantitative metrics alone. As Creswell (2014) argues, qualitative methods enable rich understanding of lived experiences, while quantitative data offer supportive trends that enhance interpretive clarity.

The case study design was selected because it allows for an in-depth examination of LCC and IRCL as unique yet representative ecumenical actors in Liberia's reconciliation landscape. According to Yin (2018), case studies are suitable for investigating contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are unclear.

The research was conducted in Monrovia, Liberia's capital and largest urban center, chosen for its strategic significance as the location of the national headquarters of the LCC and IRCL, its hosting of major political institutions where ecumenical mediation frequently occurs, its diverse religious communities that provide a rich context for examining interfaith dynamics, and its concentration of war-affected populations who relocated there during and after the conflict, making the Monrovia a microcosm of Liberia's broader social and political dynamics.

The study's target population comprised ecumenical leaders from the LCC and IRCL, denominational clergy, government officials involved in peacebuilding, civil society representatives, and community members who directly benefited from ecumenical programs. A total of 35 participants were purposively selected to provide in-depth insights into ecumenical peacebuilding, distributed as follows: 10 LCC/IRCL leaders, chosen for their direct involvement in national peace efforts; 10 denominational pastors, to capture perspectives on grassroots church engagement; 5 government officials, to understand ecumenical-state collaboration; 5 civil society actors, to assess multi-sector partnerships; and 5 community beneficiaries, to reflect lived experiences and program impact. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate because participants possessed firsthand knowledge critical to the study, consistent with Guest et al. (2013), who affirm its suitability for depth-oriented qualitative research.

Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain diverse perspectives while allowing flexibility for participants to express their personal experiences and reflections. With the informed consent of participants, all interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy, depth, and reliability of the data collected.

Document analysis was also employed as a key method of data collection. The documents reviewed included pastoral letters and public statements from the Liberia Council of Churches and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia, records from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, relevant government policy documents, reports from the United Nations Mission in Liberia, and academic literature on faith-based peacebuilding. This method enhanced data triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the study's findings.

Furthermore, a brief perception-based quantitative survey was administered to participants to complement the qualitative findings with descriptive statistical data. The survey examined perceptions of ecumenical impact, levels of trust, views on neutrality, adequacy of resources, and the effectiveness of collaboration among peacebuilding actors.

Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis approach. This process involved systematic familiarization with the data, initial coding, the generation of themes, careful review of emerging themes, clear definition and naming of themes, and the final writing up of the analysis. Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, primarily frequencies and percentages. Although the sample size was relatively small, the results revealed meaningful trends that complemented and reinforced the qualitative findings, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the study's outcomes.

The study was guided by key ethical principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of data, secure data storage, and the anonymity of participants. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences.

To protect participants' identities, real names were replaced with pseudonyms, such as "Ecumenical Leader R03," in all transcripts and reports. Sensitive data were stored securely in digital formats with password protection and were accessible only to the researcher. The study complied with institutional ethical review guidelines and was

conducted in a manner that ensured the dignity, safety, and well-being of all participants, with no foreseeable harm arising from their involvement.

The study faced several limitations that should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size, while appropriate and typical for qualitative research, limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the study context. In addition, there was a potential risk of bias, as many participants were closely affiliated with ecumenical institutions, which may have influenced their perspectives and responses.

Another limitation concerned challenges related to participants' ability to accurately recall events from the war era, given the passage of time and the emotional weight of such experiences. Furthermore, access to certain unpublished institutional archives was restricted, which constrained the availability of some documentary evidence. Despite these limitations, the use of methodological triangulation enhanced the credibility and dependability of the findings, in line with the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

6.0 Findings

The findings are presented in two sections: quantitative results and qualitative thematic analysis. Together, they demonstrate a nuanced understanding of ecumenical influence in post-conflict peacebuilding. Participants responded to five statements on a 3-point Likert scale (Agree, Neutral, Disagree). Results are summarized below:

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
LCC/IRCL contribute significantly to peacebuilding	80	14	6
Ecumenical leadership builds trust among communities	74	17	9
Mediation efforts reduce political violence	69	23	8
Collaboration with government is effective	43	31	26

Ecumenical institutions are adequately resourced	18	22	60
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By interpretation, the findings reveal that ecumenical institutions particularly the Liberia Council of Churches and Inter-Religious Council of Liberia remain central actors in Liberia's post-conflict peacebuilding landscape. Drawing on both qualitative and limited quantitative data, the study highlights a complex interplay between sustained moral influence, grassroots engagement, and emerging institutional constraints.

Survey results indicate a broadly positive perception of ecumenical leadership. A significant majority of participants (80%) affirmed that LCC and IRCL contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding processes, while 74% associated these institutions with fostering trust across communities. Similarly, 69% of respondents believed that ecumenical mediation efforts help reduce political violence. However, this positive assessment is tempered by notable concerns: only 43% perceived collaboration between ecumenical institutions and government actors as effective, and an even smaller proportion (18%) considered these institutions to be adequately resourced. These patterns suggest that while ecumenical bodies retain moral legitimacy, their operational capacity remains constrained.

Qualitative findings deepen and complicate these insights. Participants consistently identified mediation and conflict prevention as the most visible and impactful contributions of ecumenical actors. During periods of political tension particularly election cycles religious leaders are frequently called upon to initiate dialogue between opposing parties. Their perceived neutrality and moral authority enable them to convene stakeholders who might otherwise resist engagement. This mediatory role extends beyond national politics to include community-level disputes, such as land conflicts and interpersonal tensions, where religious leaders are often preferred over formal legal mechanisms due to their accessibility and trustworthiness.

Closely linked to mediation is the role of ecumenical institutions in moral advocacy and public accountability. Participants emphasized the influence of pastoral letters and public statements in shaping national discourse on issues such as corruption, electoral integrity,

gender-based violence, and social justice. These interventions position ecumenical bodies as informal custodians of public morality, capable of exerting pressure on political actors without formal authority. In this sense, their influence operates discursively as much as institutionally.

Another major theme concerns trauma healing and psychosocial recovery. In a society deeply marked by prolonged violence, churches and mosques function as primary sites of emotional and spiritual support. Participants described a range of faith-based interventions including counseling, reconciliation workshops, women's support groups, and youth rehabilitation programs that address both individual and collective trauma. These initiatives are particularly significant in contexts where formal mental health services remain limited, reinforcing the role of religious institutions as accessible and culturally resonant spaces for healing.

Interfaith collaboration emerged as one of the most distinctive strengths of Liberia's peacebuilding framework. Cooperation between Christian and Muslim leaders, particularly within the IRCL, was widely described as a stabilizing force that has helped prevent the politicization of religious identity. Joint initiatives such as peace caravans, interfaith dialogues, and coordinated messaging during elections have fostered a shared national identity that transcends religious boundaries. Participants frequently pointed to the symbolic power of visible unity between religious leaders as a source of public reassurance during moments of uncertainty.

Despite these contributions, the findings also reveal significant institutional challenges. Political co-optation was a recurring concern, with some participants suggesting that alignment with political elites undermines the perceived neutrality of religious leaders. Denominational fragmentation further complicates ecumenical cohesion, weakening the ability of institutions to present unified positions on national issues. Resource constraints were identified as a major limitation, affecting the scale and sustainability of peacebuilding programs. In addition, declining youth engagement poses a long-term challenge, as younger generations increasingly question the relevance and credibility of religious institutions.

Generational dynamics were particularly striking. While older participants tended to express strong trust in ecumenical leadership, younger respondents were more skeptical, citing perceived hypocrisy, elitism, and a disconnect between religious discourse and everyday socio-economic realities. This shift suggests a gradual erosion of automatic religious authority and highlights the need for more intentional youth-oriented engagement strategies.

Gender dynamics also surfaced as an important but underdeveloped dimension of ecumenical peacebuilding. Participants acknowledged the critical role women have played particularly in grassroots mobilization, prayer movements, and reconciliation initiatives yet noted that their contributions remain insufficiently recognized within formal leadership structures. This gap points to missed opportunities for more inclusive and transformative forms of engagement.

Finally, the findings underscore a broader tension between moral influence and institutional capacity. While LCC and IRCL are widely respected and continue to shape public discourse, their effectiveness is constrained by weak organizational structures, limited funding, and dependence on external donors. This imbalance raises important questions about sustainability and the long-term viability of ecumenical peacebuilding efforts.

Overall, the findings suggest that ecumenical institutions in Liberia occupy a paradoxical position: they are simultaneously indispensable to peacebuilding processes and constrained in their ability to fully realize their potential. Their continued relevance will depend not only on preserving moral authority but also on addressing structural and generational challenges that increasingly shape the post-conflict landscape.

7.0 Discussions

The discussion situates the findings within broader scholarly debates on religion, peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and African ecumenical leadership (Lederach, 1997; 2003; Chigudu, 2024). It interprets the empirical results through theoretical and

comparative lenses, highlighting Liberia's unique contributions to global religious peacebuilding discourse.

Despite its rich empirical contributions, scholarship on Liberia has often overlooked the evolving role of religious institutions in post-war reconstruction. This study builds on and extends earlier works such as Sewe (2018), which highlights religion's role in social reconciliation, and McMullin (2021), who examines post-war reintegration narratives.

Recent contributions by Paye & Boaheng (2024) and Paye & James (2025) further demonstrate the socio-economic and reconciliatory roles of faith-based actors in Liberia, particularly in poverty reduction and transitional justice processes. By integrating these perspectives, this study situates ecumenical leadership within a broader framework of development, governance, and social transformation (Fukuyama, 2001; Woolcock, 2010), rather than limiting it to conflict mediation alone.

This study examined the role of ecumenical institutions in Liberia's post-conflict peacebuilding landscape, focusing on the Liberia Council of Churches and Inter-Religious Council of Liberia. The findings reveal a nuanced picture: ecumenical actors remain central to Liberia's peace architecture, yet structural, political, and generational constraints increasingly shape their long-term effectiveness. Interpreted through Conflict Transformation Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Theology of Reconciliation (Lederach, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Tutu, 1999; Volf, 2005), these findings offer important insights into both the potential and limits of faith-based peacebuilding in post-conflict African contexts.

A key contribution of this study is to empirically reinforce the role of religious actors as "middle-range" peacebuilders, as conceptualized by Lederach (Lederach 1997:2003). The evidence demonstrates that LCC and IRCL operate effectively between grassroots communities and political elites, mediating disputes, facilitating dialogue, and influencing public discourse without formal state authority. Their ability to convene diverse actors during periods of political tension particularly electoral cycles highlights the continued relevance of relational forms of power in fragile contexts. Unlike state institutions, whose legitimacy may be contested, ecumenical bodies derive authority from moral credibility

and social embeddedness. This positions them as critical intermediaries in sustaining dialogue and preventing escalation.

At the same time, the findings complicate idealized assumptions about religious peacebuilding (Appleby, 2000; Philpott, 2007) by exposing the fragility of this mediatory role. Political co-optation emerges as a significant risk, suggesting that proximity to power can undermine the very neutrality that enables effective mediation. This tension reflects a broader paradox within Conflict Transformation Theory: while middle-range actors are most effective when connected to both elites and communities, such connections also expose them to pressures that may compromise their independence. In the Liberian case, maintaining this delicate balance has become increasingly difficult amid a competitive political environment.

The study also advances understanding of religion as a generator of social capital (Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 2001). Ecumenical institutions in Liberia simultaneously produce bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital, each contributing to peacebuilding in distinct ways. Bonding capital strengthens internal cohesion within religious communities, enabling collective mobilization for peace initiatives. Bridging capital, most visibly expressed through Christian-Muslim collaboration, plays a crucial role in mitigating identity-based divisions and fostering national unity. Linking capital, as reflected in religious leaders' access to political and international actors, facilitates communication across different levels of governance.

However, the findings suggest that these forms of social capital are unevenly distributed and increasingly strained. While bridging capital remains a notable strength in Liberia distinguishing it from more conflict-prone contexts such as Nigeria linking capital appears more contested, particularly in relation to state actors. Furthermore, the erosion of youth trust signals a weakening of bonding capital across generations. These dynamics indicate that social capital, while essential, is neither static nor self-sustaining; it requires continuous renewal through institutional credibility and social relevance.

The theological dimension of ecumenical peacebuilding provides an additional layer of interpretation. The study confirms that the Theology of Reconciliation is not merely a

normative framework but a lived practice embedded in Liberia's post-conflict recovery. Faith-based narratives of forgiveness, repentance, and restoration shape how individuals and communities process trauma and rebuild relationships. In contexts where formal justice mechanisms are often limited or contested, these theological resources offer alternative pathways to healing that are culturally resonant and widely accessible.

Yet, the effectiveness of these theological approaches is not without limits. The findings suggest that while religious narratives remain influential among older generations, their resonance is diminishing among younger populations. This generational shift raises critical questions about the future of faith-based peacebuilding: if theological frameworks no longer carry the same moral authority, their capacity to sustain long-term reconciliation may be significantly reduced. This points to the need for a rearticulation of theological engagement that speaks to contemporary socio-economic realities and evolving forms of identity.

Importantly, the study highlights a persistent gap between moral authority and institutional capacity. LCC and IRCL are widely perceived as legitimate and trustworthy, yet limited resources, weak organizational structures, and dependence on external funding constrain their ability to operationalize this legitimacy. This imbalance underscores a critical limitation in much of the literature on religious peacebuilding, which tends to emphasize normative and relational strengths while underestimating the importance of institutional infrastructure. The Liberian case demonstrates that moral influence alone is insufficient; sustainable peacebuilding requires organizational resilience and strategic capacity.

Compared with other African contexts, Liberia presents both convergences and divergences. Similar to South Africa, ecumenical institutions have played a visible role in shaping public morality and advocating for justice. However, unlike the more institutionalized structures observed in South Africa, Liberia's ecumenical bodies operate with comparatively weaker organizational foundations. In contrast to Nigeria, where interreligious tensions often exacerbate conflict, Liberia's experience illustrates the stabilizing potential of sustained interfaith collaboration. These comparisons suggest that while the role of religion in peacebuilding is broadly significant across Africa, its

effectiveness is highly context-dependent, shaped by historical, institutional, and socio-political factors (Herman, 2015; Villa-Vicencio, 2009).

Taken together, the findings call for a more nuanced understanding of faith-based peacebuilding one that moves beyond binary assumptions of religion as either a force for peace or conflict. In the Liberian context, ecumenical institutions function as dynamic actors whose influence is contingent, negotiated, and evolving. Their continued relevance will depend on their ability to maintain credibility in politically charged environments, adapt to generational shifts, and strengthen institutional capacity without compromising their moral foundations.

In this regard, the study contributes to broader debates in African peace and conflict studies (Ramsbotham et al., 2011; Hayward & Marshall, 2015) by demonstrating that the effectiveness of religious actors lies not only in their spiritual authority or social embeddedness but in their capacity to navigate the complex intersections of religion, politics, and society in post-conflict settings.

8.0 Recommendations

To enhance the impact and sustainability of ecumenical leadership in Liberia, this study proposes recommendations for ecumenical institutions, government, civil society, international partners, and local congregations.

For the LCC and IRCL, strengthening institutional capacity is essential through clear structures, peace desks, and staff training in conflict resolution and trauma care. They should also promote interdenominational and interfaith unity by establishing permanent platforms for cooperation, while safeguarding political neutrality through strict codes of conduct. Expanding youth-focused initiatives, improving trauma healing programs, and ensuring financial sustainability through diversified funding are also critical for long-term effectiveness.

For the Government of Liberia, ecumenical actors should be formally included in national peace frameworks such as reconciliation commissions and early warning systems. The government should provide financial and technical support for community peacebuilding,

implement key TRC recommendations in partnership with religious institutions, and strengthen legal frameworks that protect religious freedom and prevent political misuse of religion.

Civil society and international partners should support multi-sector collaboration with ecumenical bodies, particularly in peace education, governance, and anti-corruption efforts. They should also invest in training, exchange programs, and long-term funding to ensure continuity and sustainability of peacebuilding initiatives.

At the grassroots level, churches and mosques should integrate peace education into religious teaching, promote interfaith dialogue through joint activities, and strengthen accountability among religious leaders. They should also encourage community-based reconciliation through local dialogues, healing initiatives, and mediation efforts to rebuild trust and social cohesion.

9.0 Conclusion

This article set out to critically examine the ecumenical role of the Liberia Council of Churches and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia in promoting peacebuilding and reconciliation in post-conflict Monrovia. Building upon theoretical frameworks from Conflict Transformation Theory, Social Capital Theory, and the Theology of Reconciliation, the study explored how religious institutions contribute to mediating political conflict, shaping moral discourse, healing trauma, and strengthening social cohesion in Liberia's fragile post-war landscape.

Across the civil war, transitional period, and contemporary Liberia, LCC and IRCL have demonstrated considerable influence through mediation, advocacy, interfaith collaboration, and community-level interventions. Their moral authority, broad constituencies, and ability to mobilize social capital position them as indispensable actors in sustaining peace. The empirical findings reveal that Liberians overwhelmingly acknowledge the positive impact of ecumenical leadership on national stability, with 80% of surveyed participants agreeing that LCC/IRCL significantly contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation.

However, this article also documented significant constraints that hinder long-term ecumenical effectiveness. These include political co-optation, denominational fragmentation, structural weaknesses, inadequate resources, and declining youth trust. Such challenges are not unique to Liberia but reflect broader patterns of Ecumenical leadership in Africa's democratizing and post-conflict societies. Without addressing these institutional vulnerabilities, ecumenical actors risk losing their relevance and moral credibility.

The theological dimension of ecumenical peacebuilding remains critical. Liberia's churches and mosques are not merely social institutions they are spiritual communities capable of reshaping narratives, fostering forgiveness, cultivating hope, and guiding ethical transformation. While secular peacebuilding frameworks tend to neglect these spiritual dimensions, this study demonstrates their centrality in Liberia's national healing.

Going forward, ecumenical institutions must strengthen organizational capacity, reinforce political neutrality, deepen interfaith cooperation, and engage youth more meaningfully. Doing so will enhance their ability to support a more inclusive, just, and peaceful Liberia.

Ultimately, Liberia's experience confirms a broader truth in African peacebuilding: religious institutions, when properly empowered and ethically grounded, are among the most effective guardians of national reconciliation and long-term peace.

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