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Interfaith and Ecumenical Responses to Violence in Northern Nigeria: United Religion Initiative (URI)'s Health-Based Approach to Prevention

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Abstract

This study examines the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as key cases of ecumenical and interfaith response to religious extremists' attacks in Northern Nigeria. Both organisations have played prominent roles in fostering interreligious relations, dialogue, advocacy, and cooperation, while also facing criticism considering the persistence of violence in the region. The article explores how their work engages both the possibilities and limitations of interfaith responses in contexts of sustained conflict. Among their various initiatives, pastoral care work among internally displaced persons (IDPs) highlights a significant area of engagement, addressing the spiritual and socio-psychological needs of affected communities. Through a qualitative approach, the study examines current practices of interfaith dialogue as forms of support and community reconstruction. These interventions foster resilience by affirming human dignity, rebuilding trust across divides, and cultivating shared visions of coexistence. At the same time, the persistence of violent attacks has prompted ongoing critiques of dialogue-centered approaches, raising questions about their capacity to contribute to violence prevention. In response, the article argues for the integration of the United Religions Initiative's (URI) "health-based" approach to violence prevention as a complementary framework for strengthening interfaith engagement beyond reactive pastoral care toward more proactive and preventative strategies. The paper offers three practical recommendations: (1) an early-warning network that formalises the threat information already reaching religious leaders informally, (2) a coordinated sanctuary coalition building on CAN's existing self-protection efforts, and (3) a deliberate use of religious authority to counter dehumanising narratives and discourage retaliatory violence.

Keywords: Religiously Motivated Violence (RMV), Northern Nigeria, Violence Prevention, United Religions Initiative (URI), Interfaith Dialogue, Peacebuilding.

Introduction

Religiously motivated violence (RMV) in Nigeria occurs within a complex conflict landscape in which religious identity intersects with political, ethnic, economic, social, and territorial tensions. Across the country, individuals and communities of different religious identities have experienced attacks, displacement, kidnapping, destruction of places of worship and livelihoods, and cycles of communal and retaliatory violence (United States Commission on

International Religious Freedom, 2023; Vinson, 2020). This complexity requires approaches to prevention that move beyond assigning violence to particular religious groups and instead examine the conditions, behaviours, narratives, and risk factors through which violence develops and escalates.

Religious and interreligious institutions occupy an important position within this landscape. Organisations such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) possess extensive community networks, significant moral and social influence, and established experience in dialogue, advocacy, pastoral care, and responses to violence. Yet the persistence of RMV raises questions about whether existing approaches provide sufficient capacity to identify and interrupt violence before it occurs. This paper examines the roles and responses of NIREC and CAN and considers how they might be strengthened through the United Religions Initiative's (URI) health-based approach to violence prevention. Drawing on principles of early detection, interruption, risk reduction, and the transformation of social norms, it argues that Nigeria's existing interfaith and ecumenical infrastructure provides a foundation for a more proactive, coordinated, and locally grounded approach to preventing RMV.

The central problem addressed in this study is the apparent gap between the established peacebuilding activities of NIREC and CAN and their capacity to prevent religiously motivated violence before it occurs. Documented responses have frequently centred on activities following violent incidents, including NIREC's joint condemnatory communiqués and representations to government authorities, as well as CAN's public condemnations, religious mobilisation, and pastoral assistance to affected communities. Existing scholarship has also identified limitations in institutional coordination, grassroots engagement, and the capacity of dialogue-centred approaches to address the underlying drivers of violence (Ilo, 2015; Sampson, 2012; Ugorie, 2016; Williams, 2023). Although these examples suggest a predominantly reactive pattern, they do not establish the absence of preventive initiatives. Rather, they raise questions about the extent to which existing institutional activities are connected to systematic mechanisms for violence prevention.

While existing scholarship has examined the contributions and limitations of interreligious dialogue and faith-based peacebuilding in Nigeria (Driessen, 2025; Ilo, 2015; Sampson, 2012; Williams, 2023), comparatively limited attention has been given to the potential integration of public health approaches to violence prevention within the existing institutional structures of NIREC and CAN. This paper addresses this gap by exploring how URI's health-based framework could be adapted to the Nigerian context, identifying practical opportunities for strengthening preventive action through established religious networks and institutions.

Against this background, the study addresses three research questions:

1. What are the principal approaches employed by NIREC and CAN in responding to religiously motivated violence in Northern Nigeria, and what are the strengths and limitations of these interventions?

2. How might the United Religions Initiative's (URI) health-based approach complement existing interfaith and ecumenical practices in strengthening proactive violence prevention?
3. What practical and context-sensitive strategies could NIREC and CAN adopt to translate this approach into community-based violence prevention initiatives?

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing documentary analysis to examine interfaith and ecumenical responses to religiously motivated violence (RMV) in Northern Nigeria. Documentary analysis involves the examination and interpretation of existing documents to develop an understanding of a particular phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). The study draws on published academic scholarship, institutional publications, organisational reports, and publicly available materials concerning the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and the United Religions Initiative (URI). The documents examined include materials addressing religiously motivated violence in Nigeria, the peacebuilding and pastoral activities of NIREC and CAN, and health-based approaches to violence prevention.

The analysis examines the documented activities of NIREC and CAN, considering their contributions and limitations in relation to existing scholarship. These are discussed alongside the principles of URI's health-based approach, particularly early detection, violence interruption, risk reduction, and the transformation of social norms, to identify opportunities for strengthening proactive prevention. As the study relies on existing documentary evidence rather than interviews or fieldwork, its findings are necessarily informed by the availability, scope, and reliability of the sources examined.

Conceptual Framework: Health-Based Approach to Violence Prevention

This study adopts the public health approach to violence prevention as its principal conceptual framework. Rather than focusing primarily on responses after violence occurs, this approach emphasises identifying risk factors, interrupting escalation, and strengthening protective conditions within communities. The Cure Violence Global (CVG) model conceptualises violence as a learned behaviour that can spread through exposure, retaliation, and the normalisation of violent conduct. Its preventive strategy centres on three interconnected principles: detecting and interrupting potentially violent situations, reducing the risk of violence among individuals at heightened risk, and transforming social norms that legitimise violence (Ransford et al., 2025). The United Religions Initiative (URI) provides a relevant context for considering how these preventive principles might inform the work of religious and interfaith actors.

These principles guide the study's examination of NIREC and CAN's existing responses to religiously motivated violence (RMV). The analysis considers their documented activities in relation to the identification of emerging threats, the prevention of escalation, the reduction of vulnerability to violence, and the transformation of narratives that encourage

hostility and retaliation. Particular attention is given to how their institutional structures, community networks, and religious influence may facilitate or constrain preventive action. This provides a basis for assessing the potential contribution of URI's health-based approach to existing interfaith and ecumenical practices without presupposing the effectiveness of particular interventions.

Existing research provides a promising foundation for considering the application of public health approaches to violence prevention in Northern Nigeria. Evaluations of the Cure Violence model indicate its potential to reduce violence, while also showing that effectiveness varies across settings (Ransford et al., 2025; Solomon et al., 2025). African studies likewise offer insights into community-based prevention, highlighting both the potential of locally informed interventions and the importance of effective implementation and institutional support (Hatcher et al., 2020; Matzopoulos et al., 2020). A report on intimate partner violence prevention in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania further highlights the importance of risk identification, community participation, and context-sensitive strategies (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). Although much of this evidence concerns interpersonal violence in contexts different from religiously motivated violence in Northern Nigeria, its preventive principles offer a useful basis for adaptation rather than direct replication. This study therefore examines how URI's health-based approach might strengthen existing interfaith and ecumenical efforts, while recognising the importance of local conflict dynamics, institutional capacities, and the limits of community-based intervention.

The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC)

Brief Organisational Overview

NIREC was formally inaugurated in 1999, in the immediate aftermath of Nigeria's transition from military to civilian rule. Its establishment was a direct governmental and civil-society response to the escalating ethno-religious violence that accompanied the reintroduction of expanded sharia penal codes in several northern states (Adogame, 2005; Kukah, 1993). In its original configuration, NIREC comprised 50 members 25 Christian and 25 Muslim nominated by their respective religious hierarchies. A structural reform adopted in March 2019 expanded the Council to sixty members (30 Christian, 30 Muslim) explicitly to create space for greater representation of women and youth, addressing a long-standing critique that the body's gerontocratic, male-dominated composition limited its resonance with younger and female constituencies most exposed to radicalisation and displacement (Mujahid, 2024). The Council operates under a co-chairmanship structure that pairs the Sultan of Sokoto the paramount traditional and spiritual authority of Nigerian Islam, currently Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III, with the sitting President of CAN, currently Archbishop Daniel Okoh. This dual leadership arrangement, which has also included past pairings such as Sultan Abubakar III with Cardinal John Onaiyekan, was deliberately designed to symbolise parity between the country's two dominant faiths at the highest institutional level (Adogame, 2005).

Administratively, NIREC is organised into standing committees addressing international relations, publicity, policy formulation, education, dialogue and capacity-building, and finance, with day-to-day coordination vested in an Executive Secretariat, an office long held by Fr. Cornelius Afebu Omonokhua. Funding derives principally from the OSGF, supplemented on occasion by host state governments (when quarterly meetings convene outside Abuja) and by private donations from benefactors. NIREC also maintains formal affiliations with regional and international interfaith networks, including the West African Inter-Religious Council (WAIRC), the African Council for Religious Leaders (ACRL), and the global network Religions for Peace (RfP), situating the Nigerian body within a broader continental and global architecture of institutionalised interfaith diplomacy (Guild of Interfaith Media Practitioners, 2025; Mujahid, 2024).

The scholarly literature offers a mixed assessment of NIREC's institutional efficacy. Kukah (1993) credits interfaith bodies of this type with providing a vital, and otherwise absent, channel for elite-level de-escalation during recurrent national crises. By contrast, more critical assessments, notably Ugorie's (2016) historical study, which combined analysis of official NIREC documents with structured interviews of NIREC members and religious leaders, concluded that the Council has not, in fact, achieved durable religious peace in Nigeria, attributing this shortfall to the body's top-down, elite-dominated character and its structural dependence on state patronage, both of which constrain its capacity to intervene meaningfully at the grassroots level where much sectarian violence actually originates. A more recent comparative case study situates NIREC within the broader literature on interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding, and sustainable development, arguing that its principal value lies in signalling and norm-setting rather than in direct conflict intervention (Williams, 2023).

Response to Religious Extremists' Attacks in Northern Nigeria

NIREC's institutional response to the Boko Haram/ISWAP insurgency, and to the parallel escalation of Fulani-militia violence in the Middle Belt, has been channeled principally through three recurring instruments: joint condemnatory communiqués, coordinated shuttle diplomacy between the country's Christian and Muslim hierarchies, and formal advisory representations to the federal government.

The Council's quarterly meetings held, for example, at the Ritz Continental Hotel, Abuja, in the fourth quarter of 2020 have consistently produced communiqués that frame terrorist and militia violence as a common enemy of both Islam and Christianity, deliberately avoiding sectarian attribution of blame in order to forestall the retaliatory communal violence that extremist actors often intend to provoke (Paden, 2005). This function is theoretically significant: as Ahmed-Hameed (2015) argues in her study of interfaith dialogue as a tool for preventing extremism and interreligious conflict in Northern Nigeria, one of Boko Haram's explicit strategic objectives has been to manufacture a self-sustaining cycle of sectarian reprisal that would radicalise otherwise moderate Muslim and Christian populations against one another. NIREC's rapid, co-signed condemnations issued jointly by

the Sultan of Sokoto's office and the CAN presidency function as a structural circuit-breaker against this dynamic.

Beyond condemnation, NIREC has repeatedly used its advisory standing to press the federal government toward more decisive and more equitable security-sector responses. Communiqués issued across the 2009–2020 period have called variously for expanded troop deployment to the Northeast, accountability mechanisms for extra-judicial abuses committed during counter-insurgency operations, and greater parity in the security resources allocated to northern versus southern states (Ugorie, 2016). This advisory function operates in tandem with parallel initiatives from constituent Islamic bodies operating within the broader NIREC ecosystem: Jama'atu Nasrul Islam (JNI), for instance, issued a widely reported June 2024 statement expressing profound distress at coordinated attacks by armed bandits and Boko Haram/ISWAP forces, calling for a coordinated response spanning the Ministries of Women's Affairs, Justice, and Internal Affairs, and explicitly condemning what it characterised as security-force complacency. Nigerian Christian leaders publicly welcomed this intervention as evidence of the possibility of genuine, religiously grounded common cause against extremism (Williams, 2023).

Notwithstanding these functions, the academic literature is largely convergent in identifying a structural limitation: NIREC's institutional design as a periodic, elite-level consultative body rather than a standing field organisation with a permanent presence in conflict-affected areas constrains its capacity for real-time intervention during an unfolding attack, and limits its influence over conditions in the rural and peri-urban areas of Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, and southern Kaduna where the overwhelming majority of insurgent and militia violence actually occurs (Ugorie, 2016). Its comparative institutional advantage, in other words, lies not in the direct provision of physical security or humanitarian relief, but in preventing the political and inter-communal escalation that so often follows a violent incident, a distinct but complementary function to the more grassroots-oriented work performed by denominational bodies such as CAN.

Pastoral Care Work Among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

NIREC's direct humanitarian footprint among Nigeria's internally displaced population, currently estimated in the millions across the Northeast and Middle Belt (Iweze, 2024) is considerably smaller in scale than that of its constituent religious blocs, given its structural character as a coordinating and advocacy platform rather than a service-delivery agency. Nonetheless, its documented activity in this domain falls into several distinct categories.

First, NIREC's Executive Secretariat has explicitly framed relief provision for displaced persons as central to the Council's mission, alongside the organisation of joint Christian–Muslim leadership visits to Northeast communities devastated by insurgent violence, intended to rebuild what Fr. Omonokhua has described as a culture of mutual trust between the two faith communities (Mujahid, 2024). Second, because the Boko Haram insurgency systematically destroyed the agrarian and market-based livelihoods that had sustained much of the pre-conflict Northeast economy, NIREC-linked initiatives have supported vocational rehabilitation programmes intended to help both Christian and Muslim IDPs

regain a measure of economic self-sufficiency, an approach that implicitly treats pastoral accompaniment and material restoration as inseparable dimensions of the same humanitarian mandate (Faseke, 2015).

Third, and perhaps most symbolically significant, joint pastoral visits by NIREC's co-chairs the Sultan of Sokoto and the CAN President, together with, historically, figures such as Cardinal John Onaiyekan to displacement-affected communities have functioned as a deliberate performative counter-narrative to insurgent propaganda that frames the conflict as an irreducible civilisational contest between Islam and Christianity. Such visits model, at the highest symbolic level, the possibility of interfaith solidarity in the presence of shared civilian suffering (Faseke, 2015). This form of what practical theologians term *pastoral accompaniment*, the ministry of presence rather than mere material provision, resonates with a broader theological literature on faith responses to displacement. Olajide's (2026) theological analysis of the Nigerian church's response to insurgency, published in *Verbum et Ecclesia*, argues explicitly that accompaniment, understood in incarnational terms as dwelling among the suffering rather than remaining detached from it, must be complemented by prophetic witness and public advocacy for justice, accountability, and systemic reform, if the church's pastoral response to conflict is to be theologically coherent rather than merely charitable.

Finally, because NIREC lacks the dense parish, mosque, and diocesan infrastructure that its constituent religious blocs individually possess, the overwhelming majority of direct, sustained, camp-level pastoral care, chaplaincy, bereavement counselling, and material distribution is in practice delivered not by the NIREC secretariat itself but by member organisations, most consequentially CAN-affiliated churches on the Christian side and Muslim welfare and da'wah organisations on the Islamic side. NIREC's institutional contribution to IDP welfare is therefore best characterised as coordinative and symbolic-normative rather than operationally direct, a pattern consistent with its broader institutional design as a bilateral leadership forum rather than a humanitarian service agency.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)

Brief Organisational Overview

The Christian Association of Nigeria traces its immediate institutional origin to a meeting convened by the Federal Military Government under General Olusegun Obasanjo at Dodan Barracks, Lagos, on 27 August 1976. The meeting's original purpose was narrow and largely administrative, to consult church leaders on the government's proposed introduction of a National Pledge and flag-salutation ceremony into the primary and secondary school curriculum. Christian leaders in attendance did not object to the proposal, on condition that the exercises be preceded by customary morning devotions, but the meeting's principal historical significance lies in what followed: the assembled leaders spontaneously resolved to continue meeting collectively as a unified ecumenical body, and reconvened shortly

thereafter at the Catholic Secretariat near Lagos's Race Course **(**Believers Portal, 2019; Enwerem, 1995**)**.

CAN's first constitution was signed on 20 April 1977. The association achieved formal legal registration under Nigeria's Companies and Allied Matters Act (as a body with perpetual succession) on 19 December 1986, with Rev. Fr. Anthony Okogie, Pastor J. G. Sakpo, Charles Williams, Rev. Mgr. John Ogbonna, and Clifford Mobolaji Smith named as founding trustees. Notably, part of CAN's institutional lineage, specifically its northern regional structure, predates the 1976 national founding: the Northern Christian Association was established in Kaduna in 1964 amid concerns among northern Christian communities regarding equitable access to public office and constitutional protection, and this body was subsequently absorbed into the national CAN structure upon the latter's formation (Enwerem, 2003; Guardian Nigeria, 2026).

Structurally, CAN is organised into five constituent blocs designed to accommodate the full denominational diversity of Nigerian Christianity: the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), representing the Roman Catholic Church; the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), itself Nigeria's pioneer ecumenical body dating to 1929–1930 and encompassing mainline Protestant denominations such as the Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches; the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN/CPFN), covering Pentecostal, charismatic, and evangelical congregations; the Organisation of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), representing indigenous African-initiated churches such as the Aladura movement and the Celestial Church of Christ; and a fifth bloc covering the Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Nigeria and related evangelical mission-founded bodies. Leadership of the national association has passed through a succession of prominent clergy, beginning with founding president Cardinal Dominic Ekandem (1976–1986), followed by Prelate Sunday Mbang (1994–2003), Primate Peter Akinola (2003–2007), and, most recently, Archbishop Daniel Okoh, who also serves as NIREC co-chair (Enwerem, 2003).

CAN's motto, drawn from John 17:21 ("that they all may be one"; King James Bible, 1769/2017), signals the association's founding rationale as an instrument of trans-denominational Christian unity. Over its nearly five-decade history, however, CAN has evolved well beyond this original ecumenical mandate into what the sociologist of religion literature describes as a de facto political actor of significant national weight, functioning, at various historical junctures, as what one detailed institutional study characterises as the unofficial political opposition on matters touching religious freedom, constitutional secularism, and the welfare of Christian communities (Enwerem, 1995). Given that CAN's constituent denominations collectively represent close to half of Nigeria's population of more than 200 million, the association commands substantial national convening power, even as its considerable internal doctrinal and denominational diversity has periodically generated tension over presidential succession and denominational representation within its leadership structure (Enwerem, 1995).

This political dimension of CAN's institutional identity has itself become a subject of sustained scholarly inquiry. Recent comparative work situates CAN's advocacy, alongside that of Jama'atu Nasrul Islam and student and youth religious fellowships within a broader

analytical framework examining whether religion functions to consolidate or to undermine democratic consolidation and civil peace in Nigeria (Jatau & Maza, 2023). Other scholarship examines CAN's role in voter mobilisation alongside other churches, including the Catholic Church in Lagos's encouragement of Permanent Voter's Card registration ahead of the 2019 general election, and broader church engagement with disinformation and civic education within Nigeria's representative democracy (Amaefule, 2026; Kokey, 2026).

Response to Religious Extremists' Attacks in Northern Nigeria

CAN's institutional response to Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Fulani-militia violence has combined four principal modalities: public condemnation and religious mobilisation; systematic documentation and reporting; international advocacy; and, more controversially, a contested public framing of the violence as constituting targeted anti-Christian persecution.

With respect to public mobilisation, CAN's national leadership has repeatedly responded to major atrocities with coordinated religious and civic action. Following the 2020 abduction and subsequent execution of a captured clergyman — after CAN's own leadership had unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate a reduced ransom payment — the association declared three days of national fasting and prayer, culminating in a coordinated peaceful protest by Christians and church leaders across multiple states (Owojaiye, 2022). Such episodes illustrate a recurring pattern in which acts of extreme violence against Christian clergy or congregations trigger a nationally coordinated liturgical and civic response designed simultaneously to provide communal catharsis and to generate sustained political pressure on the federal government.

With respect to documentation, CAN undertook, in 2016, a landmark collaboration with the international advocacy organisation Open Doors, jointly publishing the report *Crushed but Not Defeated: The Impact of Persistent Violence on the Church in Northern Nigeria*, accompanied by the association's first joint "Nigeria Renew" declaration — a formal commitment to revive ecclesial life in the North after a decade of violence that had, by that point, killed more than 4,000 Christians in 2015 alone and displaced upwards of one million people, with the report noting that in some northern localities the visible institutional presence of the church had nearly disappeared entirely (All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2016; Open Doors International, 2016).

CAN's international advocacy has intensified markedly in the 2024–2026 period, coinciding with heightened U.S. congressional and diplomatic attention to religious freedom conditions in Nigeria. In October 2025, following claims by U.S. Senator Ted Cruz characterising ongoing killings in Nigeria as a "mass murder" of Christians (Al Jazeera, 2025), and a parallel letter from a U.S. congressman urging the redesignation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern, CAN publicly clarified its own position, emphasising that the violence — while disproportionately affecting Christian communities in specific regions — was not exclusively targeted at Christians, implicating Boko Haram and other armed groups and affecting Muslim as well as Christian civilian populations, while cautioning

against the risk of external political actors instrumentalising Nigeria's domestic crisis for unrelated foreign-policy purposes (Yushau, 2025). This nuanced public repositioning was echoed and reinforced by allied civil-society organisations: Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Nigeria chapter explicitly endorsed CAN's call for urgent government action against targeted religious killings, while simultaneously calling for a broader, religiously inclusive security response and for the establishment of an independent international investigative mechanism (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2025).

This advocacy has not been without internal and external contestation. Domestically, some Muslim religious leaders and government officials have challenged the framing of the violence as predominantly religious persecution, arguing instead for a more multi-causal analysis emphasising resource competition, weak state capacity, and criminal banditry alongside genuinely religiously motivated violence. Internationally, the more categorical "Christian genocide" framing — advanced by advocacy organisations such as the International Society for Civil Liberties and Rule of Law, which in an April 2023 report estimated more than 52,000 Christian deaths attributable to targeted persecution over fourteen years, and echoed by segments of the U.S. Congress — has become a recurring point of Nigerian-American diplomatic friction, with CAN itself occupying a position that acknowledges the severity of anti-Christian violence while resisting the most totalising persecution narratives (Chimton, 2023; Yushau, 2025). This tension reflects a broader theoretical debate in the religion-and-conflict literature concerning the analytical and political costs of framing multi-causal communal violence in exclusively confessional terms (Chouin et al., 2014; Philpott, 2007).

Pastoral Care Work Among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Because CAN's constituent denominations collectively possess one of the most extensive parish, diocesan, and mission networks in Nigeria, CAN-affiliated churches have functioned as among the most consistent and geographically distributed providers of both material relief and pastoral-spiritual care to internally displaced populations — serving displaced Christians specifically, but frequently extending assistance to displaced persons of other faiths in mixed-population settings (Orji, 2011).

At the level of direct camp ministry, clergy embedded within or adjacent to IDP settlements have, in numerous documented cases, become de facto full-time camp chaplains, providing sustained pastoral leadership addressing grief, trauma, and communal worship needs alongside acute material deprivation — including inadequate access to water, sanitation, and basic health care (Orji, 2011). This pattern is corroborated by academic research on pastoral trauma response within the Nigerian church: a study of pastoral care and counselling for traumatised Christians in the Anglican Diocese of Bukuru documented systematic clergy-led counselling interventions for populations affected by protracted communal violence, framing such interventions within the theological tradition of *cura animarum* the historic "cure of souls" — while noting that this domain of ministry has, until relatively recently, received markedly less scholarly attention than its practical importance would warrant (Aboki, 2020).

Complementary qualitative research examining survivor resilience at the International Christian Centre's IDP camp in Edo State similarly found that faith-based frameworks — centred on communal worship, scriptural teaching, and pastoral counselling — played a central role in survivors' subjective accounts of psychological recovery, alongside more conventional humanitarian provisions (Iweze, 2024). At the diocesan level, prelates such as Bishop Wilfred Anagbe of the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi — a diocese situated in one of the Middle Belt's most violence-affected states — have organised structured trauma counselling programmes and sustained prayer vigils for displaced families, while simultaneously using their public platform to advocate publicly against the underlying violence, illustrating the same dual accompaniment/prophetic-witness dynamic identified by Olajide (2026).

CAN-affiliated and partner faith institutions have also played a direct role in the physical establishment and administration of IDP settlements. In several documented instances, church-owned land has provided the material basis for displacement camps: land belonging to the Church of the brethren (Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria EYN), for example, has hosted camps sheltering hundreds of people displaced from Borno and Adamawa states, combining physical shelter with continuous pastoral and communal religious life (Mang, 2014). Beyond emergency shelter, church-linked programming has increasingly emphasised transition from relief dependency toward self-sufficiency: vocational training, small-business loans, youth stipends, and church-run schooling have enabled some IDP camps to reach documented milestones of relative economic self-sufficiency, with camp residents reportedly establishing independent businesses and pursuing university and professional education (Peterson, 2026).

Rigorous academic corroboration of the practical centrality of church-based humanitarian infrastructure is provided by a peer-reviewed study published in *African Identities*, which examined the intervention of the International Christian Centre for Missions on behalf of Northeast IDPs resettled at Uhogua camp in Edo State. The study's central finding — that the church's intervention constituted, in that specific setting, effectively the only faith-based organisation providing humanitarian assistance to IDPs from the Northeast region at that location — underscores how church infrastructure has, in numerous documented cases, substituted for otherwise insufficient state and secular NGO capacity (Iweze, 2024).

A related theological analysis of the refugee and IDP crisis argues that theological education itself has an underexplored role to play, both in critically assessing the structural drivers of displacement and in equipping the church to serve simultaneously as direct humanitarian provider and as a prophetic voice urging government and civil society toward more adequate structural responses (Idialu, 2018).

Taken together, this body of evidence suggests that CAN's contribution to IDP welfare operates less through any single, centrally administered CAN humanitarian programme than through the aggregated, decentralised pastoral and humanitarian activity of its constituent dioceses, denominations, congregations, and affiliated mission agencies — a pattern that closely mirrors CAN's own federated five-bloc organisational architecture

(Enwerem, 1995), and that stands in some methodological contrast to the more centralised, secretariat-driven coordination model characteristic of NIREC.

Muslim Organisations in Nigeria

The two best-known bodies, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), have been studied mainly through institutional history. Rufai (2013) traces the NSCIA back to the 1973 Kaduna assembly of Muslim leaders convened under JNI's auspices. He shows that delegates at that assembly often defended their own organisations' interests and not those of Muslims generally. He then assesses the Council's capacity to represent Nigerian Muslims, including during the crisis after the annulment of the 1993 election, and judges it weak. The NSCIA's constitution (Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, n.d.-a) is the primary account of its design and makes the Sultan of Sokoto President-General. Its website adds that the United Muslim Council was the first Muslim organisation formed in the South-West after independence, and that the Nigerian Muslim Council of Lagos was among the southwestern bodies that worked with JNI to create the NSCIA in 1973 (Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, n.d.-b). For JNI, Adua (2015) summarises its formation, aims and challenges and reports competing accounts of its origin: a 1960 committee on Qur'anic schools, a visit to the Ansarul Islam Society in Ilorin, and a pilgrimage with Shaykh Abubakar Gumi. The paper rests solely on a bibliographic review of earlier studies, however, and cannot be read as original empirical work. Sources also give JNI's founding date variously, from the early to the mid-1960s.

These bodies sit within a plural and contested field. Loimeier (1997) analyses Islamic reform and political change in northern Nigeria, including the long contest between Sufi brotherhoods and reformist movements. Kane (2003) studies the Izala society (Yan Izala), covering the fragmentation of sacred authority, the politics of Muslim–Christian confrontation and the later "domestication" of Izala. Last (2014) argues that the northern Muslim community has never been without religious dissidence. The volume in which his chapter appears (Mustapha, 2014) maps Sufi orders, Izala, the Shi'i movement, Yoruba Muslim associations and women's associations such as the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN). Umar (2006) supplies the colonial-era intellectual background, and Odumosu et al. (2009) map Muslim and Christian faith-based organisations, including JNI and FOMWAN, in development work. Together, these studies explain why any apex body's claim to speak for Nigerian Muslims is contested.

A third strand places Boko Haram within this field. Loimeier (2012), Azumah (2015) and Adesoji (2010) locate the movement in northern Nigeria's Salafi-reformist milieu and its history of factionalism and revivalism, which supports reading it as contested within Islam. Harnischfeger (2014) examines Boko Haram's Muslim critics in Yobe State, and Thurston (2016) analyses how northern scholars and emirs rejected its worldview. Ishaku et al. (2021) find that faith-based organisations play a significant role in the disengagement and deradicalisation of Boko Haram members, and Nasir and Garba (2026) assess JNI's conflict-resolution role in northwest Nigeria.

A fourth strand covers interfaith and humanitarian engagement. Paden (2005) studies Muslim civic cultures and conflict resolution in Kaduna; Orji (2011) examines Christian and Muslim organizations' aid in Jos; and Iweze (2022) analyzes religious leaders' interfaith work in Kano. These studies present Muslim organizations as actors in dialogue and relief. The literature is rich on Muslim movements but thin on the operational conduct of the apex bodies. Evidence on the NSCIA or JNI as providers of IDP care is almost absent, and Orji (2011), which finds faith-centered aid with an emerging interfaith partnership, comes closest. Therefore, the gap in the literature should be addressed by work on the contribution of Muslim organizations to IDPs and pastoral care as they relate to Islamic beliefs and practices.

The Limits of Interreligious Dialogue in Preventing Religiously Motivated Violence in Nigeria

Interreligious dialogue (IRD) is widely used as a policy tool for preventing and mediating religiously motivated violence (RMV), yet scholars have questioned its effectiveness where such violence has persisted or worsened despite sustained dialogue efforts, since mediation alone rarely addresses the deeper economic, ethnic, and political drivers underlying conflict (Driessen, 2025). Nigeria illustrates this broader pattern. Since the 1980s, the Nigerian state has introduced a variety of measures that attempt to reduce and mitigate RMV, including security crackdowns, commissions of inquiry, constitutional power-sharing arrangements, and the Federal Character Commission (FCC); such efforts culminated in the establishment of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) to promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation (Sampson, 2012, pp. 125–126). Despite these interventions, RMV has remained a persistent security challenge, with religious attacks continuing across Nigeria and increasingly affecting both northern and southern regions (Asakitikpi & Asakitikpi, 2024, p. 138; Sampson, 2012, pp. 125–126). Scholars have argued that government responses have generally been reactive, fragmented, and insufficiently coordinated, failing to address the underlying drivers of religious violence in a sustained and comprehensive manner. Rather than preventing violence before it emerges, efforts have frequently focused on responding after violence has already occurred (Asakitikpi & Asakitikpi, 2024, p. 138; Sampson, 2012, pp. 125–126).

Although NIREC's mandate extends beyond dialogue to include collaborative action in pursuit of sustainable peace (Williams, 2023, p. 559), questions have been raised regarding its capacity to fulfil this mandate in practice. A World Council of Churches (WCC) delegation reported declining cooperation within NIREC compared with previous years, a concern that has persisted for over a decade, identifying institutional tensions as contributing to the broader conflict environment (World Council of Churches & Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012). Similarly, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has publicly questioned NIREC's effectiveness in responding to escalating insecurity and religious violence (Adeyanju, 2025). The criticism, however, is not one-sided. While CAN has questioned NIREC's effectiveness in responding to religious violence, CAN itself has faced

criticism from Catholic Bishops over its proposed response to the challenges confronting Christians in Nigeria (Aineah, 2023). More broadly, CAN's conflict-resolution efforts have been criticised for lacking a holistic approach to religious conflict and for insufficiently addressing its underlying causes, prompting calls for it to move beyond a "war of words" towards a strategy of "rock solid actions" (Ilo, 2015, pp. 106–107). The continued involvement of international organisations in mediating between the federal government, NIREC, CAN, and other religious bodies underscores the ongoing reliance on dialogue-based interventions despite the persistence of large-scale religious violence (Asakitikpi & Asakitikpi, 2024, p. 138).

Many of the recommendations emerging from analyses of RMV in Nigeria, have therefore argued that the NIREC, alongside other relevant Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and Civil Society Organisations, should not only engage in interreligious dialogue, but also function as a mechanism for conflict monitoring, early warning of religious violence, and de-radicalisation (Sampson, 2012, p. 129). Similar recommendations have been directed towards CAN, arguing for a more holistic approach to religious conflict, greater professionalisation of its conflict-resolution capacity, and concrete action directed towards the root causes of conflict (Ilo, 2015, pp. 106–107). This reflects a broader recognition that, while dialogue and mediation remain central to Nigeria's response to RMV, their effectiveness in reducing religious violence remains uncertain, with scholars continuing to suggest that NIREC requires further institutional development and repositioning if it is to fulfil its peacebuilding objectives more effectively (Asakitikpi & Asakitikpi, 2024, p. 138; Williams, 2023, p. 565). These critiques suggest that while dialogue initiatives within organisations like NIREC and CAN remain important for relationship-building, they have not been embedded within a comprehensive prevention framework capable of identifying risk factors, interrupting pathways to violence, and strengthening protective factors before violence occurs.

Nevertheless, extending the roles of NIREC and CAN beyond dialogue towards proactive violence prevention also requires careful consideration of practical and ethical risks. Greater involvement in identifying and reporting threats raises concerns about confidentiality, the safety of informants, and the perceived neutrality of religious leaders cooperating with security agencies. Community-based protection efforts similarly require attention to the safety and legal responsibilities of those involved, as well as the distinction between non-violent prevention and armed self-defence. Efforts to counter inflammatory narratives must also preserve trust across religious communities and avoid reinforcing existing divisions. These considerations highlight the need for risk assessment, institutional safeguards, and context-sensitive engagement when expanding the preventive responsibilities of religious actors (Marshall et al., 2021). With appropriate safeguards, a public health approach may offer a useful framework for strengthening proactive responses to RMV alongside existing interfaith and ecumenical practices.

The United Religions Initiative (URI): An Interfaith Model for Violence Prevention

Founded in 2000 by the Right Reverend William E. Swing, the United Religions Initiative (URI) is a global interfaith organisation dedicated to fostering sustained interreligious cooperation, preventing religiously motivated violence, and advancing cultures of peace, justice, and environmental stewardship. Operating across eight geographic regions, URI comprises approximately 1,300 Cooperation Circles and thousands of individual members in 122 countries. As a partner of the United Nations, its fourteen Action Areas are aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, with particular emphasis on peacebuilding, gender equality, environmental sustainability, Indigenous rights, youth empowerment, and violence prevention. URI's distinctive approach lies in its integration of spirituality, community organising, and systems change, transforming interreligious dialogue into collective action at both local and global levels. By fostering collaboration across religious, spiritual, and Indigenous traditions, URI seeks to address the structural causes of violence while empowering local leaders to respond to the social, environmental, and political challenges facing their communities (United Religions Initiative, n.d.).

The Public Health Approach to Violence Prevention

URI's "health-based" approach to violence prevention draws on the model developed by *Cure Violence Global (CVG)*, a non-profit organisation that treats violence as a contagious process. This approach reflects the expertise of URI's current Executive Director, Karen Volker, who previously worked at CVG for ten years. Rather than viewing violence as a characteristic of 'bad' individuals or as an inevitable feature of society, this model conceptualises violence as a learned behaviour that is both predictable and preventable, and therefore amenable to intervention (Cure Violence Global, n.d.; United Religions Initiative, n.d.). Health-based models have historically been applied to counterterrorism strategies within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), following a four-step public health approach to violence prevention outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), to mitigate incidents of targeted violence (DeGue et al., 2026, p. 173). Similar to CVG, this approach views targeted violence as not only a threat to national security, but a threat to public health. The strategy is based on four key principles: (1) prevent the risk for violence before it develops; (2) implement population-wide approaches; (3) encourage multilevel collaboration across sectors; and (4) lead with evidence- and science-based decision-making (DeGue et al., 2026, p. 176).

Expanding upon this public health framework, the *Cure Violence Global* model draws upon behavioural science, neuroscience, and epidemiology. In addition to preventing and stopping the spread of violence, this approach also aims to identify and address the social, cultural, and economic conditions that perpetuate violence, much as healthcare professionals diagnose the underlying causes of disease. This approach is operationalised through three strategic pillars: (1) detecting and interrupting potentially violent situations before they happen; (2) supporting behavioural change among individuals at the highest risk of perpetrating violence; and (3) transforming the social norms that legitimise or

normalise violence (Ransford et al., 2025). Evaluations of the CVG model across 27 sites over the past twenty years have found that communities implementing the model experienced significant reductions in shootings and killings, with evidence suggesting that the greater the number of violent conflicts successfully interrupted, the greater the reduction in lethal violence (Ransford et al., 2025). Building on this evidence, URI has adapted these public health principles to the prevention of religiously motivated violence (RMV), translating the CVG framework into an interfaith peacebuilding context.

Applying the Public Health Model to Religiously Motivated Violence

Religiously motivated violence (RMV) continues to pose significant challenges to peace, social cohesion, and human security in many regions of the world. While governments have traditionally relied on punitive and security-based responses, these approaches often focus on responding to violence after it has occurred rather than preventing it. As demonstrated by the *Cure Violence Global* model, public health approaches instead emphasise interrupting and stopping violence before it happens while also addressing the underlying social, behavioural, and environmental factors that contribute to violence. Rather than imposing externally designed interventions, URI adapts the public health model through partnerships with religious, interfaith, and grassroots leaders already embedded within their communities. URI equips these local actors with public health principles and violence prevention strategies that can be adapted to their specific social, cultural, and political contexts. As trusted community figures, religious and interfaith leaders are often well positioned to recognise emerging tensions, identify individuals or groups at heightened risk of engaging in violence, and intervene before conflicts escalate. Their local knowledge and social legitimacy enable them to address both immediate risks and the broader community norms that sustain violence (United Religions Initiative, n.d.).

The URI approach is based on the understanding that exposure to violence (whether as a victim or a witness) increases the risk of more violence in the future. Therefore, it places a priority on intervening to prevent conflicts from escalating to violence whenever possible. It also recognises that hateful and harmful rhetoric and dehumanising language create a permissive environment for violence and therefore must also be addressed. At URI, faith leaders and actors are trained and encouraged to use their influence to push back against hateful and harmful rhetoric and to intervene to prevent conflicts from escalating to violence (United Religions Initiative, n.d.).

URI's interventions seek not only to interrupt acts of violence but also to strengthen the protective factors that reduce the likelihood of future conflict. These interventions have included the establishment of safe spaces and referral networks for survivors, peer-led education programmes promoting healthy relationships, initiatives that engage men and boys as partners in violence prevention, and vocational training programmes that support the economic empowerment of survivors and their families. Through interfaith dialogue, community mediation, youth engagement, peace education, and the promotion of inclusive social networks, trained leaders work to challenge narratives that legitimise religiously motivated violence while fostering trust and social cohesion across religious

communities. These community-based approaches also strengthen protective environments for children, adolescents, and families by engaging parents, educators, and faith leaders in challenging harmful gender norms, promoting positive relationships, and fostering cultures of non-violence before harmful attitudes and behaviours become embedded within the wider community. By combining locally led initiatives with evidence-informed prevention strategies, URI seeks to address the underlying drivers of RMV and build more resilient communities capable of preventing violence before it occurs (United Religions Initiative, n.d.).

Illustrative Cases: Honduras and Nigeria

The practical application of URI's health-based approach can be illustrated through a recent intervention in Honduras addressing gender-based violence (GBV). Although focused on GBV rather than religiously motivated violence (RMV), the programme demonstrates how URI applies the same prevention framework across different forms of violence by targeting shared social and behavioural risk factors before violence occurs. In 2025-2026, URI delivered a masculinity training programme for young people aged 10–18, reaching 131 participants (76 boys and 55 girls) across two workshop sessions. The programme introduced participants to the public health approach to violence prevention, encouraged critical reflection on harmful gender norms and constructions of masculinity, and explored the role of young people in transforming community behaviours. Most participants reported that the concepts introduced during the workshops were unfamiliar to them, highlighting the importance of early preventive interventions that address the underlying social drivers of violence. The programme's impact extended beyond the workshops themselves, with participants and community members subsequently launching school-based violence prevention initiatives across Honduras, demonstrating how locally led interventions can generate broader community engagement and reinforce the population-level objectives of the public health approach (United Religions Initiative, n.d.). However, the transferability of these reported activities and outcomes to the prevention of religiously motivated violence in Nigeria remains uncertain.

Experiences from Nigeria provide a more contextually relevant basis for considering how aspects of this approach might be adapted to religiously motivated violence. In Jos, Christian and Muslim organisations, including CAN and JNI, have provided humanitarian assistance to communities affected by religious conflict and displacement, while encountering challenges associated with mistrust across religious boundaries (Orji, 2011). The Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna also offers an example of Christian–Muslim cooperation, having been established by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa following their reconciliation (KAICIID, 2019), and subsequently undertaking interfaith training and peacebuilding activities (Eteng, 2020). Although these initiatives were not applications of URI's health-based model, they illustrate existing capacities for faith-based cooperation and community engagement in conflict-affected Nigerian settings. These Nigerian experiences highlight the potential for building on existing interfaith networks and

locally established practices when adapting URI's health-based approach to religiously motivated violence.

Recommendations for Applying URI's Health-Based Approach in Nigeria

The integration of URI's health-based approach to violence prevention within the strategies of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), in cooperation with Muslim institutions such as the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), will demand an intentional shift away from predominately dialogue-centred activities towards a more holistic violence prevention infrastructure encompassing early detection, interruption, risk assessment, and cultural transformation. However, it is important to emphasise that no intervention can be universally applied. Thus, the recommendations of this paper are made with careful consideration of the unique contextual nuances within which NIREC and CAN currently operate. Three concrete interventions are recommended: 1) The development of an early warning network and reporting system among NIREC, CAN, and other (inter)religious groups, faith communities, religious actors, and if possible, government and civic entities; 2) coordinated efforts to cultivate a coalition of faith communities willing to provide sanctuary to those facing credible threats of violence; and 3) the leverage of religious influence in transforming public perceptions.

Existing responses by organisations such as NIREC and CAN have frequently emphasised dialogue and prayer as mechanisms of prevention, alongside public condemnation in the aftermath of violence. Some churches and religious leaders associated with CAN, for example, have historically been notified of credible threats of violence within the community (Africa Check, 2024), and have facilitated responses which centre on organised prayer. This is evidenced by their response to the kidnapping of approximately 303 children and 12 school teachers from St. Mary's Catholic School in north-central Nigeria (Smith et al., 2025), which included public condemnation on social media and subsequent prayer gatherings (Channels Television, 2025). CAN later interpreted the release of the hostages as evidence of the effectiveness of these intercessions while also acknowledging the roles of the federal and state governments, security agencies and the media (Atori, 2025).

Given the evidence that threats are sometimes communicated to churches and religious leaders under CAN in advance through written and verbal warnings by potentially violent actors (Omotere, 2026), these organisations and their respective faith leaders are well positioned to identify risks of violence before it occurs. URI's recommendation for the development of early-warning networks and reporting systems could thus be strategically applied within the Nigerian context, building on existing calls for NIREC to undertake conflict monitoring and early warning (Sampson, 2012, p. 129). Such networks could also identify interdependent risk factors which increase vulnerability to violence, such as prior exposure, displacement, economic insecurity, recruitment and indoctrination into extremist groups, and other forms of social marginalisation. NIREC could coordinate an initial pilot involving CAN, the NSCIA, JNI, and local religious and community organisations, drawing on existing Christian and Muslim networks for interfaith collaboration and

humanitarian coordination (Omotosho, 2014; Orji, 2011). Designated representatives would require training to identify emerging threats, verify information, facilitate timely non-violent intervention, and refer vulnerable individuals to appropriate support services, consistent with the health-based approach (Ransford et al., 2025). This would require resources for training, coordination, and secure communication, alongside procedures to protect informants and maintain religious leaders' independence when cooperating with security agencies (Marshall et al., 2021). The pilot could be monitored through Christian and Muslim participation, the safe handling of threats, the timeliness of preventive responses, and referrals to support services before considering wider implementation.

The second intervention involves coordinating a coalition of faith communities to provide sanctuary in response to credible threats of violence identified through the aforementioned early-warning systems. Recently, CAN has called for community-based self-defence in response to threats against churches (Akasike et al., 2026). While reflecting concerns about community protection, the proposed sanctuary network would represent a distinct, non-violent intervention aimed at reducing vulnerability to violence and displacement. Existing research on faith-based humanitarian responses to conflict in Jos provides a relevant foundation for this proposal. Orji (2011) documents how CAN and JNI provided relief assistance for internally displaced persons (IDPs) through their respective religious networks, including CAN's cooperation with government emergency management agencies. The study also identifies existing interfaith emergency-response initiatives, while highlighting the difficulties of providing assistance across religious boundaries where mistrust persists. Because faith communities often place greater confidence in their own religious institutions, locally embedded churches and mosques may be particularly important providers of temporary refuge, with NIREC facilitating coordination across religious communities rather than directly administering sanctuary provision (Orji, 2011).

Under NIREC's coordination, CAN, NSCIA, and JNI could identify participating Christian and Muslim congregations and assess suitable facilities, followed by agreements on referrals, responsibilities, and cooperation with relevant emergency management agencies. Participating institutions would require resources for temporary accommodation, basic assistance, and communication, alongside safeguards addressing the security of hosts and displaced persons, legal responsibilities, and non-discriminatory access to protection (Marshall et al., 2021). Consistent with the health-based approach's emphasis on reducing vulnerability and strengthening protective conditions, an initial pilot could assess the preparedness of participating facilities, the safety of referrals, and access to temporary protection before wider implementation.

The third recommended intervention involves shifting public perceptions surrounding the shared vulnerability of Christian and Muslim communities to religiously motivated violence. Organisations such as NIREC, CAN, NSCIA, and JNI could leverage their influence to challenge narratives that portray violence exclusively through the suffering of one's own religious group, while acknowledging the particular experiences of affected communities. These institutions have previously been associated with efforts to encourage interfaith

collaboration through educational and community initiatives (Omotosho, 2014). Interfaith and ecumenical leaders should also proactively discourage retaliation following attacks on churches and mosques, challenge dehumanising rhetoric, and counter the spread of mis- and disinformation through sermons, community engagement, and the media (Little, 2007).

One relevant example is the Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna, established in 1995 by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa, who had previously been involved in opposing Christian and Muslim militias before becoming reconciliation partners (KAICIID, 2019). The organisation provides interfaith training for young people, women, religious leaders, and political actors, and has been associated with efforts to defuse tensions and facilitate peace agreements between Muslim and Christian communities (Eteng, 2020). Building on such experience, NIREC could coordinate CAN, NSCIA, JNI, and local religious leaders in developing jointly agreed messages, while trusted pastors and imams communicate these through sermons, local-language media, schools, and community forums. An initial pilot in selected conflict-affected communities would require training, communication resources, and procedures for verifying information, ensuring balanced religious representation, and avoiding the amplification of inflammatory claims. Consistent with the health-based approach's emphasis on changing behaviours and norms that sustain violence, progress could be assessed through the participation of Christian and Muslim leaders, the reach of joint messaging, and changes in community attitudes towards retaliation and collective blame.

These interventions would not replace the dialogue, prayer, and public advocacy already central to NIREC and CAN's work, but extend them into a more comprehensive infrastructure for violence prevention. By connecting trusted religious networks to early warning and response, protective sanctuary, and the transformation of narratives that enable violence and retaliation, interfaith and ecumenical actors can move from responding to violence after it occurs toward identifying and interrupting the conditions that allow it to escalate. Applied with sensitivity to Nigeria's diverse local contexts, URI's public-health approach offers a framework through which religious actors can translate their moral authority, community presence, and convening power into more sustained and proactive forms of violence prevention.

Conclusion and Future Research

This paper has examined the roles of NIREC and CAN in responding to religiously motivated violence in Northern Nigeria. The documentary evidence suggests that their activities have frequently emphasised public condemnation, interreligious dialogue, advocacy, and pastoral assistance to affected communities. While these contributions remain important, the available evidence raises questions about the extent to which their institutional strengths, including NIREC's convening capacity and CAN's extensive congregational networks, are connected to systematic mechanisms for detecting and interrupting violence before it occurs.

The paper argues that URI's health-based approach offers a potential framework for strengthening proactive prevention alongside existing dialogue and pastoral work. Specifically, it recommends: (1) an early-warning network involving Christian and Muslim institutions to identify emerging threats and facilitate preventive responses; (2) a coordinated, non-violent sanctuary coalition providing temporary refuge to communities facing credible threats; and (3) the use of religious influence to challenge dehumanising narratives and discourage retaliatory violence. These proposals build on existing institutional capacities and experiences of interfaith cooperation in Nigeria.

Nevertheless, the study's reliance on documentary evidence limits its ability to assess the effectiveness of existing interventions or predict the outcomes of the proposed approach. Future research should therefore examine the feasibility of these recommendations through locally adapted pilot programmes in conflict-affected Nigerian communities, involving NIREC, CAN, Muslim institutions, and local religious leaders. Such pilots could evaluate the effectiveness of early-warning responses, the safety and accessibility of temporary refuge, and changes in community attitudes towards retaliation and collective blame. Further qualitative research involving religious leaders, affected communities, and humanitarian actors would also help identify institutional barriers, local risks, and conditions necessary for sustainable implementation. URI's health-based approach thus offers a possible means of extending, rather than replacing, existing interfaith and ecumenical practices, subject to careful adaptation and evaluation within Nigeria's diverse conflict settings.

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