

The Role of Intercultural Relational Skills in Enhancing Peaceful Co-existence among Churches in New Heights Baptist Association, Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

The increasing cultural diversity of urban churches in Lagos, Nigeria, presents significant challenges for leadership in fostering unity and peaceful coexistence. This study investigated the role of intercultural relational skills among church leaders in promoting peaceful coexistence within the New Heights Baptist Association. A concurrent triangulation mixed methods design was adopted, involving 150 participants comprising 144 survey respondents and six interview participants selected through purposive sampling. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Findings indicate that church leaders demonstrate relatively high levels of intercultural relational skills, particularly empathy ($M = 4.08$), inclusive communication ($M = 3.88$), and emotional intelligence ($M = 3.87$). A majority of respondents (73.6%) affirmed that these skills contribute to reducing conflict and enhancing unity within congregations. Although 54.2% of respondents agreed that church leaders receive training in intercultural competence, the relatively modest mean score ($M = 3.36$) suggests that such training is neither widespread nor consistently institutionalised across churches, indicating a gap in structured capacity development. Qualitative findings further highlight underlying cultural tensions, including language barriers, minority exclusion, and informal approaches to conflict management. The study concludes that while intercultural relational skills are present among church leaders, their inconsistent application limits their effectiveness in sustaining peaceful coexistence. The study therefore recommends integrating structured intercultural competence training into ministerial formation and leadership development within Baptist associations.

Keywords: Intercultural Relational Skills, Peaceful Coexistence, Church Leadership, Cultural Diversity, Intercultural Competence.

Introduction

The contemporary African church stands at a critical intersection of spiritual responsibility and cultural plurality, especially within urban centres such as Lagos, Nigeria. Internal migration, transnational movement, and rapid urbanisation have brought together communities of diverse ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic identities, reshaping the social and religious landscapes of contemporary cities (Beeckmans, 2018; Garbin, 2023). As a result, churches within settings like the New Heights Baptist Association are no longer

culturally homogeneous but are deeply pluralistic, mirroring the complex dynamics of urban life (Obasa, 2023).

The Christian church has always been multicultural from its inception. The events at Pentecost (Acts 2), where people from various nations heard the gospel in their languages, and the cultural tensions between Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews in Acts 6 illustrate the early church's struggle with diversity. Churches in the 21st century are called to that same reconciliation and relational bridge-building ministry. However, ethnic clustering, miscommunication, relational conflicts, and silent competition remain prevalent in contemporary congregations, particularly in urban settings where multiple cultures converge (Afolaranmi, 2021).

As primary stewards of ecclesial unity, church leaders are responsible for doctrinal soundness, administrative oversight, and the management of intercultural and interpersonal dynamics. Effective leadership in such environments demands more than theological knowledge or administrative skill. It requires emotional intelligence, cultural humility, and inclusive relational engagement. These competencies, broadly described as intercultural relational skills, are vital for fostering peaceful coexistence in multicultural congregational contexts. Research has shown that intercultural communication and emotional intelligence are critical for church management and growth in multicultural regions such as Lagos (Olabode & Akande, 2025; Obasa, 2023). Studies further indicate that contextually sensitive leadership strategies foster religious moderation and social cohesion in multicultural societies (Untung et al., 2025). Evidence from Nigerian diasporic churches also underscores the importance of navigating intercultural and intergenerational differences to sustain unity and minimise conflict (Adenekan-Koevoets, 2021), while studies of urban Lagos highlight the realities of religious plurality and ongoing negotiation among diverse faith communities (Bankole, 2022). These dynamics underscore the need for church leaders to develop intercultural competencies that enable constructive engagement across cultural and religious boundaries.

Despite the growing cultural diversity within urban churches in Lagos, the capacity of church leaders to manage intercultural relationships effectively remains uneven and underappreciated. Existing scholarship on intercultural competence has established that skills such as empathy, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive communication are critical for fostering cohesion in diverse organisational settings (Deardorff, 2006; De Beer, 2020). In ecclesial contexts, these competencies are particularly important, as churches are expected to model unity across ethnic, linguistic, and social boundaries. However, much of the available literature on African church leadership remains either conceptual or broadly descriptive, with limited empirical attention to how intercultural relational skills are practically demonstrated and applied within specific denominational structures.

In the Nigerian Baptist context, and particularly in urban associations such as the New Heights Baptist Association in Lagos State, there is limited documented evidence on how church leaders deploy intercultural relational skills in everyday leadership practices or how such deployment influences peaceful coexistence among congregations. While anecdotal observations suggest the presence of cultural tensions, including communication barriers,

perceived exclusion of minority groups, and relational misunderstandings, these issues have not been systematically examined using empirical data within a defined associational framework. This creates a gap between the theological ideal of unity in diversity and the practical realities of leadership in multicultural church environments.

Consequently, there is a need for a focused empirical investigation that examines both the presence and application of intercultural relational skills among church leaders and evaluates their influence on peaceful coexistence within a specific denominational context. Addressing this gap will not only contribute to academic discussions on intercultural ecclesiology and leadership but also provide practical insights for leadership development, ministerial training, and conflict management within Nigerian Baptist associations and similar multicultural church settings.

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of intercultural relational skills in fostering peaceful coexistence among churches within the New Heights Baptist Association in Lagos State, Nigeria.

The Specific Objectives are to:

1. Assess the level of intercultural relational skills (including empathy, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive communication) demonstrated by church leaders within the New Heights Baptist Association.
2. Examine the extent to which intercultural relational skills are applied in leadership practices and administrative processes within the Association.
3. Identify the forms of cultural and relational tensions experienced among churches within the New Heights Baptist Association.
4. Determine the perceived relationship between intercultural relational skills and peaceful coexistence among member churches within the Association.

Research Questions

To accomplish these objectives, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What levels of intercultural relational skills are demonstrated by church leaders within the New Heights Baptist Association?
2. To what extent are these intercultural relational skills applied in leadership practices and administrative processes within the Association?
3. What forms of cultural and relational tensions are experienced among churches within the New Heights Baptist Association?
4. What is the perceived relationship between intercultural relational skills and peaceful coexistence among member churches?

Hypothesis

To further examine the fourth research question, the following null hypothesis was tested:
 H_0 : There is no significant relationship between intercultural relational skills and peaceful coexistence among member churches within the New Heights Baptist Association.

Literature Review

Intercultural Leadership in African Urban Churches

Intercultural leadership involves the capacity to engage difference constructively, recognising that cultural identities influence communication patterns, expectations of authority, and participation in communal life. Urbanisation across Africa has intensified the cultural complexity of Christian congregations, requiring church leaders to move beyond traditional administrative and doctrinal responsibilities towards more contextually responsive forms of leadership that address the realities of contemporary African ministry (Kgatlé, 2024; Magezi & Madimutsa, 2023; De Beer, 2020). Theological reflections on inculturation further suggest that Christian leadership in Africa must engage cultural realities constructively, affirming diversity while maintaining the unity of the body of Christ (Kurgat, 2009). Similarly, contemporary studies have emphasised that African churches contribute meaningfully to Christian mission when they cultivate unity through contextually responsive practices that accommodate diversity and promote inclusion (Alawode, 2024). These dynamics suggest that leadership effectiveness in such contexts depends not only on spiritual authority but on relational and cultural intelligence.

Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence remains foundational in this discourse, identifying attitudes such as openness and respect, alongside skills such as empathy and adaptability, as critical for effective intercultural engagement. Within African ecclesial contexts, these competencies must be contextualised to reflect communal values, relational ethics, and the theological imperative of unity. The challenge, however, lies not merely in recognising the importance of these skills but in their consistent application within everyday church leadership.

Relational Competence and Emotional Intelligence in Church Leadership

Relational competence provides a crucial bridge between intercultural theory and leadership practice. It refers to leaders' ability to navigate interpersonal dynamics to foster trust, collaboration, and mutual respect. In multicultural church environments, relational competence becomes particularly significant, as leaders must engage individuals whose cultural frameworks shape how they interpret communication, authority, and belonging.

Emotional intelligence has been widely identified as a key dimension of relational competence. Although Goleman's (1998) framework remains foundational, more recent leadership studies emphasise its relevance in complex social systems where leaders must respond to diversity and tension with sensitivity and discernment. Research within African church contexts suggests that emotionally intelligent leaders who exhibit empathy, self-awareness, and relational sensitivity are better equipped to manage conflict, facilitate reconciliation, and sustain cohesion within congregations. Such competencies enable leaders to respond constructively to interpersonal tensions while fostering trust, unity, and organisational stability within faith communities (Labuschagne & Steenkamp, 2023; Afolabi, 2023).

Inclusive communication is also a central component of relational competence. In multilingual and multi-ethnic congregations, the ability to adapt communication styles and

create participatory spaces significantly influences members' sense of belonging. Research within African church contexts indicates that exclusion is frequently embedded in organizational cultures, governance structures, leadership arrangements, and communicative practices rather than expressed through overt discriminatory actions. Such subtle forms of exclusion can limit participation, representation, and influence within congregational decision-making processes (Dweba, Mbali, & Rashe, 2020; Niemandt, 2019). This underscores the importance of intentional relational practices in fostering inclusion.

Intercultural Competence and Peaceful Coexistence in Ecclesial Contexts

Peaceful coexistence in church communities extends beyond the absence of visible conflict to encompass mutual respect, inclusion, and collaborative engagement. Intercultural competence plays a central role in achieving this, as it enables leaders to address differences constructively and prevent misunderstandings from escalating into conflict.

Empirical studies within Nigerian church contexts suggest that cultural diversity, when not intentionally managed through inclusive leadership practices, can generate relational tensions that undermine congregational unity. Okonkwo (2021) observed that leadership dynamics shaped by cultural identity often influence participation, belonging, and perceptions of inclusion within Nigerian churches. Such tensions may manifest through subtle forms of exclusion and unequal representation, thereby affecting the quality of relationships and peaceful coexistence among church members. Research in the *Journal of African Christian Studies* indicates that such challenges often remain unaddressed at structural levels, resulting in what may be described as "surface-harmony," where outward peace masks underlying relational fractures (Magezi & Madimutsa, 2023).

Conversely, when intercultural relational skills are intentionally applied, they contribute to measurable improvements in cohesion and collaboration. Leaders who demonstrate empathy, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive practices are more likely to foster environments where diversity is experienced as a strength rather than a source of division. This reinforces the argument that peaceful coexistence within multicultural churches is not automatic but requires deliberate relational engagement.

Theological Education and Intercultural Formation

The preparedness of church leaders to navigate intercultural dynamics is closely linked to the nature of their theological training. There is growing concern within African theological scholarship that traditional ministerial formation has not adequately addressed the realities of cultural diversity in contemporary ministry contexts. De Beer (2020) argues that theological education must be restructured to reflect the lived realities of urban communities, incorporating intercultural competence as a core component of leadership formation.

Scholars emphasise the need for contextually grounded training that equips leaders with practical skills for managing diversity, including conflict resolution, cultural awareness, and

inclusive communication (Kgatlé, 2024; Magezi & Madimutsa, 2023). Without such training, leaders often rely on personal experience rather than structured knowledge, leading to inconsistent, reactive approaches to intercultural challenges.

This training gap has significant implications for church leadership. While leaders may possess intuitive relational abilities, the absence of formal preparation limits their capacity to apply these skills systematically. As a result, the effectiveness of intercultural leadership remains uneven across congregations.

Empirical Gap and Justification

Although the importance of intercultural competence in church leadership is widely acknowledged, existing research reveals several limitations. First, much of the literature remains conceptual, with limited empirical studies examining how these competencies are operationalised within specific denominational contexts. Second, insufficient attention is paid to the distinction between the presence of intercultural skills and their actual deployment in leadership practice. Third, few studies adopt mixed methods approaches that integrate quantitative assessment with qualitative insights into lived experiences.

In the Nigerian Baptist Convention and within associational structures such as the New Heights Baptist Association, there is little empirical research examining how intercultural relational skills influence peaceful coexistence among churches. This study addresses these gaps by providing a context-specific, data-driven analysis of the levels and applications of intercultural relational skills and their implications for unity and collaboration within a multicultural ecclesial setting.

Conceptual Framework

This study is conceptually anchored on Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model and Goleman's (1998) emotional intelligence framework. Deardorff's model emphasises attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for effective and appropriate interaction across cultural differences, while Goleman's framework highlights the importance of emotional awareness, empathy, and relationship management in leadership practice.

Drawing from these perspectives, the present study conceptualises intercultural relational skills as comprising empathy, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive communication. These competencies are expected to shape the manner in which church leaders engage in leadership practices and administrative processes within multicultural congregations. The effective deployment of these skills is further expected to minimise cultural and relational tensions and promote peaceful coexistence characterised by unity, collaboration, inclusion, and a sense of belonging among member churches.

The framework therefore assumes that intercultural relational skills constitute important leadership resources that influence both leadership practices and the quality of relationships within culturally diverse church settings. Consequently, higher levels of these competencies are expected to contribute positively to peaceful coexistence among churches within the New Heights Baptist Association.

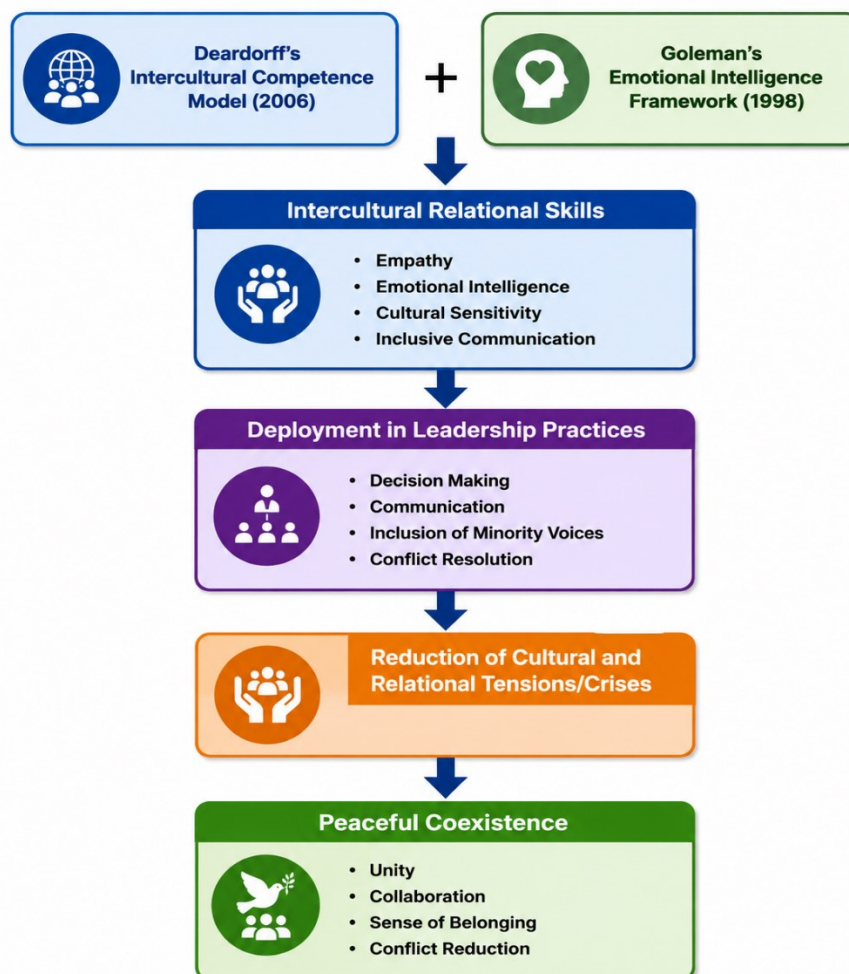


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Relationship between Intercultural Relational Skills and Peaceful Coexistence among Churches in the New Heights Baptist Association

Source: Adapted from Deardorff (2006) and Goleman (1998), modified by the researchers (2025).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods descriptive survey research design to examine intercultural relational skills among church leaders and their role in promoting peaceful coexistence within the New Heights Baptist Association in Lagos State, Nigeria. Specifically, a concurrent triangulation strategy was adopted, allowing for the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. This approach enabled the integration and comparison of findings from both strands, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the study. The quantitative component provided measurable insights into the levels and application of intercultural relational skills, while the qualitative

component offered detailed contextual accounts of leadership experiences and intercultural interactions within the Association. The combination of both approaches facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised pastors, deacons, and selected lay leaders from churches affiliated with the New Heights Baptist Association. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants with relevant leadership experience and exposure to intercultural church dynamics. Twelve churches were selected to reflect the cultural diversity within the Association. From these churches, a total of 150 participants were targeted. Of these, 144 participants completed the structured questionnaire, representing a response rate of 96%, while 6 participants with over 15 years of leadership experience were selected for in depth interviews to provide qualitative insights.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using two primary instruments. The first was a structured questionnaire designed to assess key dimensions of intercultural relational skills, including empathy, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive communication. These constructs were conceptually informed by Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence. The questionnaire utilised a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The instrument was subjected to expert review by scholars in religious and intercultural studies to ensure content validity, and it was pilot tested among a small group of church leaders outside the study sample to enhance clarity and coherence. The second instrument consisted of semi structured interviews conducted with selected church leaders. The interviews focused on participants' experiences in managing cultural diversity, addressing relational tensions, and applying intercultural skills in leadership practice. These interviews provided deeper contextual understanding that complemented the quantitative findings.

To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted among 50 church leaders selected from a Baptist association outside the study area. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The reliability coefficients obtained were 0.83 for Intercultural Relational Skills (IRS), 0.74 for Deployment of Intercultural Skills (DIS), 0.88 for Cultural and Relational Crises (CRC), and 0.90 for Intercultural Relational Skills and Peaceful Coexistence (IIRSPC). Since all coefficients exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70, the instrument was considered reliable for the study.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. These measures were used to evaluate the levels and patterns of intercultural relational skills and their perceived relationship with peaceful coexistence. In addition to descriptive statistics, Pearson Product Moment

Correlation was employed to test the null hypothesis and determine the relationship between intercultural relational skills and peaceful coexistence among member churches. The test was conducted at the 0.05 level of significance. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were carefully reviewed and coded by the researcher, with themes developed inductively from recurring patterns in the data. To ensure consistency, the coding process involved repeated reading and comparison of responses to refine thematic categories.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and their voluntary participation was secured through informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to interview participants, and respondents were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

While the study provides valuable insights into intercultural leadership within the New Heights Baptist Association, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on purposive sampling restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalised beyond the specific context of the study. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias. Nevertheless, the mixed methods approach enhances the credibility of the findings by integrating both quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

Results Interpretations and Discussions

Results Interpretations

The results of the study are presented using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, to examine the levels and application of intercultural relational skills among church leaders, as well as their perceived relationship with peaceful coexistence within the New Heights Baptist Association. The findings are organised according to the study's research objectives.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 144)

S/N	Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1.	Age	Under 30	18	12.5
		30–39	36	25.0
		40–49	48	33.3
		50–59	30	20.8
		60 and above	12	8.3
2.	Gender	Male	98	68.1
		Female	46	31.9
3.	Marital Status	Single	28	19.4
		Married	106	73.6
		Widowed	6	4.2

S/N	Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
		Divorced	4	2.8
4.	Position in Church	Pastor	60	41.7
		Deacon	42	29.2
		Lay Leader	38	26.4
		Others	4	2.8
5.	Years of Experience	< 5 years	18	12.5
		5–10 years	42	29.2
		11–15 years	54	37.5
		Over 15 years	30	20.8
6.	Educational Qualification	SSCE	6	4.2
		OND/NCE	20	13.9
		B.A/B.Sc.	60	41.7
		M.A./M.Sc.	44	30.6
		PhD	14	9.7
7.	Ethnic Group	Yoruba	114	79.2
		Igbo	16	11.1
		Hausa	6	4.2
		Others	8	5.5
8.	Church Location	Mainland LGAs	84	58.3
		Island LGAs	60	41.7

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The majority of participants were within the age range of 40–49 years (33.3%), indicating that the sample largely consisted of experienced and mature church leaders. The gender distribution shows a higher proportion of male respondents (68.1%), reflecting the gender composition of leadership within the Association.

In terms of leadership roles, pastors constituted the largest group (41.7%), followed by deacons (29.2%) and lay leaders (26.4%), suggesting that the data captures perspectives across multiple levels of church leadership. The respondents were also relatively well educated, with a significant proportion holding Bachelor's (41.7%) and postgraduate degrees (40.3%), indicating their capacity to engage with complex leadership and intercultural issues.

Ethnically, the sample was predominantly Yoruba (79.2%), which reflects the demographic reality of the study context but also suggests a potential imbalance that may influence intercultural interactions within the Association. Generally, the demographic distribution provides a credible basis for examining intercultural relational dynamics within the churches studied.

Table 2: Intercultural Relational Skills among Church Leaders

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	Church leaders demonstrate empathy when dealing with members of diverse backgrounds.	56	62	12	10	4	4.08	0.92
2	My church leadership promotes active listening across ethnic and language groups.	48	60	20	10	6	3.90	1.01
3	Leaders intentionally foster inclusive communication in our congregation.	50	58	18	12	6	3.88	1.03
4	Cultural sensitivity is a regular consideration in decision-making processes.	46	60	22	10	6	3.84	0.99
5	Leaders exhibit emotional intelligence in resolving conflicts.	52	54	20	12	6	3.87	1.02

Table 2 examines the levels of intercultural relational skills demonstrated by church leaders. The findings indicate generally high levels of perceived competence across all measured dimensions. Empathy recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.92$), suggesting that respondents strongly perceive church leaders as emotionally responsive and understanding toward individuals from diverse backgrounds. Active listening ($M = 3.90$) and inclusive communication ($M = 3.88$) also recorded high mean values, indicating that leaders are viewed as relatively attentive and intentional in engaging diverse groups within the church.

Similarly, emotional intelligence ($M = 3.87$) and cultural sensitivity ($M = 3.84$) were positively rated, reflecting a general perception that leaders possess the interpersonal and cultural awareness necessary for navigating multicultural environments. However, the standard deviation values, which are close to or above 1.00 in some cases, suggest a moderate level of variation in responses, indicating that these competencies may not be uniformly experienced across all churches.

The results suggest that while intercultural relational skills are present among church leaders, the variation in responses points to inconsistencies in how these skills are demonstrated across different congregations.

Table 3: Deployment of Intercultural Skills

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
6	Our church leaders receive training on intercultural competence.	30	48	32	22	12	3.36	1.18
7	Intercultural relational skills are applied in leadership meetings and planning sessions.	42	56	20	18	8	3.70	1.09
8	Efforts are made to include minority voices in church activities and leadership.	38	54	26	18	8	3.62	1.07

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
9	Leaders adapt their communication to suit culturally diverse audiences.	40	60	18	16	10	3.70	1.10
10	My church promotes cultural celebrations that reflect our diversity.	36	52	22	24	10	3.51	1.14

Table 3 focuses on the extent to which intercultural relational skills are applied in leadership practices. The findings reveal a noticeable gap between perceived competence and actual deployment. While leaders are generally regarded as possessing intercultural skills, their systematic application appears limited. The lowest-rated item relates to formal intercultural training ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.18$). Although 54.2% of respondents agreed that church leaders receive training on intercultural competence, the comparatively lower mean score indicates that such training is not consistently available across all churches within the Association. This suggests variation in access to structured intercultural capacity development. This is a critical finding, as it suggests that many leaders rely on informal or experiential knowledge rather than formal preparation.

Other items, such as the application of intercultural skills in leadership meetings ($M = 3.70$) and efforts to include minority voices ($M = 3.62$), show moderate levels of agreement, suggesting that such practices are present but not consistently embedded within leadership processes. Similarly, cultural celebrations ($M = 3.51$) are not widely institutionalised across churches.

These findings indicate that intercultural relational skills are applied in an ad hoc manner rather than through structured and intentional frameworks. This inconsistency highlights a significant gap between awareness of intercultural competence and its practical implementation within church leadership.

Table 4: Cultural and Relational Crises

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
11	Cultural misunderstandings have led to conflicts within the church in the past.	24	40	34	26	20	3.01	1.23
12	Ethnic or language divisions hinder collaboration among congregations.	20	36	38	30	20	2.91	1.20
13	Some members feel excluded due to their cultural background.	22	32	40	30	20	2.88	1.18
14	There have been noticeable tensions between churches in the association.	18	30	42	32	22	2.79	1.17
15	Leadership crises in our church have been tied to cultural misalignment.	26	28	36	34	20	2.89	1.23

Table 4 presents respondents' perceptions of cultural and relational tensions within the Association. The mean item scores range from 2.79 to 3.01, indicating moderate to low agreement regarding the presence of overt conflict. This suggests that respondents do not strongly perceive cultural tensions as widespread or highly visible within the churches. However, the values are not sufficiently low to indicate the complete absence of such issues. For instance, cultural misunderstandings ($M = 3.01$) and ethnic divisions affecting collaboration ($M = 2.91$) reflect a cautious acknowledgement of underlying tensions. Similarly, perceptions of exclusion ($M = 2.88$) and leadership crises linked to cultural misalignment ($M = 2.89$) indicate that such issues exist, albeit not always openly expressed. These findings suggest that, while overt conflict may not be prominent, subtle, less visible forms of cultural tension may persist within the Association. This aligns with the notion that surface harmony can coexist with underlying relational challenges in multicultural settings.

Table 5: Impact of Intercultural Relational Skills on Peaceful Co-existence

S/N	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
16	Intercultural relational skills help to reduce conflicts in our church.	54	64	12	10	4	4.07	0.91
17	Churches with inclusive leadership experience more unity and growth.	60	58	14	8	4	4.15	0.89
18	Our church enjoys peaceful co-existence due to proactive intercultural leadership.	50	60	20	10	4	4.01	0.94
19	Collaborative events across churches help to promote unity.	58	62	14	6	4	4.17	0.85
20	There is a strong sense of belonging among members from different cultural groups.	48	60	20	10	6	3.94	0.98

Table 5 examines the perceived relationship between intercultural relational skills and peaceful coexistence. The results indicate strong agreement across all items, with mean scores ranging from 3.94 to 4.17. The highest-rated item, collaborative events promoting unity ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.85$), suggests that shared activities across churches are seen as highly effective in fostering cohesion. Inclusive leadership ($M = 4.15$) and conflict reduction through intercultural skills ($M = 4.07$) were also strongly affirmed, indicating that respondents perceive a clear connection between relational competence and positive church outcomes. Additionally, the reported sense of belonging among diverse members ($M = 3.94$) reflects a generally inclusive environment within the Association. These findings reinforce the importance of intercultural relational skills as key drivers of unity, collaboration, and peaceful coexistence within multicultural church contexts.

Test of Hypothesis

Table 6: Pearson Correlation between Intercultural Relational Skills and Peaceful Coexistence

Variables	N	Pearson's r	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Intercultural Relational Skills and Peaceful Coexistence	144	0.45	0.032	Significant

The findings revealed a moderate positive relationship between intercultural relational skills and peaceful coexistence ($r = 0.45$, $p = 0.032$, $N = 144$). Since the p-value was less than 0.05, the relationship was statistically significant. This implies that higher levels of intercultural relational skills among church leaders are associated with increased peaceful coexistence among member churches within the Association.

Table 7: Summary of Thematic Findings from Qualitative Interviews (N = 6)

	Theme	Description	Frequency	Sample Quotes
1.	Cultural Conflict and Misunderstanding	Church leaders identified language barriers, tribal bias, and cultural expectations as significant sources of tension within and between congregations.	5 out of 6	"We had a major misunderstanding because some leaders thought their ideas were not accepted just because they were from a minority group."
2.	Empathy and Emotional Intelligence as Conflict Solvers	Respondents emphasised the importance of empathy, patience, and emotional control when leading diverse congregations.	6 out of 6	"When I listen without judging and show understanding, people feel heard, even when I disagree."
3.	Inclusive Communication	Leaders who used accessible language and translated sermons or announcements said this helped non-native speakers feel included.	4 out of 6	"We started interpreting our services into other local dialects, and people now participate more actively."
4.	Training and Exposure Gap	Most leaders admitted they had never received formal intercultural training and mainly relied on experience.	5 out of 6	"No, I was never trained for this. I just had to learn on the job, especially when conflict arose."
5.	Biblical Basis for Intercultural Unity	Interviewees referenced Scripture (e.g., Acts 2, Gal. 3:28, Eph. 4) to justify cultural inclusivity and unity in the body of Christ.	6 out of 6	"The gospel was first preached in many languages. So diversity is not a problem, it's a call to unity."
6.	Marginalisation and Power Imbalance	Some leaders acknowledged that minority voices are often sidelined during decision-making.	3 out of 6	"Sometimes it's unintentional, but the dominant group always takes the lead."
7.	Practical Solutions and Recommendations	Interviewees suggested workshops, pulpit exchanges, and cultural days to promote unity.	5 out of 6	"We held a joint service with three churches from different tribes. People cried and embraced after."

The qualitative findings provide deeper insight into the dynamics underlying the quantitative results. Themes such as cultural conflict, empathy as a conflict resolution tool, inclusive communication, and the lack of formal training reinforce the patterns observed in the survey data.

The theme of “training and exposure gap,” identified by five out of six interview participants, complements the quantitative findings. Although more than half of the respondents (54.2%) agreed that church leaders receive intercultural training, interview data suggest that such training is often informal, sporadic, or experience-based rather than systematically provided through structured programmes. This points to inconsistencies in leadership preparation across the Association. Similarly, the emergence of marginalisation and power imbalance within the qualitative findings further reveals that cultural tensions in church settings are not always overt but may be embedded in leadership practices and decision-making structures. Although some participants viewed such exclusion as unintentional, the tendency for dominant groups to shape discussions and outcomes may affect members' sense of belonging and participation. This finding corroborates Okonkwo's (2021) observation that leadership dynamics influenced by cultural identity often shape perceptions of inclusion and exclusion within Nigerian churches, thereby contributing to subtle relational tensions that may undermine peaceful coexistence.

The consistent reference to biblical foundations for unity further indicates that church leaders possess a theological framework that supports intercultural engagement, even when practical implementation is inconsistent. Overall, the qualitative findings deepen the interpretation of the results by revealing the lived experiences and underlying complexities of intercultural leadership within the Association.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a complex relationship between the presence of intercultural relational skills and their practical application within church leadership in the New Heights Baptist Association. While the quantitative results indicate that church leaders are perceived to possess relatively high levels of intercultural competence, the qualitative findings suggest that these competencies are not consistently translated into structured leadership practices. This distinction between competence and deployment represents a critical insight into intercultural leadership within multicultural ecclesial contexts.

The high mean scores recorded for empathy, inclusive communication, and emotional intelligence suggest that church leaders are generally aware of and committed to relational values that support intercultural engagement. This aligns with Deardorff's (2006) model, which emphasises attitudes such as openness and respect as foundational to effective intercultural interaction. Similarly, studies in African theological scholarship have highlighted the importance of relational and culturally sensitive leadership in navigating diversity within urban churches (De Beer, 2020; Magezi & Madimutsa, 2023). The qualitative data, where participants emphasised listening, patience, and understanding,

further supports the interpretation that these competencies are present at a perceptual and attitudinal level.

However, the findings also reveal a significant gap in the structured application of these skills. While more than half of the respondents (54.2%) acknowledged the availability of intercultural competence training, the relatively lower mean score suggests that access to such training is uneven across churches. Consequently, many leaders appear to rely on informal learning and practical experience, which may lead to variations in the application of intercultural leadership practices. Existing literature has similarly observed that leadership effectiveness in multicultural contexts depends not only on the presence of interpersonal skills but on their intentional and institutionalised application (Kgatlé, 2024; Niemandt, 2019). Without structured training frameworks, leaders may demonstrate competence in isolated situations while lacking the capacity to embed these skills within organisational processes.

Another important finding relates to the nature of cultural and relational tensions within the Association. While the quantitative results suggest relatively low levels of overt conflict, the qualitative findings reveal underlying issues such as marginalisation of minority voices, language barriers, and perceived exclusion in decision-making. This apparent contradiction suggests that cultural tensions may be present but not openly acknowledged, resulting in what can be described as surface-level harmony. Such dynamics have been noted in studies of multicultural religious communities, where relational imbalances persist beneath outward expressions of unity (Magezi & Madimutsa, 2023).

The inferential findings extend the descriptive results by providing statistical evidence that intercultural relational skills are significantly associated with peaceful coexistence. The moderate positive relationship observed suggests that leaders who demonstrate empathy, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive communication are more likely to foster environments characterised by unity, collaboration, and mutual respect. This finding supports the argument that intercultural competence is not merely desirable but constitutes an important leadership resource for sustaining harmony within multicultural church settings (Adelakun et al., 2024).

The strong agreement among respondents regarding the positive impact of intercultural relational skills on peaceful coexistence reinforces the central argument of the study. Respondents consistently affirmed that empathy, inclusive leadership, and collaborative engagement contribute to unity, conflict reduction, and a stronger sense of belonging. This finding supports broader research on intercultural competence, which demonstrates that effective engagement across cultural differences enhances cohesion and organisational stability. In ecclesial contexts, this is particularly significant, as the church is both a spiritual community and a social institution where relational dynamics directly influence collective identity and mission.

Taken together, these findings highlight a critical tension within church leadership in multicultural contexts. On the one hand, there is a clear recognition of the importance of intercultural relational skills and a generally positive self-perception of competence among leaders. On the other hand, the absence of structured training and institutional support

results in inconsistent application and the persistence of subtle relational challenges. This suggests that peaceful coexistence within churches is not solely dependent on individual leader attributes but requires deliberate organisational strategies that translate intercultural awareness into sustained leadership practice.

The study therefore contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating that the presence of intercultural competence does not automatically lead to effective intercultural leadership. Rather, the key issue lies in the gap between what leaders know and what they consistently do. Addressing this gap requires intentional efforts in leadership development, theological education, and policy formation within church structures. Without such efforts, intercultural competence remains largely aspirational, limiting its potential to foster genuine and sustainable unity within multicultural church communities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the role of intercultural relational skills in promoting peaceful coexistence among churches within the New Heights Baptist Association in Lagos State, Nigeria. The findings indicate that church leaders generally demonstrate high levels of intercultural relational competence, particularly in areas such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and inclusive communication. However, the study also reveals a significant gap between the perceived presence of these competencies and their consistent application in leadership practice.

While quantitative results suggest relatively low levels of overt cultural conflict, qualitative evidence highlights the existence of underlying relational tensions, including marginalisation of minority voices and communication barriers. This suggests that apparent unity within the Association may, in some cases, reflect surface-level harmony rather than deeply integrated intercultural relationships. The study further establishes that intercultural relational skills are widely perceived to contribute positively to unity, collaboration, and conflict reduction within church communities. However, the limited availability of formal training in intercultural competence constrains the effective and systematic deployment of these skills. As a result, leadership responses to intercultural challenges tend to be informal and inconsistent.

In addressing the research questions, the study finds that intercultural relational skills are present among church leaders; their application is moderate and uneven; cultural tensions exist in subtle forms; and a Pearson correlation analysis further demonstrates a statistically significant, moderate positive relationship between intercultural relational skills and peaceful coexistence among member churches. The study contributes to scholarship on intercultural ecclesial leadership by highlighting the critical gap between competence and deployment within a denominational context. However, the findings are limited to a single association and are based on self-reported data, which may influence respondents' perceptions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Integration of Intercultural Competence into Ministerial Training:** The Nigerian Baptist Convention and affiliated theological institutions should incorporate structured training in intercultural competence into ministerial formation programmes. Given that 54.2% of respondents agreed that church leaders receive intercultural training, while the moderate mean score ($M = 3.36$) suggests uneven access across churches, ministerial curricula should explicitly address empathy development, inclusive communication, cultural sensitivity, and conflict management within multicultural church contexts.
2. **Structured Leadership Development Programmes:** The New Heights Baptist Association should establish regular leadership development workshops focused on intercultural engagement. These programmes should be practical and context specific, addressing identified gaps such as the inclusion of minority voices, adaptation of communication strategies, and management of cultural tensions. Periodic training, such as quarterly workshops, would help institutionalise these competencies.
3. **Institutionalisation of Inclusive Leadership Practices:** Churches within the Association should develop formal mechanisms to ensure inclusive participation in leadership and decision making processes. This is particularly important in light of qualitative findings indicating the marginalisation of minority groups. Strategies may include rotating leadership roles, establishing intercultural advisory committees, and encouraging participatory decision making.
4. **Promotion of Inter-Church Collaborative Activities:** Given the strong positive perception of collaborative events ($M = 4.17$), churches should intentionally organise joint services, cultural exchange programmes, and pulpit exchanges. These activities should be designed to foster interaction across cultural lines and strengthen relational bonds within the Association.

Further Empirical Research

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to examine how intercultural competence develops over time and how structured interventions influence leadership effectiveness. Additional research should also explore the perspectives of underrepresented groups, including youth and minority members, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural dynamics within church communities.

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