

# Religious Leaders in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building; Lessons from Interchurches Council Kimanya Kabonera, Masaka City, Uganda

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**Abstract:** *This study examined the role of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and marital peacebuilding in Kimanya-Kabonera. Religious leaders, including pastors and priests, frequently serve as the first point of contact for couples experiencing marital distress; however, their roles, strategies, effectiveness, and challenges remain insufficiently explored in scholarly literature. Guided by a mixed-methods research design, the study collected data from 109 respondents using questionnaires, interviews, and documentary review. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings revealed that religious leaders play a substantial role in resolving marital conflicts through pastoral counselling, scripture-based guidance, prayer sessions, dialogue facilitation, and follow-up support mechanisms. The most commonly reported marital conflicts included communication breakdown, financial disagreements, infidelity, domestic violence, in-law interference, and unmet gender-role expectations. In promoting marital peacebuilding, religious leaders employed both preventive and restorative approaches, including premarital counselling, marriage seminars, couples' fellowships, and continuous spiritual mentorship. The study further established that these interventions contribute to long-term marital stability by fostering forgiveness, empathy, effective communication, and conflict prevention skills among couples. Despite these contributions, several challenges were identified, including emotional fatigue, inadequate counselling skills, difficulties in maintaining neutrality, doctrinal limitations, confidentiality dilemmas, community pressure, insufficient resources, limited collaboration with professional counsellors, increasing mental health-related cases, and emerging social media-related conflicts. Nevertheless, religious leaders remain central actors in marital conflict management due to their cultural legitimacy, moral authority, and strong community trust. The study concludes that religious leaders make significant contributions to marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding; however, their effectiveness could be enhanced through structured counselling training, strengthened referral systems, and improved collaboration between religious institutions and professional service providers. The findings have important implications for policy, theology, mental health practice, and community development by highlighting the need for integrated and culturally sensitive support systems to promote stable and peaceful marriages.*

**Keywords:** religious leaders, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, pastoral counselling, marriage stability.

## Introduction

In recent years, growing scholarly and policy attention has focused on the role of religious leaders in preventing and resolving marital conflicts and promoting peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa. Religious leaders possess substantial influence not only within their congregations but also in shaping broader community values, social behaviour, and public opinion (Bansal, 2024). As culturally embedded actors, they frequently serve as trusted insider mediators whose moral authority and social proximity enable them to intervene effectively in sensitive family disputes. Their involvement in conflict mediation is particularly significant in societies where religion remains central to everyday life and social organisation. Despite their visible contributions, however, religious leaders are often engaged in peacebuilding processes in informal and ad hoc ways that fail to fully utilise their potential within structured marital conflict intervention systems (Zein & Jarwan, 2025).

Across East Africa, religious leaders continue to play important roles in promoting reconciliation, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence within families and communities. In many contexts, pastors, priests, imams, and other faith leaders act as first responders to marital crises by providing counselling, mediation, and spiritual guidance to couples experiencing distress (Qureshi et al., 2023). Their interventions frequently combine scriptural teachings with practical approaches to communication, forgiveness, emotional regulation, and conflict management. This role became increasingly visible between 2020 and 2025, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns, economic hardship, and social isolation intensified domestic tensions and increased reports of marital conflict and intimate partner violence (Sobti et al., 2023). During this period, religious leaders in countries such as Nigeria and Kenya adopted innovative approaches, including radio counselling programmes, social media engagement, telephone hotlines, and interfaith advocacy initiatives, to support couples facing relational difficulties.

The socio-religious context of Sub-Saharan Africa further strengthens the influence of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution. Approximately 84% of Africa's population identifies with a religious community, and this proportion is projected to increase significantly in coming decades. Consequently, religious leaders are widely regarded as custodians of moral values, cultural traditions, and social stability (Falola & Yacob-Haliso, 2025). Their dual role as protectors of tradition and agents of social transformation enables them to address marital conflicts with a level of legitimacy and trust often unavailable to external professionals. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of their interventions varies depending on factors such as theological orientation, gender norms, counselling skills, conflict mediation training, and institutional support structures.

In Uganda, religious institutions have historically contributed to mediation, reconciliation, and peacebuilding at both community and national levels. Religious mediation organisations such as the Crossroads Resolution Group have developed structured approaches involving assessment interviews, guided dialogue, intensive reconciliation programmes, and restoration planning for couples experiencing marital distress (Nimoy, 2024). Similarly, faith-based interventions in western Uganda have demonstrated promising outcomes in reducing intimate partner violence and improving communication and decision-making within marriages. For example, church-based counselling programmes involving Christian religious leaders showed measurable reductions in domestic violence and improved relational dynamics among participating couples (Abdul et al., 2025). These interventions succeeded largely because they integrated practical relationship skills within culturally accepted religious frameworks, thereby increasing community acceptance and accessibility.

Despite these contributions, the role of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding remains underexplored in academic literature. Existing studies have primarily focused on religious leaders in political peacebuilding, interfaith dialogue, or humanitarian interventions, while comparatively limited attention has been given to their role within the intimate sphere of marriage and family relations (Leadership et al., 2025). Furthermore, many studies concentrate on the spiritual dimensions of counselling without critically examining the practical strategies employed, the effectiveness of interventions, the challenges encountered, and the long-term implications for marital peacebuilding. This creates a significant gap between widespread community reliance on religious leaders for marital guidance and the limited empirical evidence evaluating their actual impact (Irby, 2024).

Unlike previous studies that examine either domestic violence, pastoral counselling, or community peacebuilding separately, this research provides a holistic analysis of how religious leaders simultaneously function as counsellors, mediators, spiritual mentors, and community peace actors within marriages (Akbar et al., 2023). The study further contributes original insights by examining both preventive and restorative peacebuilding strategies employed by religious leaders, including premarital education, pastoral counselling, spiritual mentorship, dialogue facilitation, and post-conflict follow-up mechanisms.

The study also demonstrates interdisciplinary synergy by connecting perspectives from theology, peace and conflict studies, sociology, psychology, and community development (Leadership et al., 2025). This integrated approach broadens understanding of marital peacebuilding beyond legal or clinical interventions by recognising the socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions that shape marital relationships in African societies. Additionally, the study highlights the potential for collaboration between religious institutions and professional mental health practitioners in developing culturally sensitive and sustainable support systems for couples in distress.

Another important contribution of this study is its focus on contemporary challenges affecting religious leaders' interventions, including social media-related conflicts, mental health concerns, confidentiality dilemmas, emotional burnout, and changing gender expectations (Galiana et al., 2022). By documenting both the strengths and limitations of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution, the study provides evidence-based recommendations for improving counselling training, referral systems, and institutional partnerships. In doing so, it contributes not only to academic scholarship but also to policy formulation, faith-based practice, and community-based peacebuilding initiatives aimed at strengthening healthy and peaceful marriages in Uganda and Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly.

Marital conflict remains a significant contributor to family instability, domestic violence, separation, and emotional distress across many societies, including Uganda. At the same time, religious beliefs, faith communities, and religious leaders continue to play central roles in strengthening marriages and promoting family cohesion (Rassool, 2024). In many communities, couples experiencing marital difficulties seek support first from pastors, priests, imams, and other faith leaders because they are trusted moral authorities who provide accessible spiritual and social guidance. Religious leaders therefore occupy a complex yet influential position in marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Despite their widespread involvement in counselling and mediation, the specific methods, effectiveness, challenges, and long-term impact of religious leaders in resolving marital conflicts and promoting marital peace remain insufficiently documented in scholarly research (Krasny & Perry, 2023). Existing literature has largely concentrated on secular counselling approaches, legal interventions, or broader religious peacebuilding processes, with limited empirical attention given to how religious leaders manage intimate marital disputes at the community level. Consequently, there remains a significant gap between practice where millions of couples rely on religious guidance during marital crises and research evaluating the outcomes and limitations of such interventions (Hennings et al., 2021).

Furthermore, contemporary challenges such as increasing domestic violence, mental health concerns, economic stress, changing gender expectations, and social media-related conflicts have complicated the nature of marital disputes, often exceeding the traditional counselling capacities of many religious leaders in the Diocese of Masaka.

#### Map of Uganda indicating Masaka



(Source: Google Map retrieved May ,2026),

The study examined some faith-based interventions have shown positive outcomes in promoting reconciliation and reducing violence, little is known about how religious leaders navigate these emerging complexities, maintain neutrality, and collaborate with professional service providers (Lerner et al., 2022).

Therefore, this study seeks to systematically examine the role of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and marital peacebuilding in Kimanya-Kabonera. The study aims to generate empirical evidence on the strategies employed, the effectiveness of interventions, the challenges encountered, and the opportunities for strengthening collaboration between religious institutions and professional support systems (Akbar et al., 2023). By identifying best practices and existing gaps, the findings may contribute to the development of culturally relevant, interdisciplinary, and sustainable approaches for promoting healthy, stable, and peaceful marriages in Uganda

#### Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding (Adu & Miles, 2023). The role of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and marital peacebuilding in Kimanya-Kabonera. The mixed-methods approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect numerical data on patterns and perceptions while also exploring participants' lived experiences, attitudes, and interpretations in greater depth (Bhattacharyya, 2024). The study specifically employed a convergent parallel design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and later integrated during interpretation to enhance validity and triangulation of findings.

#### Study Area

The study was conducted in Kimanya-Kabonera Division in Masaka City, Uganda. The area was selected because of its religious diversity and the active involvement of religious institutions in community life, marriage counselling, and family mediation (Abdul et al., 2025). The division hosts several Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, and Muslim religious institutions that regularly engage in marital counselling and reconciliation initiatives.



Quantitative data collected through questionnaires were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis (Badr & Lhoussaine, 2024). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, tables, and charts were used to summarise the data and identify trends regarding the role of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews and documentary review were analysed thematically. Responses were transcribed, coded, categorised into themes, and interpreted according to recurring patterns and meanings related to counselling strategies (Akbar et al., 2023). The peacebuilding practices, and challenges experienced by religious leaders.

**Validity and Reliability**

To ensure validity, research instruments were reviewed by academic supervisors and experts in peace and conflict studies to assess clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the questions. A pilot study was conducted to test the instruments before actual data collection (Mandal et al., 2022). Reliability was enhanced through consistent administration of questionnaires and interview guides, as well as triangulation of data sources and methods.

**Ethical Considerations**

The study observed ethical principles throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained before participation, and confidentiality of responses was maintained by avoiding the disclosure of personal identities (Aldhaen et al., 2025). The researcher also ensured respect for cultural and religious sensitivities during data collection and reporting of findings.

**Limitations of the Study**

The study encountered several limitations, including limited financial resources, time constraints, and reluctance of some respondents to discuss sensitive marital issues openly. Additionally, some religious leaders were hesitant to disclose confidential counselling experiences due to ethical and institutional obligations (Lytras et al., 2023). These limitations were minimised through assurance of confidentiality, flexible scheduling of interviews, and triangulation of data sources.

**Results**

Findings derived from spouses who participated to assess the effectiveness of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and marital peace building. The data, collected through structured questionnaires, were analyzed to generate measurable insights into how spouses perceive the role, influence, and outcomes of interventions offered by religious leaders (Daniel, 2023). Tables, charts, and numerical summaries are incorporated to clearly illustrate trends and comparative levels of effectiveness. Overall, this section provides an evidence-based assessment of how spouses quantitatively rate the contributions of religious leaders to marital healing and marital peace building.

**1 Table: Assessment of effectiveness of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution.**

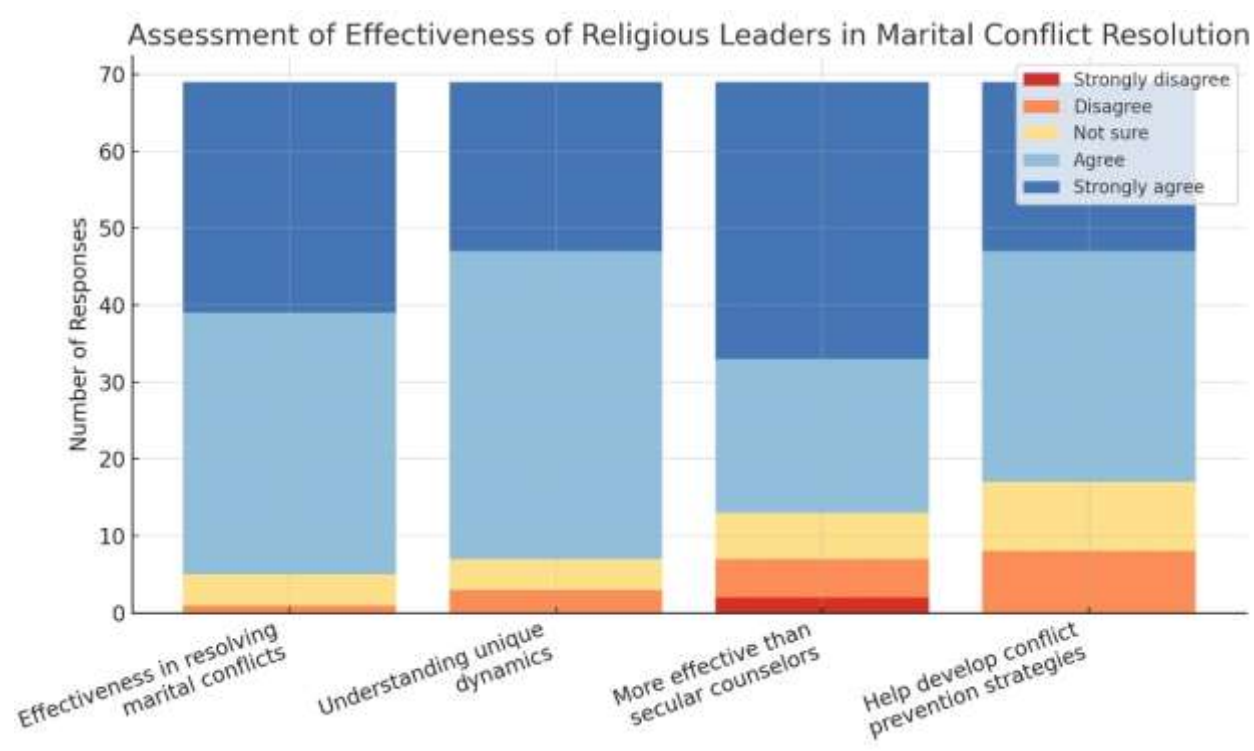
Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
Religious leaders effective in resolving marital conflicts in your opinion?	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)	4 (5.8%)	34 (49.3%)	30 (43.5%)	<b>69</b> <b>(100%)</b>
To what extent do you agree with this statement: "Religious leaders understand the unique dynamics of marital conflicts in our community"?	0 (0%)	3 (4.4%)	4 (5.8%)	40 (58%)	22 (31.9%)	<b>69</b> <b>(100%)</b>
In your experience are religious leaders more effective in marital conflict resolution compared to secular counselors?	2 (2.9%)	5 (7.2%)	06 (8.7%)	20 (29%)	36 (52.2%)	<b>69</b> <b>(100%)</b>
Religious leaders help couples develop conflict prevention strategies.	0 (0%)	8 (11.6%)	9 (13%)	30 (43.5%)	22 (31.8%)	<b>69</b> <b>(100%)</b>
religious leaders are accessible for marital conflict resolution in your community.	0 (0%)	3 (4.4%)	9 (13%)	30 (43.5%)	27 (39.1%)	<b>69</b> <b>(100%)</b>

(Source: Research findings 2025)

The findings in Table 3 show assessment of effectiveness of Religious Leaders in Resolving Marital Conflicts. A significant majority of respondents have a positive view of religious leaders' effectiveness in resolving marital conflicts. 92.8% of respondents either Agree (49.3%) or Strongly Agree (43.5%) with the statement. Only a minimal percentage of respondents Disagree (1.4%) or are Not Sure (5.8%). Understanding of Marital Conflict Dynamics by Religious Leaders a substantial majority of respondents believe that religious leaders understand the unique dynamics of marital conflicts in their community with 89.9% of respondents Agree (58%) or Strongly Agree (31.9%) with this statement.

A small percentage of respondents Disagree (4.4%) or are Not Sure (5.8%). Comparison with Secular Counselors- A majority of respondents find religious leaders more effective in marital conflict resolution compared to secular counselors. 81.2% of respondents Agree (29%) or Strongly Agree (52.2%) with this comparison. A smaller percentage of respondents express disagreement (Strongly Disagree 2.9%, Disagree 7.2%) or uncertainty (Not Sure 8.7%). Help with Conflict Prevention Strategies Respondents generally believe that religious leaders help couples develop conflict prevention strategies. 75.3% of respondents Agree (43.5%) or Strongly Agree (31.8%) with this statement. Some respondents Disagree (11.6%) or are Not Sure (13%). With religious leaders being accessible for marital conflict resolution in your community the majority of respondents agreed with (82.6 %) were (43.5%) agreed and ( 39.1%) strongly agreed. Although a small percentage of respondents disagreed with 4.4% disagreed and (13% ) were not sure.

**A stacked bar graph showing the assessment of effectiveness of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution**



(Source: Field Data, 2025)

The data above presents the responses regarding the extent to which religious leaders help couples develop conflict prevention strategies. Breakdown of Responses To a great extent: 25 respondents (36.2%) believe religious leaders help couples to a great extent. To some extent: 32 respondents (46.4%) indicate religious leaders help couples to some extent. Neutral: 8 respondents (11.6%) have a neutral stance. To a small extent: 4 respondents (5.8%) think religious leaders help to a small extent. Not at all: 0 respondents believe religious leaders do not help at all. Key Findings shown a significant majority of respondents (82.6%) believe religious leaders help couples develop conflict prevention strategies to a great extent (36.2%) or to some extent (46.4%). A small percentage of respondents have a neutral stance (11.6%) or think religious leaders help to a small extent (5.8%). No respondents believe religious leaders do not help at all. The data suggests that respondents generally perceive religious leaders as helpful in developing conflict prevention strategies for couples (Akbar et al., 2023). The majority of respondents acknowledge the positive role of religious leaders in this aspect of marital counseling.

**Table 2: Percentage Successfully marital conflict resolution by religious leaders in your community**

Range of Percentage	Number of respondents	Percentage
0-20%	2	2.9%
21-40%	5	7.2%
41-60%	17	24.6%
61-80%	25	36.2%
81-100%	20	29%
Total	69	100

(Source: Field Data, 2025)

The above Findings from 69 respondents indicate generally high levels of perceived effectiveness. As shown in Table 4.3.2, only a small proportion of respondents (2.9%) reported that religious leaders resolve 0–20% of marital conflicts, while 7.2% estimated the success rate at 21–40%. A larger share, representing 24.6%, believed that religious leaders successfully resolve between 41–60% of the conflicts brought to them.

The majority of respondents expressed even higher confidence in religious leaders’ effectiveness: 36.2% indicated a success rate between 61–80%, and a further 29% believed that 81–100% of marital conflicts handled by religious leaders were resolved successfully.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that 65.2% of respondents perceive religious leaders as achieving success rates above 60%, suggesting strong community trust in their ability to mediate and restore marital relationships. The distribution shows a clear upward trend, with the highest frequencies concentrated in the upper success categories. This indicates that, in the view of most spouses, religious leaders serve as effective mediators who contribute significantly to marital stability and peacebuilding efforts (Alves et al., 2025). The results therefore provide quantitative evidence that religious leaders are widely regarded as key actors in resolving marital disputes within the community.

Findings indicate that religious leaders in marital peace building in the community. Here's a breakdown of the responses: Not at all (1.3) Very few respondents chose this option, indicating most people think religious leaders play some role. To some extent some respondents selected this, suggesting a limited perceived impact. To Neutral (3) a moderate number of respondents were neutral on the issue. Many respondents think religious leaders contribute to marital peace building to some extent (4.8) To a great extent (4.5) a significant number of respondents believe religious leaders play a big role in marital peace building. Overall, the data suggests that most respondents think religious leaders have a positive impact on marital peace building in the community, with many believing they contribute "to some extent" or "to a great extent".

**Table 3 Involvement of religious leaders in marital conflicts resulted in the following outcomes in community.**

outcome	Rate by percentage (%)					Total
	Not at all	To small extent	Neutral	To some extent	To great extent	
Reduced divorce rates	5%	15%	10%	24%	46%	100
Improved communication Between spouse	0	4%	11%	30%	55%	100
Increased marital satisfaction	7%	10%	5%	40%	38%	100
Strengthened family cohesion	0	20%	10%	38%	32%	100

Development of conflict resolution skills	4%	19%	2%	40%	35%	100
Spouse reconciliation	3%	16%	18%	23%	40%	100
Trauma healing	15%	21%	10%	30%	24%	100
Long term commitment	20%	29%	18%	21%	12%	100

(Source: Field Data, 2025)

The findings indicate that religious leaders are widely regarded as effective in reducing divorce rates, with 70% of respondents stating that their involvement contributes to this outcome either to some extent or to a great extent. This pattern aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the stabilizing influence of religious authorities on marital institutions, especially in contexts where marriage is framed as a covenantal or sacred union (Archer et al., 2023a). Similarly, religious leaders are perceived to be highly influential in enhancing communication between spouses, with 85% reporting notable improvements. This underscores the centrality of pastoral interventions in fostering dialogue, empathy, and moral persuasion during marital discord.

A substantial proportion of respondents also attribute improvements in marital satisfaction (78%) and family cohesion (70%) to the efforts of religious leaders. These findings reflect the broader role of religious institutions in reinforcing relational norms, promoting cooperation among family members, and offering value-based guidance that can strengthen interpersonal bonds (Bodie et al., 2023). The perceived enhancement of conflict resolution skills (75%) further suggests that religious leaders often serve not only as mediators but also as informal educators who equip couples with strategies for managing disagreements constructively.

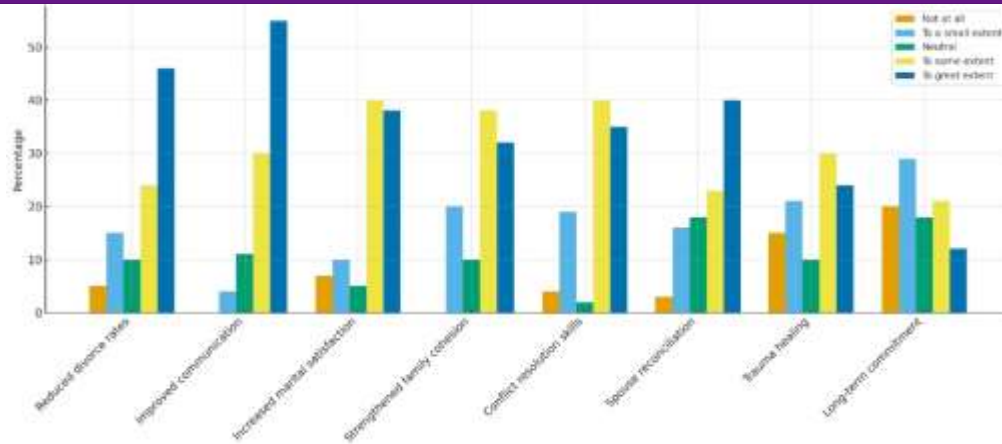
The domain of spousal reconciliation reveals moderate but meaningful influence, with 63% indicating that religious leaders aid in reuniting estranged partners. However, the relatively higher neutral rating (18%) suggests that reconciliation outcomes may also depend heavily on the couple's willingness to reconcile, the severity of conflict, or the presence of external factors beyond pastoral control (Distler et al., 2020).

Notably, respondents expressed more reserved confidence in the effectiveness of religious leaders in trauma healing, with only 54% indicating substantial impact and 15% reporting no impact at all. This divergence may reflect the limits of pastoral counseling when dealing with deep psychological or emotional trauma, which often requires specialized therapeutic interventions (Mushomi & Wielenga, 2024). This is consistent with scholarly arguments that spiritual support, while valuable, may not substitute for clinical treatment in cases involving abuse, severe mental distress, or long-term psychological harm.

The weakest area of perceived influence concerns long-term marital commitment, where only 33% of respondents believe religious leaders contribute to this outcome to a great or moderate extent. This suggests that while religious leaders may assist in acute conflict resolution, sustaining long-term relational commitment is likely shaped more by personal compatibility, continuous relational effort, socioeconomic pressures, and individual psychological factors (Daniel, 2023). The higher proportion of respondents reporting minimal or no impact (49%) further underscores the limitations of religious intervention in influencing enduring relational outcomes.

Taken together, the results reveal a pattern in which religious leaders are viewed as particularly effective in short-term conflict mitigation, communication enhancement, and relational stabilization, but less effective in areas requiring specialized psychological care or long-term behavioral change. These findings reinforce the importance of integrating religious guidance with professional counseling services, especially in contexts where marital conflict intersects with trauma or deeply rooted relational dysfunctions (Brooks, 2023). The data underscores the multifaceted but bounded role of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution. Their influence appears strongest in domains aligned with moral guidance, emotional support, and communication facilitation. However, for sustainable long-term marital health, their contributions may need to be complemented by trained mental health professionals and other structural support systems.

**Involvement of religious leaders in marital conflicts resulted in the following outcomes in community**



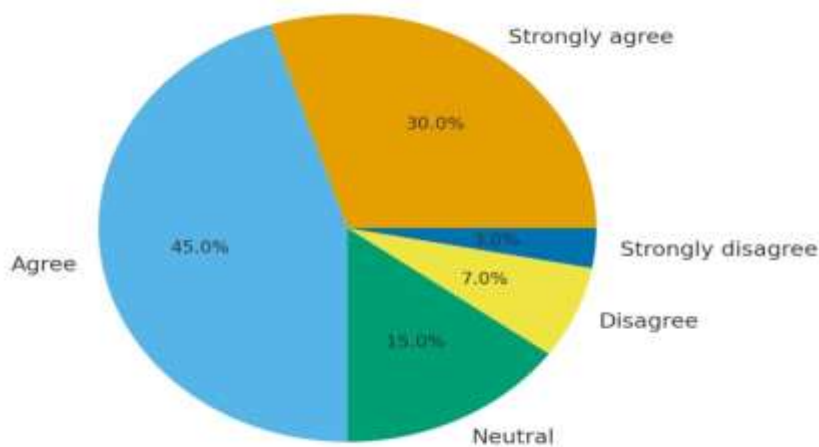
(Source: Field Data, 2025)

### Religious leaders receive sufficient support from their religious institutions to engage in conflict resolution work

The results suggest that religious leaders generally feel well-supported by their institutions in carrying out conflict-resolution responsibilities. A substantial majority 75% (“Strongly agree” 30% + “Agree” 45%) indicate a positive perception of institutional support. This implies that most leaders experience access to resources, validation of their role, or structural backing that enables them to intervene in marital or communal conflicts (Ali et al., 2024). However, the 15% neutral response indicates a notable group that remains uncertain about the adequacy of support. This may signal variability between institutions or ambiguity in what “support” entails for respondents.

Only 10% (“Disagree” 7% + “Strongly disagree” 3%) express dissatisfaction, showing that while relatively small, there is a minority who perceive insufficient institutional structures, training, or recognition for their conflict-resolution work. This gap may highlight areas where institutions can strengthen formal mechanisms, capacity-building programs, or policy frameworks that guide leaders in managing conflict. Overall, the data paints a picture of generally strong institutional support, though with meaningful opportunities for improvement in consistency, clarity.

### A pie chart showing response on religious leaders receive sufficient support from their religious institutions to engage in conflict resolution work



(Source: Field Data, 2025)

### Effectiveness of religious leaders

The qualitative findings reveal several key motivations underlying spouses' decisions to seek help from religious leaders rather than secular counselors or professional therapists. These responses highlight a combination of cultural, spiritual, relational, and accessibility factors that shape this preference.

First, many spouses emphasized a strong sense of trust and familiarity with their religious leaders. Respondents noted that religious leaders are longstanding figures within their faith communities, often serving as moral guides and confidants throughout various stages of life (Brenner & Miller, 2024). This pre-existing relationship fosters a sense of safety and reduces the emotional barriers associated with disclosing intimate marital issues. For many participants, the religious leader is viewed not merely as an advisor, but as a spiritual guardian whose role extends beyond conflict mediation.

One respondent during a face-to-face interview stated:

“For us, the main reason we went to our religious leader is because we share the same faith and values. Our marriage isn't just a legal agreement; it's something sacred. We felt that someone from our own religious background would understand that better than a secular counselor (Berdal & Sherman, 2023). When we talk to our religious leader, we know the guidance will come from scripture and from the moral teachings we believe in.”

Several respondents also highlighted the influence of cultural norms and community expectations. In many communities, it is customary to seek guidance from religious leaders during personal or relational crises (Ahmar, 2023). Adhering to this tradition reinforces social belonging and helps couples avoid potential criticism associated with turning to “outsiders” who may not fully understand their cultural or religious context.

Overall, the initial motivations expressed by spouses reflect a multifaceted interplay of spiritual beliefs, cultural practices, relational trust, and practical considerations. Together, these factors shape a strong preference for religious leaders as primary mediators in marital conflict resolution.

### **Religious Leaders for Marital Conflict Resolution**

Respondents described a range of expectations they held before their initial meeting with a religious leader. These expectations were largely shaped by prior experiences within their faith communities and by cultural norms that position religious authorities as trusted mediators.

Many couples hoped that the religious leader would serve as a stabilizing presence capable of guiding them toward reconciliation, improved communication, and renewed commitment (Akbar et al., 2023). They expected moral clarity, spiritual encouragement, and practical guidance to restore harmony within the relationship. One respondent explained during a face-to-face interview:

“Before we went to meet the religious leader, we honestly just hoped he could help us find our way back to each other. As a couple, we were expecting him to guide us toward some kind of reconciliation because things had become really tense at home. We believed he would help us communicate better and maybe remind us of the values we had when we first got married (Bodie et al., 2023). I personally expected him to give us moral direction and some spiritual encouragement something that would calm the situation and help us see things more clearly. We went in hoping he could offer practical steps to help us restore peace and harmony in our marriage.”

Individually, spouses often entered counseling with expectations of emotional support and non-judgmental guidance. Several respondents in Kimanya-Kabonera noted that they expected religious leaders to help them feel heard, validated, and understood, especially in situations where communication with their partners had broken down (Archer et al., 2023a). For some, there was also an expectation of gaining insight into their own shortcomings and behavioral patterns through spiritually grounded counsel.

Across the responses, there was a shared belief that religious leaders possess both spiritual authority and moral wisdom to intervene meaningfully in marital conflict (Berdal & Sherman, 2023). Many expected the use of scripture, prayer, and faith-based principles to address underlying relational challenges, reflecting the perception that religious leaders have a pastoral responsibility to promote forgiveness, patience, and unity within marriage.

One spouse during a face-to-face interview added:

“When we decided to meet with our religious leader, one of our biggest expectations was that he would be a fair and neutral mediator between us. We really needed someone who could help us talk honestly without things turning into an argument (Baer & Singer, 2024). I hoped he would help us express our frustrations in a respectful way and also point out where we might be misunderstanding each other. More than anything, we went to him because we believed he would help us rebuild trust and guide us back toward saving

### **Initiating Contact with a Religious Leader: Spouses' Experiences**

Spouses who sought assistance from religious leaders often described the process of initiating contact as both emotionally charged and deeply reflective. For many participants, reaching out was not an impulsive decision but the result of prolonged marital tension, repeated unresolved conflicts, or a growing sense of emotional stagnation within the relationship (Amdy, 2023). In some cases, the

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decision followed personal prayer, while in others it was influenced by encouragement from trusted family members who advised them to consult a faith-based authority.

Despite initial hesitation, many spouses reported feeling a sense of relief once contact was finally made. Speaking to someone perceived as compassionate, neutral, and spiritually grounded provided immediate emotional comfort. Even the act of scheduling an appointment was described as a constructive step toward healing, signalling movement from distress toward the possibility of resolution (Aras, 2025). For several respondents, the experience of being listened to during the first interaction significantly reduced emotional burden and restored a sense of hope. Although apprehension was common, most spouses ultimately viewed the initial contact as a turning point that offered reassurance, renewed optimism, and a structured pathway for addressing marital difficulties.

### **Direct Spouse Responses**

“Reaching out to our religious leader wasn’t something I did lightly. It came after months of constant tension at home, arguments that never got resolved, and long stretches where we barely spoke to each other. I remember feeling stuck, like no matter what we tried, nothing was improving. I prayed about it for a while, and after talking with my sister, she encouraged me to speak to someone who understood both relationships and our faith (Archer et al., 2023b). That’s when I finally gathered the courage to make the call. Honestly, I was really nervous at first. I worried about being judged or that he might think our problems were too messy to bring before him. I also wasn’t sure how my husband would react whether he would think I was overreacting or even agree to talk to someone outside the family. All those thoughts made the decision feel even heavier.”

“Looking back, contacting him was a turning point for us. Yes, I was scared, but it led to relief, hope, and a sense that we weren’t facing everything by ourselves. It became the first step toward rebuilding what felt like it was falling apart, and I’m grateful we made that call.”

### **The Process and Experience**

Spouses who participated in marital conflict-resolution sessions with religious leaders described varied experiences regarding how evenly their voices were balanced during discussions. Many respondents noted that religious leaders intentionally created space for both partners to express themselves (Abbott & Conant, 2024). Strategies such as allowing uninterrupted speaking time, encouraging turn-taking, and explicitly emphasizing fairness were commonly reported. These approaches helped several spouses feel that the process was respectful and balanced.

However, some participants observed that perfect balance was not always achieved. In certain cases, the more outspoken or emotionally expressive partner tended to dominate discussions, even unintentionally. A few respondents also felt that leaders occasionally connected more easily with one spouse often due to prior familiarity or shared interpretive alignment leaving the other partner feeling less fully understood (Daniel, 2023).

Despite these limitations, most spouses agreed that the presence of a religious leader significantly improved the quality of communication compared to discussions at home. Even when imbalances occurred, leaders often attempted to restore equilibrium by redirecting conversation, asking clarifying questions, or inviting quieter spouses to elaborate (Leadership et al., 2025).

“There were moments when my spouse talked more or became more emotional, and I felt like the leader naturally focused on them a bit more. Still, whenever that happened, he usually turned back to me and asked for my thoughts, so I didn’t feel ignored. Overall, I felt mostly heard, even if the balance wasn’t always perfect.”

### **Confidentiality and Trust**

Confidentiality emerged as one of the most critical factors shaping spouses’ willingness to engage openly with religious leaders in Kimanya-Kabonera. Many participants reported that leaders explicitly assured them of privacy at the beginning of sessions, emphasizing that discussions would remain confidential (Bergan et al., 2023). This reassurance helped establish trust and encouraged openness.

Some spouses, however, initially expressed caution due to the close-knit nature of the community, where information can easily circulate (Amdy, 2023). Despite these concerns, most participants reported that trust gradually increased over time, particularly when leaders demonstrated consistency, professionalism, and discretion in handling sensitive matters.

“At first I worried because our leader is part of the community, but the way he kept everything private made me feel safe to open up and be honest.” A few spouses admitted that they were initially guarded and withheld certain details due to fear of misinterpretation or unintended disclosure. For these individuals, trust developed gradually and was reinforced by the leader’s neutrality and ability to avoid taking sides (Adam-Bagley et al., 2023).

“At the beginning, I wasn’t completely open. I kept holding back because I was afraid that sharing too much might change how the leader saw our family or be misunderstood if the information ever slipped out. It took time to trust the process. But as I saw him remain neutral and avoid taking sides, I gradually felt safer and became more comfortable sharing honestly.”

### **Perceived Effectiveness**

Spouses reported mixed short-term outcomes following initial counseling sessions. Many experienced an immediate reduction in household tension, with fewer arguments and more controlled communication (Alves et al., 2025). Even where conflicts persisted, several couples noted that sessions helped them pause, reflect, and engage more thoughtfully.

However, some respondents indicated that improvements were not always immediate or sustained, as emotional tensions occasionally resurfaced after returning to daily routines. For these couples, meaningful progress required time and repeated engagement. "Right after the sessions, the house felt calmer (Golemboski, 2022). We still disagreed, but we talked without shouting." (Spouse)

In the long term, many spouses reported gradual but meaningful improvements in their marital relationships. Improved communication was the most frequently cited outcome, with couples describing better listening skills, more respectful expression of concerns, and reduced impulsive reactions.

Some respondents also reported improvements in emotional intimacy and trust, which they attributed to continued dialogue and guided reflection (Leadership et al., 2025). While not all conflicts were fully resolved, many couples indicated that they had developed better coping mechanisms and a more collaborative approach to handling disagreements. "Over time we learned to listen to each other better. Even when we argue now, we handle it with more respect."

### **Unintended Consequences**

Several spouses reported unexpected positive outcomes from engaging in religious counseling. Some described a strengthened personal faith and deeper spiritual reflection, while others noted improved family relationships and increased social support from relatives and the broader community (Guthrie & Devies, 2024).

However, a few participants also reported initial concerns about stigma, particularly in closely connected communities. While some experienced temporary discomfort, these fears generally diminished as counseling progressed and marital relationships improved.

### **Leaders' Strengths and Limitations**

Analysis of respondents' views revealed a mixed assessment of religious leaders' competencies in managing marital conflict. Couples identified notable strengths that enhanced trust and facilitated engagement, while also pointing to certain limitations that occasionally constrained long-term effectiveness.

#### **Perceived Strengths of Religious Leaders**

Many spouses highlighted strong interpersonal, spiritual, and moral qualities demonstrated by religious leaders throughout the mediation process (Amdy, 2023). Emotional support and empathy: Respondents frequently noted that leaders created a calm and supportive environment where they felt listened to and understood. This emotional presence helped reduce tension and encouraged openness.

Moral and spiritual guidance: Participants valued the use of scriptural teachings and spiritual principles, which reinforced values such as forgiveness, patience, and reconciliation. This was particularly meaningful for couples with strong religious commitment.

#### **Perceived Limitations of Religious Leaders**

Despite these strengths, couples identified several structural and professional weaknesses that constrained the effectiveness of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution. A number of spouses particularly women reported experiences of bias, where leaders appeared to privilege patriarchal cultural expectations. Some felt pressured to "submit" or tolerate harmful behaviors in order to preserve the marriage (Nations, 2022).

Overemphasis on Spiritual Solutions: Several spouses felt that leaders relied too heavily on prayer, scripture, or moral exhortation, without adequately addressing practical or emotional dimensions of the conflict. Issues like domestic violence, financial stress, or mental health were sometimes minimized or spiritualized. Limited Time and Availability (Abbott & Conant, 2024). Some participants expressed frustration with leaders who were too busy or unable to provide follow-up sessions. This lack of continuity weakened the progress made in initial counseling. Inadequate Confidentiality Safeguards A few spouses expressed concerns about privacy, citing instances where sensitive information circulated within the religious community or was referenced indirectly in sermons, which compromised trust (Golemboski, 2022). Inability to Enforce Long-Term Change: Respondents noted that religious leaders could advise and mediate but lacked mechanisms to ensure accountability or monitor long-term behavioral change within the marriage.

Overall, spouses appreciated the moral authority and spiritual reassurance provided by religious leaders, which played a significant role in fostering hope, communication, and initial reconciliation (Amberley, 2023). However, the lack of formal counseling skills, cultural biases, and over-spiritualization of complex marital issues limited the effectiveness of religious leaders as comprehensive

peace builders. Many couples indicated that while religious support was helpful, sustained marital peace required a blend of faith-based guidance and professional counseling services.

### **Religious Leaders in Marital Conflict Resolution and marital Peace building.**

The findings presented in this section are based on rich qualitative data gathered from religious leaders who actively engage in marital conflict resolution and marital peace building within their congregations and communities (Akbar et al., 2023). It identified Qualitative data Findings on Challenges Faced by Religious Leaders in Marital Conflict Resolution and marital Peace building

The findings revealed that religious leaders operate within a highly demanding environment when supporting couples experiencing marital conflict. Their accounts paint a picture of work that is deeply meaningful yet emotionally taxing, requiring them to constantly navigate the intersection of spiritual responsibility, psychological complexity, and cultural expectation. The challenges identified fall broadly into personal and skill-related constraints, doctrinal and ethical dilemmas, relational and communal pressures, systemic limitations, and contemporary contextual realities. The voices of the leaders underscore that marital conflict resolution is not only a technical task but also a deeply human one—requiring empathy, discernment, resilience, and wisdom.

### **Personal and Skill-Based Challenges**

Many religious leaders expressed that mediating marital conflicts takes a significant emotional toll. They described the emotional atmosphere of counseling sessions as intense, often filled with anger, tears, disappointment, and sometimes despair (Berdal & Sherman, 2023). Several leaders admitted that after hearing repeated stories of betrayal, domestic violence, or long-standing resentment, they often felt “spiritually heavy” or emotionally drained. In some cases, these emotional burdens followed them home, affecting their personal wellbeing and sometimes intruding into their family relationships.

A recurring theme was the sense of being underprepared for the complexity of modern marital problems. Although most leaders were trained in theology and pastoral ministry, many felt inadequately equipped to handle issues that require clinical or psychological expertise (Amah, 2023). Problems involving trauma, depression, substance abuse, personality disorders, or deep-seated communication dysfunctions often left leaders feeling overwhelmed. One leader summarized this gap by stating that some marital cases “need more than prayer, Scripture, or pastoral listening they require professional therapeutic skills we were never taught.”

Impartiality also emerged as a delicate challenge. Leaders acknowledged that maintaining neutrality becomes increasingly difficult when they have longstanding relationships with one spouse, or when one partner’s actions clearly violate moral or ethical expectations (Cohen & Soukup, 2023). Some confessed that their own emotions occasionally influenced their guidance, despite their efforts to remain objective.

Burnout and compassion fatigue were prominent concerns. Leaders spoke of feeling chronically exhausted from carrying many congregants’ emotional burdens while also managing the expectation that they must “save marriages” at all costs. With limited time for rest, personal retreats, or self-care, many felt they were pouring from an empty cup.

### **Doctrinal, Theological, and Ethical Challenges**

Religious leaders frequently encountered tension between doctrinal teachings and pastoral realities. Many doctrines emphasize the permanence of marriage, forgiveness, and the ideal of reconciliation (Ginty, 2024). However, leaders noted that applying these teachings becomes complicated when faced with situations involving persistent abuse, severe emotional distress, or clear incompatibility. Several leaders expressed that while doctrine calls for upholding the sanctity of marriage, pastoral compassion sometimes requires prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of individuals. This created internal conflict as they tried to balance fidelity to doctrine with sensitivity to human suffering.

The misuse or misinterpretation of religious teachings further complicated their work. Some spouses, for instance, invoked concepts like forgiveness or submission to justify harmful behavior, avoid accountability, or pressure their partner into reconciliation (Ahmar, 2023). Leaders shared that correcting such distortions required great care, as doing so risked appearing doctrinally inconsistent or biased.

Confidentiality dilemmas were also common. Leaders described situations where they learned about infidelity, domestic violence, or even illegal activities. They often struggled with the decision of whether to maintain confidentiality or take action to protect those involved. This challenge highlighted the tension between ethical responsibility, the need to uphold pastoral trust, and legal obligations.

Additionally, leaders expressed concern about balancing spiritual authority with empowering couples. While congregants often view them as authoritative guides, leaders were mindful not to create dependency. Supporting couples in developing their own communication and conflict-resolution skills without overshadowing their autonomy was an ongoing and delicate task.

### **Relational and Communal Challenges**

Community expectations emerged as a major relational challenge. Many congregations strongly believe that religious leaders can and should “fix” marriages (Distler et al., 2020). This pressure often resulted in unrealistic expectations, especially in cases involving deep-rooted problems or long-term emotional disconnection. Some leaders noted that communities sometimes push for reconciliation even when remaining in the relationship may be unsafe or unhealthy.

Extended family dynamics further complicated counseling efforts. Because many couples come from closely knit or communal family systems, relatives especially in-laws played active roles in marital life. Leaders explained that disputes often escalated due to interference, family loyalty pressures, or competing cultural expectations (Distler et al., 2020). These external influences sometimes made mediation difficult, as the conflict extended beyond the couple to a much broader network.

Leaders also highlighted the challenge of navigating power imbalances within marriages. In cases where one spouse was more financially stable, more educated, or socially dominant, it became difficult to facilitate equitable dialogue (Kezar, 2023). Cultural and religious norms were sometimes used to silence or overshadow the more vulnerable partner.

Resistance from couples was another common challenge. Some spouses arrived with rigid positions, seeking validation rather than resolution. Leaders reported that in some cases, individuals participated merely to “prove a point,” justify their decisions, or fulfill social expectations, making genuine peacebuilding difficult.

### **Systemic and Resource-Based Challenges**

A recurring systemic challenge was the lack of clear referral pathways. While some cases required professional psychological or legal intervention, leaders often felt uncertain about when or how to refer couples (Carbone & Pellegata, 2020). Some worried that referrals might undermine their spiritual authority, while others noted that couples were reluctant to seek help outside religious settings. In many communities, professional counseling services were either scarce, unaffordable, or culturally stigmatized.

Many leaders emphasized that their theological training did not include sufficient preparation in marriage therapy, clinical psychology, or trauma-informed care. This limitation made it difficult to address complex behavioral or mental health issues effectively.

Time constraints posed another systemic challenge. Religious leaders juggle numerous roles preaching, administration, community outreach, funerals, youth mentorship which often leaves little time for thorough marital counseling. Leaders serving in large congregations described the difficulty of providing consistent follow-up, making it hard to track progress or provide sustained support.

Interdisciplinary collaboration was also limited. Leaders expressed the need for stronger partnerships with therapists, legal practitioners, and social workers. Differences in worldview, mistrust, and institutional gaps often hindered effective cooperation, leaving leaders feeling isolated in their efforts.

### **Contextual and Modern Challenges**

Modern societal changes have introduced new layers of complexity to marital conflicts. Religious leaders observed growing tension between contemporary values such as women’s empowerment, individual autonomy, and evolving gender roles and traditional religious teachings on marriage (Davis et al., 2023). This tension sometimes created confusion or defensiveness among couples, particularly where expectations were unclear, inconsistent, or perceived as contradictory.

Mental health challenges have also become more prominent in marital problems. Leaders reported an increasing prevalence of depression, anxiety, trauma histories, and addiction among couples seeking assistance. Many acknowledged feeling inadequately equipped to identify or manage such conditions, noting that without clinical training, they often struggled to provide appropriate and sustained support.

The digital age has further complicated marital relationships. Leaders highlighted emerging issues such as social media-related infidelity, online secrecy, pornography consumption, and excessive device use as growing sources of conflict (Distler et al., 2020). Many expressed uncertainty in addressing these challenges, as technological developments have rapidly outpaced the guidance available within traditional pastoral training frameworks.

## Religious Leaders in Marital Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

The following qualitative findings explore the strategies and approaches employed by religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding, based on their lived experiences and in-depth interviews (Carbone & Pellegata, 2020). Despite differences in pastoral backgrounds and limited formal counseling training, religious leaders consistently demonstrated adaptive, practice-based methods grounded in faith, dialogue, prayer, and sustained pastoral engagement. Their accounts reflect a strong integration of spiritual guidance with relational counseling, shaped by deep community trust and long-term involvement with couples.

### Nature of Marital Conflicts Brought to Religious Leaders

Religious leaders reported that marital conflicts presented to them are diverse but often follow recurring patterns. Communication breakdown was identified as the most common issue, typically expressed through persistent arguments, silent treatment, or emotional withdrawal. Financial disputes were also prominent, often linked to unemployment, hidden spending, debt, or unequal contributions to household income.

Infidelity both actual and suspected was increasingly reported as a major source of marital distress, often resulting in emotional trauma and loss of trust (Bergan et al., 2023). Leaders also encountered cases of domestic violence, ranging from emotional abuse to physical harm. Although such cases were not always openly disclosed, signs such as fear, intimidation, and emotional suppression frequently emerged during counseling sessions.

Additional issues included in-law interference, unmet gender-role expectations, and sexual dissatisfaction. Overall, leaders described contemporary marital conflicts as increasingly complex, shaped by economic pressures, modern lifestyles, and shifting gender norms.

“Most couples come to us when communication has completely broken down; they either argue endlessly or keep silent for days.”  
(Pastor)

### Religious Leaders' Contribution to Marital Peacebuilding

Religious leaders described marital peacebuilding as an ongoing process that extends beyond resolving immediate conflicts. They emphasized nurturing relationships through spiritual formation, emotional support, and social reinforcement.

Preventive strategies included sermons, premarital counseling, marriage seminars, men's and women's fellowships, and couples' workshops (Daniel, 2023). These platforms were used to promote communication skills, empathy, patience, and mutual understanding. Some leaders also facilitated group counseling and couples' fellowships, which fostered peer learning, accountability, and community support.

Prayer and shared spiritual practices were emphasized as key tools for strengthening marital bonds. Priests, in particular, highlighted the sacramental and covenantal nature of marriage, encouraging couples to deepen their spiritual commitment as a foundation for relational stability.

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that religious leaders play a significant role in marital conflict resolution and marital peacebuilding in Kimanya-Kabonera. The discussion integrates both quantitative and qualitative findings with existing scholarly literature and theoretical perspectives on religion, peacebuilding, counseling, and family stability (Archer et al., 2023a). The results reveal that religious leaders are widely perceived as trusted mediators whose interventions contribute positively to reconciliation, communication improvement, conflict prevention, and marital stability. However, the findings also expose important limitations associated with inadequate professional training, doctrinal tensions, and emerging psychosocial challenges.

### Religious Leaders in Marital Conflict Resolution

The study established that the majority of respondents perceived religious leaders as effective in resolving marital conflicts. Most spouses agreed that religious leaders understand the unique dynamics of marital disputes within their communities and are more effective than secular counselors in certain contexts (Jacobson, 2025). These findings support existing scholarship that identifies religious leaders as influential insider mediators whose legitimacy is rooted in shared faith, cultural familiarity, and moral authority. In many African societies, religious leaders occupy socially respected positions that enable couples to approach them with confidence and emotional openness.

The findings are consistent with peacebuilding theories emphasizing the importance of culturally embedded actors in conflict resolution. Lederach's conflict transformation theory argues that sustainable peacebuilding is more effective when local and trusted actors participate actively in mediation processes (Syna & Corry, 2023). Religious leaders in Kimanya-Kabonera function as such actors because they possess intimate knowledge of community values, family structures, and relational expectations. Their interventions therefore resonate more strongly with couples compared to externally imposed counseling approaches.

The findings further align with previous studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, which indicate that religious leaders frequently serve as first responders during family crises due to their accessibility and affordability. Unlike professional therapists who may be financially inaccessible or socially distant, religious leaders are integrated into everyday community life and often provide support without formal charges (Chaplin, 2021). This accessibility strengthens their influence in marital mediation and reinforces community trust in faith-based counseling.

The study also found that respondents perceived religious leaders as more effective than secular counselors in addressing marital conflict. This finding may be explained by the spiritual dimensions attached to marriage in many African societies. For many couples, marriage is understood not merely as a contractual relationship but as a sacred covenant grounded in religious teachings. Consequently, couples often seek interventions that address not only emotional and relational issues but also spiritual concerns (Steele, 2025). Religious leaders therefore occupy a unique position where they can combine moral guidance, scriptural interpretation, and emotional support within a culturally accepted framework.

However, the findings also suggest that the perceived effectiveness of religious leaders does not necessarily imply comprehensive effectiveness in all aspects of marital conflict. While respondents valued faith-based mediation, some spouses identified limitations related to gender bias, over-spiritualization of complex problems, and inadequate professional counseling skills (Zabrodskaja & Wang, 2025). These concerns support scholarly critiques arguing that religious leaders sometimes rely excessively on doctrinal solutions while underestimating psychological, economic, or trauma-related dimensions of marital conflict.

### **Religious Leaders and Marital Peacebuilding**

The findings revealed that religious leaders contribute significantly to marital peacebuilding through both preventive and restorative interventions. Couples identified premarital counseling, marriage seminars, couples' fellowships, prayer sessions, and follow-up mechanisms as important peacebuilding strategies employed by religious leaders (Fisher & Mollica, 2026). These interventions contribute to long-term relationship stability by promoting communication, forgiveness, empathy, and mutual understanding.

This finding corresponds with broader peacebuilding literature that views peace not merely as the absence of conflict but as the presence of positive relationships, social cohesion, and constructive communication. Religious leaders in this study appeared to adopt both reactive and proactive peacebuilding approaches (Archer et al., 2023a). They intervened during active marital crises while simultaneously promoting preventive education aimed at reducing future conflicts.

The emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation within religious counseling reflects theological perspectives that view marriage as a covenant requiring patience, sacrifice, and restoration. Such teachings can strengthen emotional resilience within marriages and encourage couples to pursue reconciliation rather than separation (Damansari, 2025). The findings therefore support studies suggesting that faith-based peacebuilding mechanisms can reinforce relational stability by shaping moral behavior and promoting social accountability.

At the same time, the study revealed that the effectiveness of religious leaders in promoting long-term marital commitment was comparatively weaker than their effectiveness in short-term conflict mediation. This finding is significant because it suggests that while religious leaders may successfully de-escalate immediate tensions, sustaining long-term behavioral change requires additional structural and psychological interventions (Salanova & Zyl, 2022). Long-term marital stability is influenced by broader socioeconomic pressures, personality dynamics, mental health conditions, and evolving gender expectations factors that may exceed the scope of traditional pastoral counseling.

This finding supports systems theory perspectives, which argue that marital relationships are shaped by interconnected personal, relational, social, and structural influences. Religious counseling alone may therefore be insufficient to address all dimensions of marital instability, particularly in contexts involving trauma, addiction, or persistent domestic violence.

### **Trust, Accessibility, and Cultural Legitimacy**

One of the strongest themes emerging from both quantitative and qualitative findings was the importance of trust and cultural legitimacy in shaping the effectiveness of religious leaders (Ansar et al., 2026). Spouses repeatedly emphasized that they approached religious leaders because they trusted them, shared common beliefs with them, and perceived them as spiritually grounded and morally upright individuals.

This finding supports social capital theory, which emphasizes the role of trust, networks, and shared values in strengthening social relationships and facilitating collective problem-solving. Religious leaders possess significant social capital within communities because they maintain longstanding relationships with congregants and often accompany families through major life events such as marriage, childbirth, illness, and bereavement (Falloon et al., 2023). This relational proximity increases spouses' willingness to disclose intimate problems and seek guidance.

The findings also illustrate the importance of contextualized peacebuilding approaches. Religious leaders understand local cultural norms, gender expectations, and family structures, enabling them to mediate disputes in culturally meaningful ways. Their familiarity with community dynamics enhances their legitimacy compared to external counselors who may lack contextual understanding.

However, the same cultural embeddedness that strengthens trust may also create challenges. Some respondents feared breaches of confidentiality due to the close-knit nature of the community. Others noted that cultural and patriarchal norms occasionally influenced leaders' interpretations of marital issues, particularly regarding gender roles and submission (Astle et al., 2023). This reflects feminist critiques of some faith-based counseling practices that may unintentionally reinforce unequal power relations within marriages.

### **Challenges Faced by Religious Leaders**

The findings indicate that religious leaders face numerous challenges in marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Emotional fatigue, compassion burnout, inadequate counseling skills, confidentiality dilemmas, doctrinal tensions, and increasing mental health-related cases emerged as major obstacles.

The emotional burden reported by religious leaders aligns with studies on pastoral care and caregiving fatigue, which demonstrate that continuous exposure to emotionally intense situations can negatively affect counselors' wellbeing (Ahmar, 2023). Religious leaders in this study often functioned simultaneously as spiritual advisors, mediators, social workers, and emotional caregivers, yet many lacked formal psychological training or institutional support systems.

The challenge of insufficient counseling skills is particularly important. Although religious leaders possess theological knowledge and moral authority, many admitted feeling underprepared to handle complex issues such as trauma, depression, domestic violence, addiction, and personality disorders (Berdal & Sherman, 2023). This finding supports previous scholarship arguing that pastoral counseling alone may be inadequate for addressing severe psychological or behavioral conditions.

The study further revealed tensions between doctrinal teachings and pastoral realities. Religious doctrines emphasizing forgiveness, reconciliation, and the permanence of marriage sometimes conflicted with situations involving abuse, chronic dysfunction, or emotional harm (He et al., 2023). Religious leaders therefore faced ethical dilemmas in balancing doctrinal obligations with the safety and wellbeing of spouses.

This finding contributes to broader debates concerning the role of religion in conflict resolution. While religion can promote peace, reconciliation, and healing, rigid doctrinal interpretations may sometimes complicate interventions in abusive or unequal relationships. The study therefore highlights the need for contextual and ethically sensitive approaches that prioritize both spiritual values and human wellbeing.

### **Religious Leaders and Interdisciplinary Collaboration**

Another important finding was the limited collaboration between religious leaders and professional service providers such as psychologists, social workers, and legal practitioners (Albert & Pappas, 2024). Although some leaders acknowledged the importance of referrals, many expressed uncertainty about referral systems or feared losing congregants' trust by involving external professionals.

This finding reflects broader structural challenges within many African contexts where mental health services remain underdeveloped, expensive, or socially stigmatized. Couples may therefore prefer to remain within religious support systems even when specialized intervention is necessary.

The study supports interdisciplinary perspectives that advocate integrated approaches to marital conflict resolution. Effective peacebuilding within marriages requires collaboration between spiritual care providers, mental health professionals, legal systems, and community support structures (Collectif, 2021). Religious leaders possess cultural legitimacy and relational trust, while professional counselors contribute specialized psychological expertise. Combining these strengths may enhance the quality and sustainability of marital interventions.

### **Changing Marital Dynamics**

The study further revealed that religious leaders are increasingly confronted with modern challenges, including social media-related conflicts, changing gender expectations, financial pressures, and mental health concerns (Nimoy, 2024). These findings reflect broader social transformations occurring across African societies due to globalization, urbanization, digital technology, and evolving gender relations.

Religious leaders noted that issues such as online infidelity, pornography consumption, digital secrecy, and excessive social media use now contribute significantly to marital disputes. These emerging realities challenge traditional pastoral approaches that were not designed to address technologically mediated relational problems.

Similarly, changing gender roles and increased advocacy for women's rights have altered expectations within marriages. Some couples struggle to reconcile traditional religious teachings with contemporary ideas about equality, autonomy, and partnership (Clark, 2022). Religious leaders therefore operate within increasingly complex relational environments requiring adaptive and context-sensitive responses. The findings suggest that marital conflict resolution in contemporary African societies can no longer rely exclusively on traditional or purely doctrinal approaches. Instead, there is growing need for religious leaders to receive ongoing training in psychology, gender sensitivity, trauma-informed care, digital ethics, and contemporary family dynamics.

### Conclusion

This study examined the role of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Kimanya-Kabonera and established that religious leaders remain central actors in promoting marital harmony and family stability within the community. The findings demonstrated that religious leaders are widely trusted because of their moral authority, cultural legitimacy, accessibility, and shared religious values with community members. Couples often perceive them as approachable mediators who provide not only emotional and relational guidance but also spiritual support that aligns with their understanding of marriage as a sacred covenant.

The study further revealed that religious leaders contribute significantly to both conflict resolution and preventive peacebuilding through counseling, mediation, prayer sessions, premarital education, marriage seminars, and follow-up support mechanisms. Their interventions promote reconciliation, communication, forgiveness, empathy, and mutual understanding among couples, thereby strengthening social cohesion and marital stability. These findings affirm theoretical perspectives that emphasize the importance of culturally embedded and community-based actors in sustainable peacebuilding processes.

However, the study also established that the effectiveness of religious leaders is constrained by several challenges, including inadequate professional counseling skills, emotional burnout, confidentiality concerns, doctrinal tensions, and the growing complexity of contemporary marital problems such as mental health issues, digital-related conflicts, financial stress, and changing gender expectations. While religious leaders possess strong spiritual and relational influence, many lack sufficient training to adequately address severe psychological, trauma-related, or abuse-related cases. This limitation highlights the need for greater professional capacity-building and institutional support.

The findings further underscore the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing marital conflict comprehensively. Effective marital peacebuilding requires partnerships between religious leaders, professional counselors, psychologists, social workers, legal practitioners, and community institutions. Integrating spiritual care with professional therapeutic approaches would enhance the quality, sustainability, and ethical sensitivity of marital interventions.

Overall, the study concludes that religious leaders continue to play an indispensable role in marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Kimanya-Kabonera. Their influence remains deeply rooted in the social, cultural, and spiritual fabric of the community. Nevertheless, for their contributions to remain effective in contemporary society, religious institutions and policymakers must invest in counseling training, referral systems, mental health awareness, gender-sensitive approaches, and collaborative support structures that enable religious leaders to respond effectively to evolving marital challenges.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the role of religious leaders in marital conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Kimanya-Kabonera and similar contexts.

The study recommends that, Religious institutions should establish structured and continuous training programmes for religious leaders in areas such as counseling, mediation, conflict resolution, trauma-informed care, mental health awareness, gender sensitivity, and family therapy. Such training would equip religious leaders with practical and professional skills necessary for addressing increasingly complex marital challenges. Capacity-building initiatives should also include ethical counseling practices, confidentiality management, and domestic violence response mechanisms.

It also recommends that, Religious leaders should collaborate more closely with psychologists, social workers, legal practitioners, marriage counselors, and healthcare professionals to ensure comprehensive support for couples experiencing marital conflict. Religious institutions should develop clear referral systems that enable leaders to refer severe or specialized cases such as trauma, addiction, mental illness, or domestic violence to appropriate professionals while continuing to provide spiritual and emotional support.

The study further recommends that, Religious institutions should strengthen and institutionalize premarital counseling, marriage enrichment seminars, couples' fellowships, and family mentorship programmes. These initiatives should focus on communication skills, conflict management, financial planning, emotional intelligence, parenting, and healthy relationship practices. Preventive interventions are essential for reducing the escalation of marital disputes and promoting long-term marital stability.

More so the recommends Religious leaders should adopt counseling approaches that promote mutual respect, equality, dignity, and shared responsibility within marriage. Religious institutions should critically examine teachings or practices that may unintentionally

reinforce harmful gender stereotypes or unequal power relations. Gender-sensitive counseling would help ensure that marital peacebuilding efforts prioritize justice, safety, and wellbeing for both spouses.

Given the increasing influence of mental health challenges on marital relationships, the study recommends that religious institutions should integrate basic mental health education into pastoral care programmes. Religious leaders should be trained to identify signs of depression, trauma, anxiety, substance abuse, and emotional distress among couples. Awareness campaigns within congregations could also help reduce stigma associated with seeking professional psychological support.

The study commends that; Religious institutions should establish formal ethical guidelines governing marital counseling and mediation. Such guidelines should emphasize confidentiality, professionalism, informed consent, and protection of vulnerable individuals. Strengthening ethical standards would increase trust in faith-based counseling systems and reduce fears related to information disclosure within close-knit communities.

The article recommends that Religious leaders should update counseling approaches to respond effectively to emerging marital challenges associated with social media, digital communication, pornography, online infidelity, financial stress, and changing gender expectations. Continuous learning and exposure to contemporary family dynamics would enable religious leaders to provide more relevant and context-sensitive guidance to couples.

Government agencies and civil society organizations should recognize religious leaders as important grassroots peacebuilding actors and involve them in family welfare and community development programmes. Partnerships between faith-based organizations, local governments, and non-governmental organizations could support training initiatives, awareness campaigns, and community-based family support services.

It further recommends that research should be conducted on the role of religion and faith-based institutions in family peacebuilding, particularly regarding mental health, domestic violence, youth relationships, and changing family structures in contemporary African societies. Religious institutions should also document successful mediation practices and experiences that can inform future interventions and policy development.

Community-wide sensitization programmes should be organized to educate couples and families about healthy communication, peaceful conflict resolution, shared responsibility, and the importance of seeking help early when marital challenges arise. Religious leaders, together with community stakeholders, should promote a culture of dialogue, respect, and nonviolent conflict management within families.

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