

# Congregational conflicts and societal impacts: A case of Evangelical Presbyterian congregation in Ghana

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## Abstract

Church conflicts impact lives in societies wherever they occur. This present study analyses one of such conflicts and impacts, using a congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana as a case study. The approach of the study was qualitative with individual and group interviews techniques. The findings are that: both central and local authorities of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, caused, fermented ill-sentiments and fanned structural fissures within two religious groups or coalitions at the congregation into conflict that was exacerbated by external pressure from local traditionalists. The coalitions disagree on issues that conflagrate the conflict and the resultant schism. The impact of the conflict is grave affecting lives in both church and society; crippling all socio-economic development efforts. The conflict appears embedded in moments of history and the structure of culture of the society within which it has unveiled; and provided identity, loyalty and association to the conflict actors. Those identities have influenced the disputants' perceptions and expressions of grievances and conflict. Thus, the study has realized that economic, political and historical variables alone may not be sufficient to explain the under-currents and motivations of the conflict. This is why it appears important to understand the psychology of disputants and the cultural setting within which they live since these tend to shape the conflict and its resolution.

**Keywords:** Religious identity; pentecostalism; denomination; congregational conflict.

## **1. Introduction**

Most literature on congregational conflicts (e.g. Leas and Kittlaus, 1973; Richter and Francis, 1998; Starke and Dyck, 1996; Ammerman, 1990) are more or less mono-causal while very little on multi-causality. The present study investigates multi-causal intra-congregational conflicts and their impacts on societies using the Evangelical Presbyterian congregation at Anyako in the Volta region of Ghana as a sampled case study. While it is important to discuss the plural causes of the congregational conflict, it is equally crucial to consider the pattern or form of conflict, including what issues the conflict actors fight over, how the issues are framed, typical trajectories and processes played out by the conflict, the attempt to resolve it, how serious or divisive the conflict is, and what effects it has unleashed on the congregation and the society alike in the long run (Becker, 1999:6). This study is important because, among other things, it has spelt out the causes, nature and impacts of the conflict and shown how it can be resolved in order to prevent future occurrences. It has also contributed to both local and international cultural theories of congregational conflicts.

## **2. Theorizing religious identity, denomination, Pentecostalism and congregational conflict**

Theorizing about religious identity, denomination, Pentecostalism, among others in this study is important because they are major variables that account for the composite nature of the congregational conflict that affects its resolution. This includes all reciprocal transactions, normative expectations as well as the quest for mutual approval. Relational embeddedness may also include all the networks of social relations with customers, suppliers, banks, competitors, and, even law enforcers (Kloosterman, 2010). Structural embeddedness on the other hand refers to the network of social relations to which a person belongs (Granovetter, 1990. See also Portes, 1995).

### *2.1. Religious identity*

The essentialist and modernist frame of analysis signifies identity as “sameness”, “wholeness”, “boundary”, and “structure”. As such, identity is important for comprehending the function of religion<sup>1</sup> not only for individuals, but also for groups (Mol, 1978: 12) both in traditional and modern societies.

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<sup>1</sup> Religion in this context is humans’ relationship with the Ultimate reality that has influence on every aspect of their material and psychological life.

According to the religious model of identity, individuals or groups try to keep their identity, boundary, sameness or wholeness no matter what (Mol, 1978). This is because change means disintegration of the sameness that characterizes their social or religious identity. One may argue in this context that it was the intransigence of maintaining respective identities by the disputing parties that sparked the congregational conflict in Anyako. This idea seems to concur with Weber's (1963) stress of ethical and legitimating functions of religion and the role religion plays as a vehicle of protest. Similarly, Hans Mol draws attention to the issues of religion and identity with his concept of "sacralization of identity" (Chong, 1998). For him, religion is the instrument that sacralizes identity (Mol, 1976:15). All this is indicative that religion gives identity, loyalty and association. Those identities have apparently influenced the disputants' perceptions and expressions of grievances and conflicts. This variable in the context of this study appears to connect religion with conflict. It would mean that economic, political and historical variables alone might not sufficiently explain the under-currents and motivations of the intra-congregational conflict. It is therefore important to understand the psychology of disputants as well as the religious and cultural setting within which they live since these, apparently, have shaped the congregational conflict and its resolution. It also suggests that conflict takes different forms according to the circumstances of its expression (Myerson, 1991:108-112). That is to say that the intra-congregational conflict seems to be embedded in moments or contexts of history and structures of culture within which the disputing congregation is sited.

Recent studies of religious identity (e.g. Jacobson, 1997; Zine, 2001; Peek, 2005; Mourin, 2013:3) have, however, conceptualized identity as a negotiated process. "Rather than as a hierarchy of psychological statuses, or individuals' commitment to fixed beliefs and practices, these studies assume and reveal the flexible nature and mutability of religious identity in their socio-cultural contexts, and how religious identities are shaped by socio-political processes and phenomena, including educational institutions" (Mourin, 2013: 2). This analytic stance seems to have its basis from the multifaceted nature of the postmodern society within which identity is perceived as being "constantly constructed and how individuals construct their sense of self in dialogue with systems of representation in a plural society" (Mourin, 2013: 2). The stance, however, seems to ignore assessment of the reality of harm that can be caused through mis-representation and interpretation of a society's hard core values and beliefs through the self or group construction. In other words, the conceptualization of identity as a negotiated process does not account for

the impact of individuals' or groups' changing and conflicting experiences in the unsettled cultural settings like Anyako which to a large extent is still a traditional society.

Events leading to the denominational and congregational conflicts, as we shall see, may be interpreted as a symbolic clash between modernity and the religious culture of the national and the local level Churches. "Modernity" refers to "a world constructed anew through the active and conscious intervention of actors" and the new understanding of "self that such active intervention and responsibility entailed" (Eyerman, 1982-2004:37-38). As employed in classical sociological theory, the concept has its roots in efforts to come into terms with the meaning and significance of the social changes that took place in the latter half of the 19th century Europe. One is not in any way implying here that Africa, and for that matter Ghana where the unit of analysis of this present research is based, has gone through the same level of industrialization as Europe. What it means is that some of the effects of modernity have taken place in Ghana through, for example, the wave of Pentecostal/Charismatic movements. One theme that stands out clear in the narrative of "social change and its effect on human experience is the development of a new sense of self, of subjectivity and individuality that ... distinguishes the modern individual from the traditional one" (Eyerman, 1982-2004:38). In this context, as we shall see, Pentecostalism connotes a protesting force of modernity against the traditional unitary world-view.

## *2.2. Pentecostal / charismatic Christianity*

Pentecostalism is a Christian religious movement that essentially places much emphasis on the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and empowerment through spiritual gifts that are meant to equip believers in the proclamation of Jesus as the only Lord and Savior (see Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). Some of these spiritual gifts include speaking in tongues, prophecies, visions, healing, miracles, signs and wonders among others. Pentecostal Christianity claims distinctiveness on account of its emphasis on repentance, personal salvation, and newness of life that comes from the power of the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ (Omenyo, 2000:1; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). The label "Charismaticism" is often seen as coterminous with the Pentecostal phenomenon in the African context although some indicated a slight difference between the two terms in the sense that while Pentecostalism stresses the pneumatic experience of speaking in tongues as a criterion of being born-again, Charismaticism, on the other hand, does not stress or make a case of this (Lindhart, 2015; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005).

In any case Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity which began on the periphery of society in the 1980s has now moved into a central space and a force to reckon with in African Christianity. According to the World Christian Data Base, Pentecostal Christianity enjoys about 107 million memberships in Africa, including the predominantly Muslim North on the continent; while Charismatics (non-Pentecostals) consist of about 40 million in membership (Lindhardt, 2015). Whilst there may be lack of reliability in the statistical data, one thing incontrovertible is the fact that this type of Christianity emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit and the importance of becoming born-again. Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity has largely changed the face of African Christianity by placing significant stress on spiritual warfare, empowerment and prosperity. Equally important is the fact that it does not present itself as only “a system of beliefs, meaning and symbols by use of which individual adherents organize experience and make sense of the world around them, but” also “as a multifaceted social and cultural force that has shaped life in significant ways” (Lindhardt, 2015: 2). As a force of modernity the social change this brand of Christianity emits, conflicts with traditional religious worldview and structures. Creating their own identity, Pentecostals in many cases not only sever loyalty to the traditional religion, but also break with established identity-giving traditional authority or people who do not imbibe their way of life. This situation sometimes creates division or sectarianism and conflict.

The sectarianism is a division(s) on grounds of belief, ritual or religious, cultural, social and political identities (Free Encyclopedia.com, n.d: 1). These identities, as we shall see, form the ideological underpinnings of attitude and behaviors of the conflict actors: the Pentecostal oriented youth group, and the non-Pentecostal inclined elderly group in the same congregation, on one hand, and traditionalists, on the other. Thus, the use of terms “liberal/conservative divides” in particular in the study to describe the congregational groupings involved in the conflict, is rigidly employed to depict the unwillingness of the coalitions to resolve their misunderstanding amicably. The usage of the terms in this context therefore does not reflect the normal operations of religious institutions or denominations that oftentimes, are able to amicably resolve this kind of cognitive dissonance among their membership through application of specific scriptures.

### *2.3. Denomination*

A denomination in the context of this study is a subgroup of Christianity that operates under a common name, tradition, and identity. The Evangelical

Presbyterian denomination was founded by German missionaries on 14 November 1847. The denomination comprises about 750 congregations (small units of the denomination). The Anyako congregation is one of the congregations in the Evangelical Presbyterian denomination. Each congregation is headed by a pastor, but the overall leader of the denomination is the Moderator of the General Assembly. Beginning from the 23 August 2008, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church changed from Synod to the current General Assembly status. The Moderator starting from that time is officially known as the Moderator of the General Assembly. The Headquarters of Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana is at Ho, the Volta regional capital. The church has more than 600,000 members in all the 750 congregations (Free Encyclopaedia. com, n. d: 1).

As a denomination, the Church went through a country-wide conflict in 1991. This conflict was severe and led to its split giving rise to formations of new religious bodies in almost all its 750 congregations. Among the multiplicity of factors that caused the intra-denominational conflict and the attendant split, according to key field informants, was the introduction of a Pentecostal-Charismatic mode of worship that many elderly members (the anti-Pentecostal group) did not like. This group, according to informants, saw the introduction of the new way of worship as a deviation from the normal liturgy of the church. Sabuava (1997), Ansre (1997) and Tosu (2007), local historians, corroborated the field findings and argued, among other things, that the liturgical change contributed to the nation-wide denominational conflict and the attendant schism.

Others like the Pentecostal youth wing of the church, on the other hand, according to both individual and group interviews, supported the liturgical change because they were fed up with the highly conservative Reformed Tradition with its stale spirituality and wanted something new and emotionally satisfying. This desire for a greater spiritual vigour links the discussion to factors that facilitated the emergence of new religious movements in many parts of Africa (Mbiti, 1999). According to Lindhardt (2015) Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity is the cause and catalyst of social change in Africa. This type of Christianity is readily embraced by many on the continent because of the claim that it satisfies the material, emotional, social and the spiritual needs of Africans. Other scholars like John Samuel Mbiti (1999) have identified the apparent lukewarm spiritual life as well as the dull expression of religiousness of the historic churches as fundamental to the rise and growth of new religious movements in Africa. The phenomenon is, thus, seen by such scholars as

basically a religious drive towards the attainment of a religious and spiritual satisfaction. The youth wing of Evangelical Presbyterian Church associated themselves with the spiritual vigour and renewal, and the apparently more open Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition which allows radical social transformation (Thompson and Hickey, 2011).

Furthermore, during our field research we found that the introduction of Meleagbe theology (literally, I am alive theology) into the denomination by the then Moderator, Rev. Prof. Dzobo acted as an added fuel to the ensuing confusion and therefore the conflict. Meleagbe theology was based on Anlo metaphysics.

The metaphysics of this traditional society comprises Mawu, the Supreme Being and the Creator of everything. Mawu is believed by the Anlo, including Anyako people its subset ethnic group, to operate through vicegerents such as Emi, Nyigbla and Yewe/Xebieso, other local deities and ancestral spirits who mediate between humans and the Supreme Being (see also Abotchie, 1997: 65). The deities are owned by individuals, families, communities or the whole society and are believed by the people to “perform protective, welfare and truth searching functions for worshippers” (Ohrt, 2011: 14). Two of such tutelary deities are Nyigbla and Yewe or Xebieso that the people worship and showcase in their annual migratory festival. Individuals and communities form covenants with these deities and spirits. “These covenants are legally binding; the obligations can be inherited, deliberately entered into, unknowingly covenanted into, and transmitted to progeny... Circumstances of life are determined in the spiritual realm” (Omenyo, 2000:1).

Dzobo, as it were, tapped into this traditional religious environment to create a new theology for the nation-wide denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church that he moderated at the time. According to Dzobo, among the Ewe in general, people who are gifted with dynamic spirit are known as “Sesi/Trosi/Vodusi” (literally, wife of a deity). The term “Se”, which is part of the structures of Anlo traditional religion, refers to the timeless principle or the original stuff behind the creation of the universe. Thus, “Se” in the traditional religious thought, for Dzobo, is genuinely equivalent to the pre-existing word, “logos”, the Christ. Since in the traditional thought “Se” is in every person, so also Christ should be seen as present in all persons as their “Se”. This understanding, for Dzobo, should form the superstructure of African Christians’ interpretation and understanding of scriptures as cited, for example, in Col. 1:27 that “Christ is in us” (Dovlo, 1991). The essence of the new theology, for

Dzobo, is to contextualize Christianity in Africa so as to make it more relevant and meaningful for the people in order to realize their Christhood or “Sehood” (Dovlo, 1991).

Elorm Dovlo (1991) indicated how a large section of the membership of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, including a number of intellectuals like Rev. Prof. C.G. Baeta from the Department for the Study of Religion, University of Ghana at the time rejected this new theology and wondered if Dzobo wanted to write a new contextualization of Christianity in Africa. Key field informants, similarly indicated how some members of the church, especially the Charismatic-Pentecostal leaning youth wing regarded the Meleagbe theology as anti-Christ since its content was informed by Ewe religio-cultural beliefs and values. Ansre (1997) corroborated that while the Moderator and his collaborators introduced and supported this new theology, others like the Bible Study Prayer Fellowship Group comprising mainly of the Pentecostal-leaning youth wing of the denomination expressed a sharp disagreement and a dissatisfaction.

Additionally, the fieldwork indicated, among other things, that the Moderator’s attempt to change the church’s constitution so as to prolong his tenure in ecclesiastical power acted as the last stroke that broke the camel’s back. There were also financial issues that were not well accounted for. The events led to a serious misunderstanding and upheavals culminating in the split of the denomination. The trajectories in the conflict shows how adherents of the same single congregation or denomination and faith tradition were divided into separate and competing ecclesiastical entities on account of church government, worship, doctrine, and church property (Encyclopedia.com, 2020:1).

From its origin, denominationalism was concerned about religious toleration and freedom (Encyclopedia.com, 2020:1). These are virtues that members of Evangelical Presbyterian denomination appear to lack. As a theory, it was designed to respond to problems arising from the division of adherents of a single religious tradition into separate and competing ecclesiastical entities. But then the theory “moved beyond the goal of peace among competing groups to a quest for unity in the midst of acknowledged differences of those who share a common faith” (Encyclopedia.com, 2020:1). To achieve this goal, “both an ideology and a system of relationships were devised that would permit members of the several Protestant denominations” like the Evangelical Presbyterian Church “to acknowledge the unity that transcended their divisions and thus encourage them to maintain friendly common ends” (Encyclopedia.

com, 2020:1). But, as we shall see, this dream has never materialized neither in the denomination nor in its local branch, the Anyako congregation that were polarized and atomized by conflicts on account of the mentioned competing interests. These field findings appear to concur with McSwain and Treadwell's (1981) argument that ecclesiastical organizations sometimes experience these types of conflicts when two or more groups within them disagree on doctrinal or liturgical grounds; and that such factors often end up in conflicts, schisms and the emergence of new religious movements (Akyeampong, 2006).

#### *2.4. Congregational conflict*

Congregational conflict can be defined as “a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone’s goals or desires” that occurs “when ... religious and spiritual beliefs are unaligned” (Sande, 2004 as cited in Peters, 2010:1). Conflict is not always bad. It is beneficial at times. For example, increased incidents of conflict in a socially heterogeneous congregation may act as a “function of caring” and may induce the spirit of loyalty among members (Leas and Kittlaus, 1973). This loyalty may not only decrease the instances of exit, but also increase “the existence of voice” within the faith-based communities or organizations (Hirschman, 1970). In other words, it allows people to “let off steam” and reshuffle so that no permanent coalitions are formed (Becker, Ellingson, Flory, Griswold *et al.*, 1993: 196). Thus, it is seen that a congregation with many conflicts tend to be more stable over the long run than those with a few serious conflicts that polarize them into factions, leading to schisms.

This theoretical perspective seems to be valid because viewed in relation to this current study, the congregation under investigation hardly had any conflict among its members in the history of its existence. These theoretical findings seem to reflect the normal life realities of both faith-based and non-faith-based organizations. Takayama (1975, 1980) also argues that internal conflict such as one in the context of this study, can be caused by “external pressures” through the mobilization of inherent “latent structural fissures”. This insight, combined with Hirschman’s (1970) and Lead and Kittlaus’s (1973) findings, have shown that congregations that have experienced and retained “permanent coalitions or factions” are susceptible to “conflict over external pressures” as we shall see demonstrated in the sampled case study.

Whilst this analysis is not essentially centered on what kind of connection exists between religion and conflict, the main objective is to find out the causes, nature and impacts of congregational conflicts on societies by using the intra-

congregational conflict at Anyako as a sampled case study. As we shall see, factors such as the liberal divide (mainly the youth wing of the congregation) and the conservative divide (mainly the elderly group), and “external pressures” (from traditional religious authorities), among other things, would give rise to the conflict through the mobilization of latent “structural fissures” locked up within personalities and groups in the faith set-up (see also Wuthnow, 1988; Takayama, 1980; cf. Becker, Ellingson, Flory, Griswold *et al.*, 1993:194).

### **3. Methodology**

The study population comes from Anyako, a small town situated on an island within the Keta lagoon in the eastern coast of Ghana that separates the Gulf of Guinea by a narrow strip of sandbar. The 2010 Housing and Population Census by the Ghana Statistical Service (2012) estimated the population of this small town at 4,867. The town, as indicated, is a subset of Anlo socio-cultural group and therefore shares the same religious traditions, beliefs and structure of the Anlo society. The religion has created a bond between its adherents and their ancestral land or territory. It as well connects the traditional religion “to territorial governance and traditional understanding of citizenship” (De Witte, 2008:691-692).

The approach of the study was qualitative, which allowed in-depth interviews with key informants who were the conflict actors; and others in the local level religious organization. Key informants comprised ten (10) members each from the youth wing of Pentecostal oriented group and the non-Pentecostal oriented elderly group, who were parts of the conflict actors in the congregation. The second group of informants consisted of twenty (20) ordinary citizens who were non-congregants (outsiders) not involved in the conflict. Their views were solicited concerning the impacts of the conflict on people and society. Five (5) traditionalists were also interviewed. Specific in-depth information was obtained through the snowballing field research strategy. The reason was to access the actual actors of the conflict so as to obtain reliable information. This research strategy of obtaining information from different conflict actors and non-conflict actors was to have a wider perspective on the conflict so as to ensure objectivity of data. The information was obtained through individual and group interviews. This strategy also helped in ensuring that the information obtained through the group interview was used to validate the ones obtained through individual informants. Informants claimed anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the information retrieved from them. This method made the interviews very flexible interactive processes.

The study also involved a non-participant observation of two of the collaborative researchers who because they were residents and are citizens of the field location, personally witnessed the conflict as it occurred. This dimension helped in obtaining unbiased information on actions, attitudes, feelings and behaviours of the conflict actors within the study population.

In addition, literature on intra-congregational conflicts and other related textual materials supplemented the primary data. Literature on intra-denominational conflicts was also sought because it reflects similar characteristics of intra-congregational conflicts. This cross validation of results or triangulation (Patton, 1990), ensures consistency in the information collected through the qualitative method, techniques and sources. It is important to acknowledge that most of the information cited in this present study came via the field interviews.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### *4.1. Congregational conflict and societal impacts*

The analytical strategy adopted in this section, is, first, discuss the intra-congregational conflict, and second, analyze its impacts on church and society and suggestions as to how to prevent its future occurrences.

#### *4.1.1. Congregational conflict*

The Anyako conflict case is illustrative of wider challenges that confronted the Evangelical Presbyterian denomination, nationally. Initially, the effect of the nation-wide denominational conflict in 1991 was not experienced in the local church at Anyako. But congregants were in one way or other affected by the unfolding events that had prepared the ground for the intra-congregational conflict later in 1997. This was evidenced in fermentation of ill-feeling between the youth and the elderly members, the liberal/conservative divides or coalitions within the congregation. Of great significance was Amewude, a female pastor who, according to field interviews, was newly posted to Anyako to head the congregation. Informants identified the leadership style of the new pastor as one of the factors that caused the conflict. For the field informants, the pastor's activities fanned the latent flames of the "structural fissures" or ill-feelings that were locked up in the liberal/conservative divides within the congregation. For example, the pastor sometimes preached sermons that condemned members of other faiths like worshippers of *Emi*, *Nyigbla* and *Yewe* or *Xebieso*, deities of the Anlo traditional religion.

According to Birgit Meyer (1999), what facilitated this, is perhaps the upsurge of Pentecostalism in Ghana that has intensified awareness about “Satan, demons, and evil in popular African Christianity”. Not only is there the creation of awareness but also African Pentecostals actually “take this African map of the universe very seriously and make the spirits real, just as Christ is real” (Omenyo, 2000:1). Meyer’s (1999) *Translating the Devil Religion and Modernity among the Ewe* brings into perspective the symbolic image of the devil epitomized in local deities, which according to the author, the founding missionaries of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church had effectively communicated to their Ewe converts. This image of the devil has gained much currency in Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in Ghana and not only tremendously influenced the education and training of pastors, but also the local appropriation of Christianity. For Meyer, this diabolization confirms the existence of local deities that together with witchcraft, are incorporated into Pentecostal/charismatic Christian belief as demons. Thus, one can argue that Meyer’s study seems to depict the psychology and thought system of Pentecostals such as the newly posted pastor and her support base, the Pentecostal oriented youth group in the Anyako congregation.

For the Ghanaian Pentecostal, “a more realistic way of helping Christians deal with their deep-seated concerns is to reckon with the reality of both Satan and demons and to rank Jesus Christ as higher in status and power” (Omenyo, 2000:1). But the sermons of the pastor that caricatured the local deities as demons, according to the informants, made some congregants stop coming to church altogether. It means, the attack on the other faith did not only adversely affect peace in the congregation, but also outside it, creating tension among congregants, on one hand, and between the congregation and adherents of the deities or traditionalists, on the other (Kpobi, 2008).

Furthermore, informants indicated that the pastor’s public pronouncement that a “chapel and a pastor’s residence” hitherto owned by the local Evangelical Presbyterian Church, belonged to Global Evangelical Church (not yet formed at Anyako) annoyed many members of the congregation. The church leader’s public sympathy with the newly founded Global Evangelical Church (in other congregations) made some congregants also to publicly declare their hitherto hidden identity with the new church. The pronouncement, according to the field informants, intensified tension that exploded into an open intra-congregational conflict and attendant secession of the Pentecostals to form their own Global Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The incident of causing secession in this

local church seemed easy because the national church authority was in crisis preventing any timely practical intervention by its leadership.

Informants indicated how the split group aided by the pastor vandalized items in the local church. Some of these items belonged to the Tarso Royal Orange Lodge, an economic elite class that funded many development projects in the congregation. Following the destruction of the items, the Lodge decided to seize and take full control of the chapel and the pastor's residence of the local church; and would not allow their use by the newly founded Global Evangelical Church. This seizure of church property exacerbated the conflict between the local Church and the newly founded Global Evangelicals.

Furthermore, each year adherents of Anlo traditional religion prepare for ritual celebrations for the *Nyigbla* deity. Traditional authorities in Anyako during the month of February always enforce a ban on drumming, dancing and other forms of noise-making as the chief priest of the *Nyigbla* deity moves from his main shrine at Alakple (a powerful Anlo town) through other towns and villages where adherents of the deity are in preparation for the ritual festival. The traditional authorities always expect compliance with the ban from everyone, including Christians. The main reason of the ban, according to field informants, is to create the necessary silence the deity needs in order to listen and answer the individual and communal plea made by the *Nyigbla* priest for the general wellbeing of the people. The ban time, therefore is a period "of quiet and servitude, when the spirits' benevolence with respect to the growth and harvest of agricultural produce and fish is solicited" (Dijk, 2001:33) through special rituals. The traditionalists believe the disturbance of their deities like the *Nyigbla* might affect not only their economic life, but also their general protection and total human wellbeing. Marleen de Witte's (2008:703) investigation in *Accra's Sounds and Sacred Spaces* mentioned specific sounds like "drumming, handclapping, whistling, yelling, wailing and shooting" that traditionalists believe have effects on the spirit world and which disturb deities (De Witte, 2008: 703). This disturbance might make the deities withdraw their blessings to individuals and the society. The deities are not only regarded by the people as the landowners, but also having control over the land's fertility. As a result, they could punish the society for social misdeeds. Priests/ritual functionaries therefore make sure they maintain a harmonious relationship between the people and their deities so as to ensure blessings from them.

Unfortunately, "Pentecostal/Charismatic groups' loud modes of worship, prayer and preaching, their use of powerful sound technology and the open

architecture of their worship buildings and meeting places combine to establish an auditory sacred space that is never contained within the physical boundaries of their sacred spaces” (De Witte, 2008: 704). This creates a serious problem not only for non-Pentecostals/Charismatics, but also for traditionalists.

Both individual and group interviews cited the non-observance of the ban on drumming and noise-making by the Pentecostal-leaning youth wing with its pastor Amewude in the congregation as a contributory factor to the church conflict. Whereas in previous years there were few challenges, recent years have witnessed many incidents of stiff resistance from Pentecostals on the ban (van Dijk, 2001:33). Again, “ancestral spirits, witches and ritual practices related to veneration and protection are classified” by Pentecostals “as demonic and are diabolized” (Meyer, 1995 as cited in van Dijk, 2001:39). More forcefully than the African Indigenous or Prophetic Churches, the Classical Pentecostal churches, in particular, “denounced the continuation of practices that in their view might invoke the presence of demons, the accomplices of Satan” (van Dijk, 2001:39). Thus, the Pentecostal-leaning group resisted the ban on drumming and noise-making because they associate it with a demand that is coming from the agents of the devil. Informants admitted more influence of the traditional religion on the elderly non-Pentecostal members who, as such, have not imbibed the Pentecostal world-view as have the Pentecostals/Charismatics in the congregation.

While the former appeared willing to sacrifice their Christian values for the traditional religious ones, the latter supported by the pastor, refused. This external religious pressure, according to the field findings, led to a misunderstanding between the liberal/conservative groups in the congregation. Church members, who supported and observed the traditional religious ban, aligned themselves with the traditional authorities against the Pentecostal youth wing. As revealed in a group interview with some members of the youth wing:

We reject the social control mechanism employed by the traditional religious leaders in the form of edict. As Christians, we do not see how we should obey an edict from their deity.

It is important to note that events which threatened removal of the feeling of ‘safety’, sameness or wholeness and stability that were tied to the different forms of identity led to both offensive and defensive reactions between the conflicting parties within the congregation and outside it. Thus, the defensive and offensive reactions, as we would see, create the socio-economic and educational implications for adherents of faiths and others within the conflict

environment.

According to Wuthnow (1988), the liberal/conservative divides form much of the basis of every denominational or congregational conflict and that such a conflict is perpetuated by religious groups. This theoretical stance seems demonstrated and replicated in the sampled conflict study. From the analysis, it has become abundantly clear that the intra-congregational conflict was precipitated by a layering of issues. As such, effective conflict resolution strategies must pay attention to this. Thus, the analysis tends to show that even within the same category of conflict, there may be apparent differences. It may be possible to explain these differences by acknowledging the particular layer of issues and factors that influenced opposing parties.

According to both individual and group interviews, since the beginning of the congregational conflict, there had been several attempts to build peace between the two factions within the local church. Initially, the case was sent to a formal court (Circuit Court). Our informants indicated that local traditional authorities, comprising chiefs and their elders, having realized the ways that conflict escalated while cases were in court, withdrew the case for a speedy settlement in the traditional courts, which was also not successful.

#### *4.1.2. Impacts of conflict*

The congregational conflict proves costly because it has caused serious damage by polarising individuals or groups in a way that may take years to overcome. It has created enmity among people not only in the church but also in society.

Socially, many families have been split by the conflict because the opposing disputing parties are made up of people from the same families. Friends and family members in the society who had spent lifetime together, according to informants, are no longer in speaking terms. In other words, the conflict has seriously damaged social relations and demoralised the people involved. It has also sown the seed of discord among the people leading to public disgrace. Thus, one can argue that serious congregational conflict such as the one under consideration, if not well handled, can degenerate into painful devastating family conflicts that divide a people who used to live and do things together.

Economically, the conflict has caused a lot of damage in the church. For example, during the conflict, the pastor's residence and other church properties were vandalized. The breakaway group, now the Global Evangelical Church, was also attacked during worship. In retaliation members of the new church also vandalized the congregation's properties. The economic impact was

also experienced outside the church. For instance, both individual and group interviews indicated Anyako as a predominantly fishing society. According to the Ghana Statistical Service's 2010 Housing and Population Census, about 85 per cent of Anyako's labour force goes into fishing (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). The fieldwork has identified that the fishing activities came under threat because the conflict has turned fishing partners into enemies. Fishermen and women for security reasons are unable to get up early in the morning for fishing. People are also scared of being attacked in the lagoon while fishing. As a result, there has been a considerable decline in fishing activities, leading to a fall in supply. Other economic activities have suffered enormously since the opposing factions are not ready to transact business any more with each other. All this has negatively impacted the development of Anyako. Informants also mentioned how inhabitants could no more access social amenities such as potable water because of damaged pipes and pumping machines which no one was ready to contribute funds towards their repair or replacement. Respondents argued that an organisation that had been formed by citizens, which was responsible for the development of Anyako could no longer function as it used to be. During Easter Sundays, this organisation used to organise non-denominational church services to raise funds for development projects. But the conflict does not permit this anymore. Thus, inhabitants in Anyako have to travel long distance - to access water in surrounding towns and villages.

Educationally, both individual and group interviews indicated how a number of teachers affiliated to the Global Evangelical Church, who had long been teaching at the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Schools were transferred against their will to very remote places. Others got their release from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church Education unit to other education units. While this caused inconvenience to existing teachers, new teachers posted feel reluctant to accept posting to the disputing town. This, obviously has created under-staffing. Again, respondents disclosed how this event has caused low output and inefficiency particularly in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church schools since more experienced teachers have either been sacked or left to other schools. This situation has caused an immense inconvenience to both pupils and affected teachers. Due to this anomaly, most parents withdrew their wards from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church schools. This has also affected enrolment in the Church's schools. It has as well led to the interruption of children's education. Thus, while it is arguable that an intra-congregationally infused conflict may be externally connected to broader social conflicts, the reverse is also true in the sense that the church conflict has osmosed, affecting

the lives of people in the larger society and crippling all socio-economic and educational development efforts that may have enhanced the quality of lives of the people.

#### *4.1.3. Recommendation*

The analysis of the congregational conflict has shown that believers of the same single congregation and denominational faith tradition were atomized into separate and competing ecclesiastical entities because of disagreement on issues of worship/ritual, doctrine, and church property. From its inception the Evangelical Presbyterian denomination of which the Anyako congregation is a member, was built on the spirit of denominationalism that is concerned about religious toleration and freedom of its members and congregations; and envisioning moving beyond the goal of peace among competing groups to looking for unity in the midst of acknowledged differences. (Encyclopedia.com, 2020:1). Achieving this goal is possible if the two main coalitions, namely the Pentecostal-oriented youth group and the non-Pentecostal-leaning counterparts bury their differences by acknowledging the unity that transcends their divisions and thus encourage each other to maintain friendly common ends.

Furthermore, the congregational conflict could have been prevented if leaders in both the national and local churches were to intervene using religious/spiritual resources at their disposal. For instance, the “role of the prophets, at least in Pauline-type congregations, was not that of social criticism but of witness to Jesus Christ within the body in order that the church could discern the mind of Christ and be built up in faith, hope and love” (Cunningham, 1996:249; Gruchy, 1981:68 as cited in Cunningham, 1996:249). But this was not the case.

On the other hand, the importance of dialogue among plurality of faiths for co-existence is becoming more and more crucial since no one faith can claim spatial monopoly these days (Gedzi, 2013e). This may help avert future confrontations between Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians and traditional religious adherents.

The field findings also revealed how a religious leader can strategically instrumentalize religious language or symbol and not religious beliefs in themselves to cause tension and conflict. It also means leaders and members of religion can avoid using religious language and symbols as forceful strategic weapons in causing conflict. Knowledge of this can be an incentive for future congregational conflict prevention. This appears workable if religious leaders see as one of their top priorities in defusing conflict, facilitating peace and

reconciliation in order to create a more stable post-conflict situation. Again, there can be peace-building between the liberal/conservative divides or coalitions in church and in society, including their leaders. This is necessary because it would be a way of preventing or alleviating conflicts and potential conflicts within church and society. This is possible when religious people are able to tolerate and respect each other's beliefs and religious convictions; and also show a commitment to understand and cooperate with each other.

## **5. Conclusion**

The paper examined intra-congregational conflicts and impacts on societies using the Evangelical Presbyterian Church's congregation at Anyako in the Volta region of Ghana as a sampled case study. The approach of the study was qualitative with individual and group in-depth interviews techniques. According to the findings, the conflict is illustrative of a wider challenge that the Evangelical Presbyterian denomination faced nationally in 1991 that had prepared the ground for a similar conflict at the local level church at Anyako in 1997. This was easy because the ill-feeling that precipitated the national church conflict was still harbored and kept brewing in the congregants at the local level church.

In the congregational conflict, believers of the same single congregation and faith tradition were atomized into separate and competing ecclesiastical entities because of disagreement on issues of worship/ritual, doctrine and church property aided by the apparently strong personality of the local church leadership at the time.

While the non-Pentecostal inclined elderly group wanted to maintain the Evangelical Presbyterian way of worship, based on the reformed tradition, the Pentecostal youth wing of the church, on the other hand, was fed up with it and rather wanted something new and emotionally satisfying that they identified in Pentecostal-Charismatic liturgy.

Doctrinally, the Pentecostal oriented group was intolerant of anything that relates to Anlo metaphysics. For example, each year in February adherents of Anlo traditional religion prepare for ritual celebrations for *Nyigbla* deity. During this preparation period, traditional authorities enforce a ban on drumming, dancing and other forms of noise-making that they expect everyone, including Christians to comply with. The main rationale behind the ban is to create the necessary atmosphere for the deity to listen and answer the individual and communal plea for general well-being of inhabitants made by the *Nyigbla*

priest. While the non-Pentecostals saw nothing wrong with the metaphysics and therefore obeyed the ban, the Pentecostal rejected it. They did not only refuse to obey it but actually directed their preaching that caricatured the local deities as demons and their worshippers as demonic. What seems to facilitate this type of preaching, perhaps, is the upsurge of Pentecostalism in Ghana that has intensified awareness about Satan and its demons, witches and other malevolent spirits. Not only is there intensified awareness but also Ghanaian Pentecostals actually take this metaphysical map very seriously and make the existence of malevolent spirits real, just as Christ with his superior power made real to that of Satan and his demons.

No doubt then that the Pentecostal preaching has created misunderstanding between the liberal/conservative divides within the congregation, on one hand, and between the liberals and the traditionalists, on the other. It means, the attack on the other faith did not only adversely affect peace within the congregation itself, but also outside. Thus, these events cumulatively fanned the latent flames of the “structural fissures” or ill-feelings that were locked up in the liberal/conservative divides within the congregation leading to the conflict and attendant split.

The impact of the conflict has been grave affecting lives in both church and society; crippling all socio-economic development efforts. The conflict shows embedment in moments of history and the structure of culture of the society within which it has unleashed, providing identity, loyalty and association to the actors and parties of conflict. Those identities have influenced the disputants’ perceptions and expressions of grievances and conflict. Thus, the study has realized that economic, political and historical variables alone may not be sufficient to explain the under-currents and motivations of a conflict. This is why it appears important to understand the psychology of disputants and the cultural setting within which they live since these tend to shape the conflict and its resolution.

It is important to reiterate the existence of the two coalitions in the conflict case since they played an active role in the trajectory of the church conflict. The incident of conflict and the ensuing secession at the local level church seemed easy because the central authority of the national Evangelical Presbyterian Church was in crisis preventing any timely practical intervention.

Existing theories identified the liberal/conservative divides as phenomena between interdenominational families rather than factors that exist intra-denominationally or intra-congregationally. However, the current study has

demonstrated that these phenomena also manifest intra-congregationally, as seen in the case study between the conservative elderly group and the liberal youth wing within the faith set-up in the unit of analysis. Additionally, it has manifested between the liberal youth wing in the Anyako congregation, and adherents of the non-Christian faith organization or the traditionalists. This finding seems to suggest that the liberal/conservative divides are not only phenomena characteristically inherent within or between denominational or congregational faith families. They can also manifest between a Christian and a non-Christian religions and therefore, two different faith families. Thus, this study is important because it has specifically spelt out the causes, nature and impacts of the intra-congregational conflict and shown how it can be resolved. It has also contributed globally to cultural theories on intra-congregational conflicts. In the final analysis, if the recommendations in lieu of the research problem are implemented, they may contribute to the resolution of the conflict and peace may return for development both in church and society.

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