Bearing Witness in the Fire: A Theological Reflection on Christian Genicide, Evangelization and Development in Sankera, Benue State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a contextual theological reflection on reported violence affecting Christian communities in the Sankera axis of Benue State, comprising Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo Local Government Areas, and on its implications for evangelization and socio-economic development. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 90 participants across six categories: displaced persons, community members, youth representatives, church leaders, traditional leaders and religious leaders as well as documentary sources in communities including Gbise, Sai, Ikyule, Anyiin, Kyado, Gbagir, Gbeji, Ukpen and Jootar, the study examines reported patterns of violence, displacement, and disruption to livelihoods, education, family life, and Christian practice. The term genocide is treated as a contested legal question rather than an established finding: the study does not independently determine perpetrators' intent or whether the legal threshold is met. The analysis interprets participants' accounts through martyr theology, the theology of the Cross, and Joban lament, while avoiding the romanticization of suffering or the substitution of theology for justice. Findings indicate interconnected effects on safety, farming, markets, schooling, pastoral participation, psychological well-being, and community recovery. The article contributes a contextual-theological synthesis linking these effects and proposes coordinated responses involving civilian protection, accountability, livelihood restoration, educational support, psychosocial care, pastoral accompaniment, reconciliation, and reconstruction. The findings represent qualitative accounts from the participants and should not be read as statistically representative of all Sankera residents.

Keywords: Sankera; Christian persecution; genocide discourse; contextual theology; evangelization; displacement; socio-economic development.

INTRODUCTION

Benue State, located in Nigeria's Middle Belt, is widely recognized for its agricultural productivity and is often described as the "Food Basket of the Nation." Within the state, the Sankera axis, comprising Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo Local Government Areas, is predominantly agrarian, with many residents depending on farming and related economic activities. The area is largely associated with the Tiv people, whose cultural identity, communal relationships, and livelihoods are closely connected to ancestral land. Christianity has significantly influenced the religious and social development of Sankera through missionary activities, indigenous evangelization, the establishment of churches and schools, and other social institutions.

In recent decades, however, communities across Sankera have experienced recurrent episodes of violent conflict involving farming communities, pastoralists, armed groups, and other actors. These conflicts have resulted in loss of lives, destruction of homes and property, displacement, disruption of agricultural activities, and the weakening of social and economic structures. Human rights organizations and conflict-monitoring institutions have documented serious incidents of violence in Benue State and highlighted their humanitarian consequences (International Crisis Group, 2018; Amnesty International, 2018). The effects extend beyond physical destruction

to include family separation, food insecurity, interrupted education, restricted access to healthcare and markets, and declining participation in religious activities. For communities whose livelihoods and identities are closely connected to ancestral land, prolonged displacement poses significant challenges to social stability and sustainable development.

The religious dimension of the conflict is important for understanding the experiences of affected Christian communities. Some residents, religious leaders, and advocacy groups have interpreted recurrent attacks as having a religious dimension and have described them as persecution. The term *genocide* has also appeared in some ecclesial and advocacy discourses. However, its application requires careful legal and empirical examination because international law defines genocide through specific acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such (International Crisis Group, 2018; Amnesty International, 2018). Distinguishing between documented violence, religious persecution, and the legal classification of genocide is therefore essential to a balanced theological assessment.

The Christian theology of the Cross provides an important framework for interpreting the suffering of affected communities. Through Christ's suffering, death, and Resurrection, the Cross affirms the reality of human suffering while sustaining hope in the possibility of new life. Similarly, the Book of Job offers theological insight into undeserved suffering through lament, questioning, and continued engagement with God. These perspectives enable Christian reflection to acknowledge victims' pain without romanticizing violence, promoting passivity, or neglecting the demands of justice and human dignity.

Furthermore, the crisis has significant implications for evangelization and integral human development. The Church's mission encompasses proclamation of the Gospel, sacramental life, pastoral care, education, social responsibility, peacebuilding, and the promotion of human dignity. Violence and displacement consequently challenge both the spiritual life and socioeconomic wellbeing of affected communities.

Against this background, this study examines Christian persecution in the Sankera axis of Benue State through a contextual theological approach. It engages the discourse on genocide, Christian martyrdom, the theology of the Cross, Joban lament, evangelization, and integral human development. Ultimately, the study seeks to interpret the experiences of affected Christian communities and explore their implications for the Church's mission, while emphasizing justice, reconciliation, peace, and the protection of human life.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Sankera axis of Benue State, comprising Ukum, Logo, and Katsina-Ala Local Government Areas, has experienced recurrent episodes of violent conflict, displacement, destruction of property, and disruption of community life. Christian communities within the area have reported experiences of killings, attacks on settlements, destruction of homes and places of worship, abductions, displacement, and the disruption of religious and socio-economic activities. Human rights reports and other documentary sources have also recorded serious violence in Benue State and other parts of Nigeria.

Within some Christian, ecclesial, and advocacy contexts, these experiences have increasingly been described using the language of persecution and, in some instances, genocide. However, the use of the concept of genocide presents a significant analytical problem. International law establishes specific criteria for genocide, particularly the requirement of an intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Consequently, the study must distinguish between the existence of severe and systematic violence, the perception of such violence as religious persecution, and the much narrower legal determination of genocide.

Beyond the legal and descriptive questions surrounding the violence, the crisis presents a profound theological problem for the affected Christian communities. Persistent violence raises questions about the meaning of suffering, divine justice, Christian hope, martyrdom, lament, forgiveness, and the mission of the Church in circumstances of insecurity. The destruction of churches and community institutions, the killing or displacement of clergy and lay faithful, and the abandonment of villages have disrupted patterns of worship, evangelization, education, economic activity, and community development.

Existing discussions of violence in Benue State have largely focused on political, economic, sociological, security, and humanitarian dimensions. These perspectives are essential for understanding the conflict, but they do not fully address how affected Christian communities interpret and respond to prolonged suffering within their theological tradition. There is therefore a need for contextual theological reflection that takes seriously the lived experiences of the communities while engaging biblical and theological resources relevant to suffering and persecution.

There is a need to examine how martyr theology, the theology of the Cross, and the Book of Job can contribute to an understanding of Christian responses to violence. Such reflection is necessary because an exclusively spiritual interpretation of suffering may risk neglecting the demands of justice, accountability, reconstruction, and human security. Conversely, an exclusively political or security-based interpretation may fail to recognize the theological agency, resilience, lament, hope, and pastoral experiences of affected Christian communities.

The crisis also has significant implications for integral human development. Persistent insecurity can undermine agriculture, employment, education, healthcare, infrastructure, food security, social cohesion, and local economic activity. Displacement may also weaken community institutions and increase dependence on humanitarian assistance. Consequently, the theological problem cannot be separated from the developmental consequences of violence.

The central problem addressed by this study, therefore, is the absence of a sufficiently integrated contextual theological framework for understanding the experiences of Christian communities in Sankera in relation to persecution, genocide discourse, martyrdom, suffering, evangelization, and integral human development. The study seeks to address this gap by bringing theological reflection into dialogue with empirical testimonies and relevant legal, human rights, and scholarly literature.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The main aim of this study is to examine the experiences of Christian communities in the Sankera axis of Benue State from a theological perspective and to assess the implications of persistent violence for evangelization and socio-economic development.

The study seeks to:

1. Examine the nature and patterns of violence experienced by Christian communities in Sankera and assess the extent to which such violence may be interpreted within the legal and theological discourse on genocide and persecution.
2. Identify and analyse the major social, political, economic, environmental, and religious factors associated with the recurring violence in Sankera.
3. Assess the effects of persistent violence and displacement on Christian communities, particularly in relation to evangelization, agriculture, economic activities, education, healthcare, social cohesion, and general development.
4. Examine Christian theological responses to suffering, with particular attention to martyr theology, the theology of the Cross, and Joban lament as theological resources for interpreting suffering, resilience, and Christian witness in Sankera; and
5. Propose practical and theological approaches to peacebuilding, reconciliation, community reconstruction, and sustainable development, including possible collaboration among Church institutions, government agencies, civil society organizations, community leaders, and relevant initiatives such as the Leonard-Igba Initiative for Dialogue and Reconciliation Centre at Sankera.

1.3 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the nature and pattern of violence experienced by Christian communities in Sankera, and how may it be understood within relevant legal and theological frameworks?

2. What are the major social, political, economic, environmental, and religious factors associated with the violence in Sankera?
3. What are the socio-economic, educational, pastoral, and developmental effects of persistent violence on Christian communities in Sankera?
4. How do Christians and Christian institutions in Sankera respond to experiences of violence, displacement, suffering, and insecurity?
5. What theological, institutional, governmental, and community-based approaches can contribute to peacebuilding, reconciliation, reconstruction, and sustainable development in Sankera?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework identifies the principal concepts through which this study examines violence affecting Christian communities in the Sankera axis of Benue State and considers its implications for Christian witness, evangelization, and human development. It brings together six related concepts: persecution and the discourse of genocide; violence and displacement; Christian witness and martyrdom; suffering, lament, and resilience; evangelisation and integral mission; and human development, justice, and reconstruction. These concepts are treated as connected analytical dimensions rather than as findings that can be assumed in advance. The framework is informed by the study's contextual-theological orientation, which places theological reflection in critical dialogue with the lived realities of a particular community (Bevans, 2002; Augustine, 1998; Behr, 2006).

2.1.1 Persecution and the discourse of genocide

Persecution refers here to reported acts of violence, intimidation, exclusion, or other serious harm experienced by people because of, or in connection with, their religious identity or practice. The term genocide has a narrower legal meaning. Under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, it requires specified acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such (United Nations, 1948). Genocide therefore cannot be established solely by the occurrence of killings, displacement, or destruction; the relevant acts, protected group, and specific intent must be assessed against reliable evidence (Bauer, 2001; Fein, 1993). In this article, persecution and genocide are consequently related but distinct concepts: persecution describes reported experiences and patterns of harm, while genocide is used as a legal-analytical question requiring evidential caution.

The concept of genocide occupies a central position in international law, moral philosophy, human rights discourse, and contemporary studies of mass violence. The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as certain specified acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such (United Nations, 1948).

In recent years, the term has increasingly been employed in discussions concerning violence against Christian communities in Nigeria, particularly in Benue State and other parts of the Middle Belt. The legal sustainability of this designation remains a matter requiring careful examination because genocide has a specific legal meaning under international law. Nevertheless, the severity of reported violence against affected communities provides an important basis for legal, theological, humanitarian, and scholarly inquiry.

The foundational legal definition of genocide is contained in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the United Nations in 1948. Article II defines genocide as specified acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such (United Nations, 1948). The acts identified in the Convention include killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about the group's physical destruction, imposing measures intended to prevent births, and forcibly transferring children from the group to another group (United Nations, 1948).

An important element of the legal definition is the requirement of specific intent, commonly described in legal scholarship as *dolus specialis*. This distinguishes genocide from other forms of serious international crimes and mass violence. Consequently, the existence of widespread killing or displacement alone does not automatically establish genocide. The question of whether the perpetrators possessed the specific intention to destroy a protected group, in whole or in part, remains central to any legal assessment.

Scholarly interpretations have contributed significantly to the understanding of genocide. Bauer (2001) argues that genocide involves a coordinated plan directed toward destroying the essential foundations of the life of national groups and ultimately seeking their annihilation. Fein (1993) similarly describes genocide as sustained and purposeful action intended to physically destroy a collectively, either directly or indirectly, by interfering with the biological and social reproduction of its members.

These scholarly approaches demonstrate that genocide involves more than isolated acts of violence. It concerns patterns of conduct directed toward the destruction of a protected group. Consequently, the study of alleged genocide requires attention to the nature, scale, pattern, targets, circumstances, and purposes of the violence, as well as the evidence relating to the intention of those responsible.

In the context of this study, the concept of genocide is therefore employed as an analytical and legal category through which the violence affecting Christian communities in Sankera and other parts of Benue State can be examined. The use of the concept does not eliminate the need for empirical investigation. Rather, it provides a framework through which the reported incidents can be assessed against established legal and scholarly criteria.

Within Sankera, the violence has similarly been described by affected Christian communities as taking on the character of persecution. Reports and testimonies from the respondents indicate that Christian settlements, places of worship, community institutions, and individual believers have experienced repeated insecurity. The perception among some affected Christians is that attacks have occurred during significant Christian periods, including Christmas, Easter, and Holy Week, thereby creating fear surrounding religious gatherings.

According to reports, more than sixty-five people were reportedly killed and approximately thirty injured between 2024 and 2025. The report also documents recurring attacks affecting communities within the Sankera axis (Yange et al., 2026; Mnda et al, 2026).

Across the three Local Government Areas of Sankera, it has been reported that more than 2000 people lost their lives from 2020-2026, with some missing, while many others were forced to flee their ancestral homes. There has been attacks during Holy Week in March 2024 and April 2025 affecting communities and parishes in Aboki where seven persons were killed in Chito eight were killed; some missing, and in Gbagir than six hundred were killed in Ukum Local Government Area, as well as Gondozua, Abeda, Anyiin, and Ikyule in Logo Local Government Area.

In Katsina-Ala Local Government Area, parishioners of St Paul's Parish, Aye-Twar, Agu Centre, according to respondents experienced a severe attack on Sunday, 10 August 2025, involving destruction of parish house and other properties in the Church premises.

When the definition of genocide is applied analytically to these reported incidents, questions arise concerning whether the patterns of killing, serious harm, destruction, and displacement were accompanied by the specific intent required under the Genocide Convention (United Nations, 1948). The attacks on Christian communities, churches, religious gatherings, and settlements therefore require systematic examination rather than categorical assumption justice, accountability, victim recognition, international humanitarian response, and the protection of vulnerable communities. For this reason, the present study examines the genocide discourse critically while placing it.

The debate concerning whether these events constitute genocide is consequently not merely rhetorical or theological. It has implications for justice, accountability, victim recognition, international humanitarian response, and the protection of vulnerable communities. For this reason, the present study examines the

genocide discourse critically while placing it alongside theological and empirical perspectives on Christian persecution.

2.1.2 Violence, displacement, and community disruption

Violence is conceptualized as the direct and indirect harm arising from attacks, threats, destruction of homes and places of worship, loss of life, and insecurity. Displacement refers to the forced movement of people from their homes while remaining within their country, often accompanied by loss of land, livelihoods, property, social networks, and access to services. Research on internally displaced people in Benue has documented social losses and challenges involving justice, inclusion, and recovery (Iorbo et al., 2024), while wider research on communal conflict in Nigeria has identified pressures on shelter, food, health, and other resources available to displaced populations (Anierobi et al., 2024). These concepts help the study consider violence not only as a series of incidents but also as a process that disrupts the social, economic, educational, and religious life of affected communities.

2.1.3 Christian witness, martyrdom, and the theology of suffering

Christian witness refers to the ways believers and church communities express their faith through worship, testimony, service, moral commitment, and public action. The term *martyr* originates from the Greek word *martyria*, meaning "witness" or "testimony." It is a related theological concept associated with bearing witness to faith under conditions of persecution; it should not be used to romanticise violence or to imply that victims are responsible for their suffering. In the early Church, a martyr was not merely a person who died violently but one who bore faithful testimony to Christ even unto death (Boer, 1976). Within Christian theology, martyrdom is not merely death endured but conscious participation in the suffering of Christ, understood as witness and covenantal fidelity (Kelly, 1979). Persecution was a defining experience of the early Christian community, particularly under the Roman Empire. Christians were accused of atheism because of their rejection of Roman gods, political disloyalty because of their refusal to participate in emperor worship, and social subversion because of their distinctive communal practices (Bettenson, 1970; Boer, 1976; Kelly, 1977).

Periodic persecutions under emperors such as Nero, Decius, and Diocletian intensified the Church's theological reflection on suffering and perseverance (Frend,2008). These persecutions compelled Christians to interpret suffering not simply as divine abandonment but as participation in the Passion of Christ.

Drawing upon Jesus' teaching in Matthew 16:24 concerning taking up the Cross and following him, early Christians understood martyrdom as conformity to Christ's cruciform pattern of discipleship. Suffering for Christ was interpreted as participation in both his death and Resurrection (Rom. 8:17). Tertullian's well-known statement that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" expresses the conviction that persecution could strengthen rather than destroy Christian identity (Donaldson, 1885).

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* presents Polycarp's death as conscious imitation of Christ's sacrifice (Holmes, 2007). Similarly, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch express his desire to imitate Christ even unto death and understand martyrdom in relation to union with God (Holmes, 2007). These narratives shaped Christian spirituality by presenting martyrdom not primarily through despair but through hope-filled fidelity.

Three major theological themes emerged from patristic reflection. First, *imitatio Christi*, or the imitation of Christ, emphasized that martyrs reproduce Christ's pattern of faithful suffering. Second, martyrdom was linked to eschatological hope, grounded in the promise of resurrection and eternal life (Rev. 2:10). Third, the veneration of martyrs strengthened communal identity and continuity within the Church (Frend, 2008).

The Church Fathers further developed the theology of martyrdom. Cyprian of Carthage interpreted persecution in relation to participation in Christ's victory and the purification of the Church (Cyprian, 1957). Augustine later distinguished between suffering and suffering for righteousness' sake, insisting that true martyrdom depends upon the cause for which one suffers rather than simply upon the pain endured (Augustine, 1998).

Patristic theology therefore articulated enduring principles: martyrs participate in Christ's Passion and triumph; martyrdom bears witness to divine sovereignty over earthly powers; and persecution can deepen faith and discipleship (Augustine, 1998; Cyprian, 1957). Importantly, early Christian theology did not simply glorify suffering for its own sake. Rather, it provided a Christ-centred interpretation of suffering and affirmed that persecution, although tragic and unjust, can become a context for faithful witness.

Martyr theology upholds faithful witness without romanticizing pain. It affirms that suffering endured in communion with Christ can become proclamation, while maintaining the moral imperative to resist injustice and uphold human dignity.

This understanding relates to the command of the risen Christ in Acts 1:8: "You will be my witnesses." Martyrdom was therefore understood primarily as ultimate fidelity and public testimony to Christ.

The theology of the Cross provides a language for recognising suffering and injustice while affirming divine solidarity with the vulnerable (Moltmann, 1974). Joban lament adds the importance of honest protest, questioning, grief, and the search for justice in the face of innocent suffering (Gutiérrez, 1987). In the present study, these concepts provide interpretive resources for examining how Christian communities understand and respond to violence, without treating theological interpretation as a substitute for investigation or accountability.

2.1.4 Evangelization and integral mission

Evangelisation is understood as the Church's mission of proclaiming the Gospel and forming communities of faith through worship, teaching, pastoral care, and service. The missionary mandate in *Ad gentes* and *Redemptoris missio* frames evangelisation as an ecclesial responsibility, while the Church's social teaching emphasises the dignity of the human person and the connection between faith and public responsibility (John Paul II, 1990; Second Vatican Council, 1965a, 1965b). Within this framework, integral mission links proclamation with practical responses to suffering, injustice, peacebuilding, and community welfare. Persistent insecurity may restrict access to churches, interrupt worship and religious education, displace clergy and congregations, and constrain the Church's capacity to provide pastoral and social support. The framework therefore examines evangelisation both as religious practice and as a community activity affected by insecurity.

2.1.4 Human development, justice, and reconstruction

Human development refers to conditions that enable people and communities to live with dignity and to access livelihoods, education, healthcare, food, shelter, security, participation, and opportunities for social and economic advancement. In this study, development is not limited to income or infrastructure; it also includes safety, social inclusion, justice, and the ability of communities to sustain cultural and religious life. Evidence from Benue indicates that displacement can involve loss of farms and property, weakened social relationships, and difficulties obtaining justice and support for recovery (Iorbo et al., 2024). Studies of conflict-related disruption in the Sankera area also make education and the behaviour of teachers and students relevant to understanding the broader developmental consequences of insecurity (Jato & Iornumbe, 2025). Fraternity, social friendship, and the protection of human dignity provide additional ethical principles for recovery and reconciliation (Francis, 2020).

2.2 Conceptual relationship among the key concepts

The framework proposes an analytical relationship in which reported violence and insecurity may produce displacement and damage to community institutions; these effects may in turn disrupt livelihoods, education, healthcare, social cohesion, and church activities. Such disruption creates pastoral and theological questions concerning suffering, lament, Christian witness, and resilience, while also challenging churches, government, traditional authorities, and civil society to support protection, justice, peacebuilding, and reconstruction. These relationships are examined through interview accounts, documentary sources, and theological interpretation. The framework does not presume that every incident is religiously motivated or that all reported violence meets the legal threshold for genocide. Instead, it distinguishes participants' interpretations, corroborated evidence, legal categories, and the author's theological analysis.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by contextual theology, the theology of the Cross and lament, and integral mission. Together, these perspectives provide a theological lens for examining how Christian communities in the Sankera axis interpret violence and suffering and how churches may respond through pastoral care, evangelization, justice, peacebuilding, and community development. The framework is interpretive: it helps organize the study's analysis but does not independently establish perpetrators' motives or determine whether particular events meet the legal definition of genocide.

2.3.1 Contextual theology

Contextual theology maintains that theological reflection should engage critically with the histories, cultures, experiences, struggles, and hopes of particular communities. Schreiter (1985) explains that local theologies develop through dialogue between Christian tradition and the concrete social and cultural contexts in which faith is lived. Bevans (2002) similarly presents contextual theology as an approach that takes context seriously while remaining in dialogue with the Christian tradition. In this study, accounts from residents, displaced people, and religious leaders in Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo are treated as significant contexts for theological reflection. They are not accepted uncritically; reported experiences are considered alongside available documentary material and the methodological limitations of the study.

2.3.2 Theology of the Cross and lament

The theology of the Cross, often expressed through the Latin phrase *theologiacrucis*, affirms that God's self-revelation and redemptive action are disclosed decisively in the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Rather than interpreting the Cross simply as defeat, this theological tradition understands it as the paradoxical locus of divine power, wisdom, and victory (Bonhoeffer, 1959; Moltmann, 1974). The Cross reveals a God who redeems not through domination but through self-giving love. As such, it provides a critical framework for interpreting Christian persecution, discipleship, and faithful witness in contexts of affliction.

The foundation of the theology of the Cross is deeply rooted in Pauline thought. In Colossians 1:24, Paul speaks of "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." This statement does not imply any deficiency in Christ's atoning sacrifice but expresses the believer's participation in Christ's suffering for the sake of the Church. Suffering therefore becomes vocational and ecclesial in the context of Christian ministry.

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 1:27–28, Paul declares that God chooses what is weak and foolish in the world to shame the wise and powerful. The Cross consequently challenges conventional understandings of strength, honour, and success. Divine power is manifested through what appears weak according to worldly standards (Moltmann, 1974).

Closely related to this is the tradition of cruciform discipleship. Jesus' call to take up the Cross and follow him establishes suffering as a possible dimension of Christian identity (Matt. 16:24). The early Church Fathers deepened reflection on the Cross as the centre of salvation history. Ignatius of Antioch interpreted union with Christ's suffering as a pathway to true life and expressed his desire to imitate Christ even unto death (Holmes, 2007). Athanasius of Alexandria, in *On the Incarnation*, presented the Cross within God's decisive victory over death and corruption (Behr, 2006). Augustine emphasized Christ's humility as a remedy for human pride, presenting the Cross in relation to atonement and moral transformation (Bettenson, 1970).

For the Fathers, the crucifixion was not evidence of divine weakness but of divine condescension: God enters human suffering in order to redeem humanity from within. This patristic understanding became an important foundation for later Christian reflection on suffering, martyrdom, and discipleship.

Ecclesial teaching across the centuries has continued to affirm the centrality of the Cross. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the Cross constitutes Christ's unique sacrifice for the redemption of humanity while inviting believers to unite their sufferings with his (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994, paras. 618–623). Similarly, the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* presents Christ as fully revealing humanity to

itself and places human suffering within the wider mystery of Christ's Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection (Second Vatican Council, 1965).

Luther contrasted the theology of glory with the theology of the Cross, arguing that God is known most profoundly not through human triumphalism but through the suffering and apparent hiddenness of Calvary (Luther, 1957). In the twentieth century, Moltmann (1974), in *The Crucified God*, argued that God participates in human suffering and that the Cross offers hope to oppressed and suffering communities. Bonhoeffer (1959) similarly linked discipleship with costly grace and readiness to suffer for righteousness.

In his reflection on Job, Gutiérrez (1987) emphasises lament, protest, and the rejection of simplistic explanations for the suffering of the innocent. Applied to Sankera, these perspectives encourage churches to listen to survivors, acknowledge grief, accompany bereaved and displaced families, and resist interpretations that blame victims or portray violence as divinely ordained. This framework does not romanticise suffering; rather, it treats preventable harm as a moral and theological challenge requiring compassion, truth, justice, and practical action.

2.3.3 Joban Lament Theology

Joban lament theology emerges from the theological drama of the Holy Bible, particularly the Book of Job, where innocent suffering becomes the arena for a profound encounter between faith, protest, and divine mystery. Unlike retributive frameworks that equate suffering strictly with punishment, the Book of Job challenges simplistic moral causality. Job is described as righteous, yet he suffers catastrophic loss (Job 1–2). His experience destabilizes conventional wisdom and creates space for lament as a faithful response to affliction.

In Job's speeches, particularly Job 3, 13, and 19, lament is neither rebellion nor apostasy. Rather, it constitutes relational boldness. Job directs his anguish toward God rather than away from God. He curses the day of his birth (Job 3:1–3), demands an audience with God (Job 13:3), and wrestles with divine justice. Yet even in protest, he does not abandon his relationship with God.

Job's lament therefore reveals several theological dimensions. First, lament embodies relational fidelity. Job continues to address God, demonstrating that authentic faith can include confrontation and questioning (Job 13:22–24). Second, lament expresses moral seriousness. Job resists the reductionist theology of his friends, who insist that suffering must result from sin. Third, lament models theological honesty. Faith does not require emotional denial; it includes grief, confusion, questioning, and doubt expressed within relationship with God.

Brueggemann (1984) argues that biblical lament functions as covenantal speech, permitting protest within trust. Similarly, Gutiérrez (1987) interprets Job as a paradigm of innocent suffering that refuses both resignation and rejection of God, insisting that dialogue with God must continue even amid apparent divine silence.

In contexts of persecution, this theology affirms that crying out against injustice is not necessarily an expression of faithlessness but can constitute a mode of faithful engagement with God. Despite his anguish, Job articulates hope: "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). This confession is not superficial optimism, but a form of trust rooted in covenantal confidence.

When God finally responds in Job 38–42, no simple explanation of Job's suffering is provided. Instead, God reveals divine sovereignty and creative wisdom. The encounter shifts the theological focus from abstract explanations to relational encounter. Job's confession, "now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5), indicates a deepening of his understanding of God.

Joban theology therefore sustains resilience through endurance without denial, hope without simplistic answers, and trust grounded in divine presence rather than changing circumstances. For communities experiencing persecution, this provides a theological language for lament, protest, endurance, and hope.

2.3.5 A Cruciform Hermeneutic of Resilience

When read alongside martyr theology and the theology of the Cross, Joban lament contributes to what may be described as a *cruciform hermeneutic of resilience.* A hermeneutic is a framework of interpretation,

while *cruciform* indicates that the interpretation is shaped by the Cross of Christ. In the New Testament, Christ himself voices lament in the cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46), echoing the Psalm tradition and resonating with Job's protest.

As articulated by Moltmann (1974), this integrated framework brings together three interrelated dimensions. First, **witness**, as articulated in martyr theology, understands suffering as testimony to faithfulness. Second, **participation**, central to the theology of the Cross, affirms that believers share in Christ's suffering (Phil. 3:10). Third, **protest and hope**, grounded in Joban lament, sustain honest engagement with God while maintaining confidence in divine justice.

Together, these strands resist two theological extremes. They reject triumphalism, which denies the reality of suffering in the name of victory, and they resist despair, which denies the reality of hope in the face of injustice. Instead, a cruciform hermeneutic of resilience interprets persecution within the framework of God's solidarity and redemptive presence (Okoh, 2022).

In contexts of sustained persecution, this integrated theology can nurture spiritual endurance and communal solidarity. It allows afflicted communities to grieve deeply, protest injustice courageously, and remain anchored in eschatological hope. Faith therefore becomes neither passive resignation nor violent retaliation (Okoh, 2022). Rather, it becomes steadfast trust shaped by the Cross, expressed through lament, and sustained by hope in God's ultimate vindication.

2.3.6 Integral mission and human development

Integral mission understands Christian witness as encompassing proclamation of the Gospel alongside service, justice, peace, and concern for the whole person and community. The missionary mandate articulated in Ad gentes and Redemptoris missio, together with the Church's engagement with the modern world in Gaudium et spes, provides a basis for connecting evangelization with human dignity and social responsibility (John Paul II, 1990; Second Vatican Council, 1965a, 1965b). Within this study, the framework directs attention to how insecurity may disrupt worship, pastoral care, education, farming, healthcare, livelihoods, and social cohesion. It also highlights potential church contributions through trauma-sensitive pastoral care, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, education, advocacy for protection, and collaboration with credible community and public institutions.

2.4 Empirical Studies

Anthony et al. (2021) explored recurrent attacks on churches in Nigeria from the perspectives of affected families in Benue and Enugu States, using semi-structured interviews. Participants associated the persistence of attacks with factors including land acquisition, religious intolerance, and weak accountability. The authors highlighted the need for interreligious dialogue and stronger government responsibility for protecting lives. This study is relevant because it foregrounds victims' accounts and directly considers attacks on Christian worship communities. Its qualitative and geographically limited sample, however, should be read as situated testimony rather than a statistically representative account of violence across Nigeria. The present study builds on this work by focusing on the Sankera axis and relating reported experiences to Christian theology, evangelization, and development (Anthony et al., 2021).

Anierobi et al. (2024) examined the effects of communal conflict on internally displaced persons (IDPs) and settlements in Nigeria during the COVID-19 period. Using a mixed-method design involving 386 IDPs and 20 stakeholders, the researchers reported substantial challenges affecting displaced populations and their settlements. The study illustrates that conflict-related harm extends beyond immediate casualties to living conditions, resources, livelihoods, and recovery. Whereas Anierobi et al. (2024) concentrate on the humanitarian consequences of communal conflict, the present study also considers effects on church life, pastoral care, evangelization, and theological interpretations of suffering.

Iorbo et al. (2024) investigated social inclusion and justice for people displaced by the herder–farmer conflict in Benue State. Their study drew on interviews with 12 displaced people and seven humanitarian workers and highlighted losses affecting relationships, farms, property, access to services, mobility, and livelihoods. It also

drew attention to barriers to recovery, protection, social participation, and remedies for losses. This research is important to the development dimension of the present article because reconstruction requires more than emergency relief; it also involves safety, justice, social inclusion, and opportunities to rebuild livelihoods. The present study complements this perspective by considering how Christian institutions and theological commitments may contribute to accompaniment, advocacy, reconciliation, and long-term community recovery (Iorbo et al., 2024).

Olumba (2023) examined the persistence of farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt through the lens of collective memory and social representations, with attention to the Benue context. The study highlights the significance of historical narratives and shared interpretations in how communities remember and explain recurring violence. It cautions against reducing conflict to a single cause, since material competition, political decisions, social identity, historical memory, and perceptions of threat may interact. For the present study, this perspective supports careful listening to local narratives while distinguishing participants' interpretations from independently corroborated facts. It also reinforces the importance of taking local histories seriously without treating any ethnic or religious group as inherently violent (Olumba, 2023).

Adamgbe (2025) examined the impact of communal crises on educational development in Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo Local Government Areas. The study is directly relevant to the geographical focus of the present article because it considers educational consequences in the Sankera area. Read alongside Jato and Iornumbe's (2025) work on armed conflict and the educational behaviours of teachers and students in Sankera, it points to the importance of examining how insecurity affects learning environments, teacher and student behaviour, and educational continuity. These studies provide a useful development-oriented context, while the present article broadens the discussion to include worship, pastoral ministry, evangelization, and theological responses.

Taken together, the empirical literature documents the consequences of violence and displacement in Benue State and the wider Middle Belt, including attacks on churches, disrupted education, loss of livelihoods and property, displacement, and barriers to justice and recovery. However, much of the literature focuses on conflict dynamics, victim experiences, education, or humanitarian response rather than sustained theological interpretation. The present study addresses this gap by examining how affected Christian communities understand suffering and witness and how evangelization and integral development may respond responsibly to insecurity. The term "genocide" is treated as a contested legal and public discourse rather than as a classification established by this study; under the United Nations Genocide Convention, a legal determination requires specified acts and the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group (United Nations, 1948).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative, contextual-theological design combining semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and theological interpretation (Guest et al., 2006; Patton, 2015; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This design was appropriate for exploring how people affected by insecurity described their experiences, how these experiences shaped Christian life and evangelization, and how martyr theology, the theology of the Cross, and Joban lament could inform reflection on suffering, resilience, justice, and hope. Documentary sources were considered alongside participants' accounts to situate narratives within their historical, social, ecclesial, and theological contexts. The study is interpretive; it is neither a statistical estimate of the prevalence of violence nor a legal adjudication of whether genocide occurred.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in the Sankera axis of Benue State, North-Central Nigeria, focusing on selected communities in Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo LGAs. Communities in the study area include Gbise, Sai, and Kasar in Katsina-Ala; Kyado, Ukpen, Jootar, Gbagir, and Gbeji in Ukum; and Anyiin and Ayilamo in Logo. These locations provide a context for examining reported violence, displacement, disruption of livelihoods, damage to homes and churches, and implications for religious life and development. Place names and their administrative locations should be checked against field records before submission.

3.3 Population of the Study

The study population comprised residents and relevant community stakeholders in Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo Local Government Areas (LGAs), which together form the Sankera axis of Benue State. The population of interest included internally displaced persons (IDPs), community members, church leaders, youth representatives, traditional leaders, and religious leaders. These categories were included to obtain complementary perspectives on insecurity, displacement, livelihoods, education, Christian worship, evangelization, community relations, and prospects for peacebuilding and development.

The study focuses on individuals whose experiences, knowledge, and responsibilities can provide relevant information on the effects of violence and insecurity on human life, displacement, livelihoods, education, Christian worship, evangelization, community relations, and local development. Accordingly, population of interest includes Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), community members, church leaders, youth representatives, traditional leaders, and religious leaders across the three local governments areas.

These categories are considered relevant because they offer complementary perspectives on the experiences of affected populations, the responses religious and traditional institutions, the challenges confronting young people, and the prospects for peacebuilding, reconciliation, and sustainable development in the study area.

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 90 participants were interviewed. The sample comprised six participant categories, with 15 participants in each category: internally displaced persons (IDPs), community members, church leaders, youth representatives, traditional leaders, and religious leaders. To ensure equal geographical representation, five participants from each category were recruited in each of the three LGAs, giving 30 participants per LGA and 90 participants overall. The sample was designed to provide information-rich perspectives rather than statistical representation of the entire Sankera population.

Table 1: Participant category

S/N	Participant category	Number of participants
1	Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	15
2	Community members	15
3	Church leaders	15
4	Youth representatives	15
5	Traditional leaders	15
6	Religious leaders	15
	Total	**90**

Source: Fieldwork conducted July–August 2026.

Participants were recruited from Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo LGAs through purposive sampling, based on direct experience of, or relevant knowledge about, insecurity and its effects. Snowball referrals were used cautiously to reach eligible participants who were difficult to identify; referrals did not determine participation, and confidentiality was maintained. The intended distribution was five participants from each of the six categories in each LGA. The study therefore comprised 30 participants per LGA. The findings are qualitative and should not be generalized statistically beyond the participants and locations represented.

Across the three LGAs, the sample comprised 15 IDPs, 15 community members, 15 church leaders, 15 youth representatives, 15 traditional leaders, and 15 religious leaders. Recruitment focused on participants with relevant experience or knowledge of insecurity, displacement, livelihoods, religious life, and community responses. For clarity, ‘church leaders’ refers to leaders with formal responsibility for congregational or parish administration, while ‘religious leaders’ refers to other recognised faith leaders or ministers whose roles were distinct from those included in the church-leader category. Authors should retain this distinction only if it accurately reflects the recruitment records.

3.5 Instrument of Data Collection

The principal instrument was a semi-structured interview guide prepared in line with the research objectives. It contained open-ended questions and optional probes on experiences and perceived patterns of violence, displacement and livelihoods, effects on churches and Christian practice, evangelization, community responses, justice and reconciliation, and theological understandings of suffering and hope. The guide was flexible enough to allow participants to raise issues not anticipated by the researcher. A documentary-review checklist was used to record relevant information from scholarly literature, church statements, policy documents, credible reports, and other materials whose provenance was assessable. Documents were evaluated critically for authorship, date, purpose, corroboration, and limitations.

3.6 Instrument Validity and Reliability / Trustworthiness

To strengthen content validity, the draft interview guide was reviewed by persons with relevant expertise in qualitative research, theology or religious studies, and conflict-sensitive field research. Their feedback was used to improve the clarity, neutrality, cultural appropriateness, sequencing, and coverage of the questions. A small pilot or pre-test with eligible individuals outside the final interview sample, where safe and feasible, was assessed whether questions are understandable and whether any wording may cause unnecessary distress. Pilot participants were not automatically included in the final sample.

In a qualitative study, reliability is better addressed through procedural consistency and trustworthiness than through internal-consistency statistics for an interview guide. The researcher used a common core of questions, maintained field notes and an audit trail, document changes to the guide, and preserve a transparent record of coding decisions. Credibility was supported through careful probing, comparison across participant groups and documentary sources, and participant verification of factual summaries where safe and appropriate. Dependability was supported by documenting procedures; confirmability by reflexive notes and evidence-linked interpretations; and transferability by describing the context and participants sufficiently for readers to judge relevance to other settings.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Ethical principles governing research involving human participants were strictly observed throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee before commencement of data collection. Where necessary, permission was also obtained from relevant authorities and community leaders in the selected communities within Katsina-Ala, Logo, and Ukum Local Government Areas.

To ensure privacy and confidentiality, no personal names or other directly identifying information were included in the reporting of qualitative findings. Participants were assigned anonymous identification codes as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Interview Participants and Coding Structure

Participant category	**Katsina-Ala**	**Ukum**	**Logo**	**Total**
Internally Displaced Persons (IDP)	5(KA-IDP 01–05)	5(UK-IDPs01–05)	5(LG-IDPs01–05)	**15**
Community Member	5(KA-CM 01–05)	5(UK-CMs01–05)	5(LG-CMs01–05)	**15**
Church leader	5(KA-CL 01–05)	5(UK-CL 01–05)	5(LG-CL 01–05)	**15**
Youth representative	5(KA-YR 01–05)	5(UK-YR 01–05)	5(LG-YR 01–05)	**15**
Traditional leader	5(KA-TL 01–05)	5(UK-TL 01–05)	5(LG-TL 01–05)	**15**
Religious leader	5 (KA-RL 01–05)	5 (LG-RL 01–05)	5(LG-RL 01–05)	**15**
Total	**30**	**30**	**30**	**90**

Key: Coding convention: KA = Katsina-Ala; UK = Ukum; LG = Logo; IDP = Internally Displaced Person; CM = community member; CL = church leader; YR = youth representative; TL = traditional leader; RL = religious leader. The numerical suffix identifies the participant within the category.

Source: Fieldwork conducted July–August 2026

Table 3: Thematic Coding Framework

S/No.	Theme	Code	Meaning/indicator
1	**Experiences of violence**	EXP-VIO	Attacks on communities, loss of lives, threats to residence, and persistent fear.
2	**Displacement and loss**	DIS-LOSS	Residents abandoning homes, relocation to safer areas, and losing access to property and community.
3	**Economic consequences**	ECO-CONS	Reduced agricultural production, loss of income, increased food costs, and dependence on assistance.
4	**Effects on education**	EFFT / EDU	Children missing classes, families struggling to pay school expenses, and young people losing learning opportunities.
5	**Impact on Christian life**	IMPT-CHRT-LIF	Disrupted services, restricted movement, damaged worship facilities, and weakened community participation.
6	**Evangelization**	EVANG	Reduced visits to remote communities, difficulty organizing religious activities, and reliance on smaller or dispersed gatherings.
7	**Trauma and resilience**	TRAU-RES	Anxiety, mourning, uncertainty, prayer, social support, and efforts to rebuild everyday life.
8	**Justice and accountability**	JUS-ACCT	Calls for improved security, transparent investigations, assistance to affected families, and recognition of losses.
9	**Reconciliation and peacebuilding**	JUS-PEA	Community meetings, interfaith engagement, mediation, and initiatives to reduce hostility.
10	**Theological interpretation**	THEO-INTR	Religious interpretations of suffering, prayer during crises, questioning, and reflections on God's presence amid tragedy.
11	**Institutional response**	INST-RES	Relief distribution, pastoral counselling, security measures, community mediation, and assistance to displaced households.
12	**Development and reconstruction**	DEVT/RSTN	Rebuilding homes, restoring roads and schools, returning to farming, and improving access to basic services.

Source: Fieldwork conducted July–August 2026.

3.8 Instrument of Data Analysis

Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary materials were analysed thematically. The researcher generated initial codes, grouped related codes into candidate themes, reviewed these themes against the dataset, defined and named the themes, and developed an interpretive account supported by anonymised excerpts (Patton, 2015). Coding combined inductive attention to participants' meanings with sensitising concepts from the theological framework. Divergent accounts and negative cases were considered rather than forcing all accounts into a single narrative. Theological interpretation drew on martyr theology, the theology of the Cross, and Joban lament without imposing these frameworks on participants who did not share them. Documentary claims were compared with interview accounts where possible, and discrepancies were noted. The analysis distinguishes participants' reports, the researcher's interpretation, and external legal or factual claims. Interview data were not used to make statistical claims or a legal determination of genocide.

The theological interpretation engaged martyr theology, the theology of the Cross, and Joban lament as interpretive resources, while avoiding the imposition of theological explanations on participants who do not share them. Documentary claims were compared with interview accounts where possible, with discrepancies noted rather than concealed. Findings distinguished participants' descriptions, the researcher's interpretation, and any external legal or factual claims. No statistical inference about the prevalence of violence or legal determination of genocide was made from the qualitative interviews.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Because the research concerns violence, displacement, religious identity, and potentially traumatic experiences, ethical care is central. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were told that they may decline any question, pause, or withdraw without penalty. Consent for participation and consent for audio recording was requested separately. For participants with limited literacy, the information sheet was read aloud and consent documented using an ethics-approved process.

Confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms or participant codes, removal of identifying details from transcripts, and secure, access-restricted storage of recordings, notes, and consent records. Reports avoided naming individuals or publishing precise details that could identify survivors, displaced persons, or vulnerable communities without explicit ethical justification and consent. The researcher helped explain that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed where disclosure is required by law or where an immediate serious safety concern triggers an applicable safeguarding duty.

A trauma-informed approach was adopted: interviews were proceeded at the participant's pace; participants were not required to narrate distressing events; and the interviewer was paused or stopped if distress aroused. Where feasible, information about appropriate psychosocial, health, legal, or protection services were made available without promising services the researcher cannot provide. Researchers and interpreters avoided partisan, coercive, or leading language and was attentive to power differences, religious sensitivities, and risks of retaliation. Fieldwork followed a do-no-harm approach, including secure travel arrangements and the suspension of data collection when safety deteriorates.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Results

Table 4: Major Qualitative Themes and Interview extracts

S/N	Major qualitative theme/ Code	Subthemes	Manifestation	Verbatim Quotation	Qualitative explanation
1	**Experiences of violence/EXP-VIO**	Attacks and killings, threats, fear, and insecurity, perceived religious targeting	Attacks on communities, loss of lives, threats to residence, and persistent fear	"whenever we hear that an attack has occurred in a community, we become afraid because we do not know where the next attack will happen" **KA-CM 01)**	This theme explains how violence shapes residents' sense of safety, belonging, and everyday life. participants perceived attacks to be linked to land and resources, religious targeted, "genocide" or driven by overlapping factors.
2	**Displacement and loss/DIS-LOSS**	Forced migration, loss of homes, family separation, loss of ancestral land, disrupted social networks	Residents abandoning homes, relocation to safer areas, and losing access to property and community support	"We left our homes because we feared for our lives, and returning has become difficult because we are uncertain about our safety" **(UK-CM 05)**	Displacement represents both physical relocation and the loss of livelihood, identity, community ties, and a sense of home. Theologically, it raises questions about human dignity, hospitality, protection, and the church's responsibility towards displaced people.
3	**Economic consequences/ ECO-CONS**	Loss of farmland, destruction of crops, food insecurity, unemployment, poverty, market disruption	Reduced agricultural production, loss of income, increased food costs, and dependence on assistance	"Farming used to provide food for our families, but insecurity has made it difficult to reach our farms and earn a living**" (LG-CM 03)**	This theme explains how insecurity undermines agricultural livelihoods and economic independence in Sankera.it connects violence with hunger, poverty, inequality, and the need for livelihood restoration and sustainable development.
4	**Effects on education/ EFFT/ EDU**	School closures, interrupted	Children missing classes, families	"The children have missed school because of the	Education disruption threatens children's development and long-term

		schooling, school insecurity ,financial barriers to education	struggling to pay school expenses, and young people losing learning opportunities	insecurity, and some parents can no longer afford the expenses of their education" **(UK-IDP 04)**	opportunities. It may also deepen intergenerational poverty and vulnerability. Recovery requires safe learning environments, educational support, and cooperation among government, communities, and faith-based organizations.
5	**Impact on Christian life/ IMPT-CHRT-LIF**	Church damage or destruction, reduced attendance, interrupted worship, fear among congregants, loss of followership	Disrupted services, restricted movement, damaged worship facilities, and weakened community participation	"Some members no longer attend services regularly because they are afraid of travelling to the church or gathering together" **(LG-CL 03)**	This theme explains how insecurity may affect worship, followership, pastoral care, and public expression of Christian faith. It also examines how congregations adapt spiritually and practically to changing security conditions.
6	**Evangelization/ EVANG**	Restricted outreach, reduced pastoral visitation, fear of gathering, limitation on public witness, alternative forms of ministry	Reduced visits to remote communities, difficulty organizing religious activities, and reliance on smaller or dispersed gatherings	"It has become difficult to visit some communities and minister to people because travelling there may expose the ministers and residents to danger" **(KA-RL 02)**	Evangelization is examined not merely as preaching but also as pastoral presence, service, compassion, and Christian witness. Insecurity may constrain conventional outreach while increasing the importance of safe, community-sensitive, and humanitarian forms of ministry.
7	**Trauma and resilience/ TRAU-RES**	Fear, grief, emotional distress, bereavement, coping strategies, mutual support, hope	Anxiety, mourning, uncertainty, prayer, social support, and efforts to rebuild everyday life	"Although we have experienced painful losses, the support we receive from other people and our faith helps us continue living with hope" (**LG-TR 01)**	This theme considers the emotional and social consequences of violence alongside the resources people use to cope. Faith, family, community solidarity, and pastoral support may contribute to resilience, although they do not remove the need for professional psychological assistance where required.
8	**Justice and accountability/ JUS-ACCT**	Protection, investigation, accountability ,compensation, recognition of victims, access to justice	Calls for improved security, transparent investigations, assistance to affected families, and	"We want the authorities to investigate what happened, protect our communities, and ensure that those responsible are held	This theme examines perceptions of institutional responsibility, protection, and justice. From a theological perspective, it raises issues of truth, human dignity, and the relationship between

			recognition of losses	accountable" **(UK-YR 05)**	forgiveness and accountability.
9	**Reconciliation and peacebuilding/ JUS-PEA**	Dialogue, rebuilding trust, forgiveness, coexistence, community mediation, conflict prevention	Community meetings, interfaith engagement, mediation, and initiatives to reduce hostility	"Peace will require people to speak honestly about what happened, listen to one another, and work towards preventing further violence" **(KA-TR 04)**	Reconciliation involves rebuilding relationships and addressing the conditions that sustain conflict. The theme explores whether dialogue and forgiveness are considered possible, what obstacles remain, and how religious and traditional leaders can contribute without overlooking justice or victim's needs.
10	**Theological interpretation/ THEO-INTR**	The Cross and suffering, lament, faith under persecution, martyrdom, hope, divine justice	Religious interpretations of suffering, prayer during crises, questioning, and reflections on God's presence amid tragedy	"During this difficult period, we have to continue to pray, even when we struggle to understand why our communities are experiencing so much sufferings" **(UK-CL 05)**	This theme analyses how participants interpret violence through Christian beliefs and theological traditions. Biblical lament, the suffering of Christ, hope, and pursuit of justice can provide interpretive frameworks. Researchers should not automatically label victims as martyrs or assume that all participants interpret suffering in the same way.
11	**Institutional responses/ INST-RES**	Church assistance, governmental intervention or action, traditional leadership, humanitarian support, collaboration among institutions	Relief distribution, pastoral counselling, security measures, community mediation, and assistance to displaced households	"The support that reaches affected families is important, but communities also need lasting protection and coordinated assistance" **(LG-CM 02)**	This theme evaluates how churches, government institutions, traditional authorities, and civil society responds to insecurity. It considers the accessibility, adequacy, coordination, and perceived effectiveness of these response, based on participant's actual accounts.
12	**Development and reconstruction/ DEVT-RSTN**	Housing reconstruction, infrastructure restoration, livelihood recovery, access to services, community rebuilding	Rebuilding homes, restoring roads and schools, returning to farming, and improving access to basic services	"For our community to recover, we need to rebuild our homes, return to productive work, and ensure that our children can continue their education" **(UK-IDP 05)**	This theme links peace and security with long-term development.it highlights the importance of rebuilding physical infrastructure, restoring livelihoods, supporting education, and ensuring that reconstruction reaches vulnerable households. Sustainable recovery also requires inclusive planning and measures that reduce the risk of renewed conflict.

Source: Fieldwork conducted July–August 2026.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative findings in Table 4 show that insecurity in Sankera is a multidimensional crisis affecting physical safety, displacement, livelihoods, education, religious practice, psychological well-being, trust in institutions, and prospects for recovery. These effects reinforce one another: violence generates fear and displacement; displacement limits access to land, work, schools, and places of worship; and these restrictions increase reliance on public institutions, humanitarian assistance, and community networks. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that conflict-related displacement often results in the loss of housing, livelihoods, services, and social connections, while lasting recovery requires protection and conditions that enable safe and dignified return (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2025; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025; Yange et al., 2026; Mnda et al., 2026). The interview extracts are treated as accounts of participants' experiences, not as independent verification of the perpetrators, causes, or religious motivations of particular attacks.

4.2.1 Experiences of violence and persistent insecurity

Participants described attacks, threats, killings, and continuing fear of further harm. One explained that an attack in another community made residents afraid because they could not predict where violence might occur next. This anticipatory fear matters because it influences movement, social interaction, farming, worship, and decisions about whether to remain in or return to a community. Reports on farmer–herder and communal incidents in Benue State likewise document fatalities, displacement, and urgent protection and psychosocial needs (IOM, 2025; WHO, 2011; Yange et al., 2026; Mnda et al., 2026).

Participants explained violence through overlapping narratives, including competition over land and resources and perceived religious targeting. Research on conflict narratives in the Benue Valley suggests that resource competition and religious interpretations can intersect in public discourse (Nwankwo, 2024; Yange et al., 2026; Mnda et al., 2026). The findings therefore indicate that religious identity shapes how some participants understand their experiences, but they do not establish that every incident was religiously motivated.

4.2.2 Displacement, loss, and disrupted belonging

Participants reported leaving their homes because they feared for their lives and remained uncertain about whether it was safe to return. Displacement involves more than movement between locations: it can sever access to ancestral land, homes, possessions, social networks, and familiar sources of identity and belonging. Research in Benue similarly describes displaced residents losing farms, property, community infrastructure, and access to education, often without being able to return safely to their places of origin (Iorbo et al., 2024; Yange et al., 2026; Mnda et al., 2026). UNHCR (2025) also emphasises that return is not a durable solution where security, housing, livelihoods, and essential services remain inadequate.

In Sankera, return should therefore be assessed alongside personal safety, freedom of movement, access to housing and land, and the availability of basic services. Theological principles of human dignity, hospitality, and responsibility for vulnerable people offer a locally meaningful ethical perspective, but they should complement practical protection, transparent assistance, and respect for displaced people's own choices.

4.2.3 Economic consequences and livelihood insecurity

Agriculture is central to the social and economic life of many Sankera communities. When farmers cannot safely reach their land, insecurity affects food production, household income, trade, and community economic stability. Participants' accounts of farming becoming difficult because of insecurity illustrate how violence undermines both household welfare and the means through which families sustain themselves.

Catholic social teaching regards work as important not only for earning income but also for human dignity, family provision, personal development, and participation in society. Pope Francis highlights the social significance of work and its contribution to human development (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 162). John Paul II similarly links evangelization with human promotion, education, health care, and the development of the whole person

(*Redemptoris Missio*, nos. 58–59). For the Church in Sankera, agricultural disruption is consequently both a developmental and a pastoral concern.

Inability to cultivate land, crop destruction, disrupted markets, and loss of income can occur together. Households may produce less food, earn less money, and struggle to purchase food and meet other essential needs. Research on farmer–herder conflict in Nigeria identifies farmland and crop destruction, displacement, and competition over land and water as pathways through which conflict undermines food security (Sowunmi, 2025; Yange et al., 2026; Mnda et al., 2026). Where security permits, recovery should include safe access to farmland, replacement of essential farm inputs, restoration of markets and transport routes, and livelihood support for displaced and host households. Assistance should be conflict-sensitive and distributed transparently to avoid perceptions of unfairness.

4.2.4 Educational disruption and risks to children's futures

Participants reported that many children had stopped attending school because of insecurity, displacement, and household poverty. These accounts indicate two connected barriers: violence can make attendance and travel unsafe, while loss of livelihoods can leave parents unable to pay for uniforms, learning materials, transport, and other school expenses. Prolonged absence can interrupt learning and reduce children's future opportunities.

These findings are consistent with Jato and Iornumbe's (2025) study of Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo, which reported that armed conflict affected teachers' and students' experiences through displacement, economic disruption, absenteeism, and difficulties in teaching and learning. Adamgbe (2025) also found that communal crises affected school infrastructure, enrolment, teachers' commitment, and attendance in these local government areas. UNICEF (2025) similarly identifies schooling disruption, displacement, and reduced access to essential services as interconnected effects of insecurity in Nigeria.

From a Catholic perspective, education contributes to the integral formation of the person. Its interruption therefore affects children's present well-being as well as their intellectual, moral, social, economic, and spiritual development. Schools, families, and catechetical programmes also provide settings for transmitting Christian values and forming young people in faith and moral responsibility. Prolonged displacement and interrupted schooling may consequently weaken both educational development and the intergenerational transmission of faith.

Appropriate responses include safe and accessible learning spaces, flexible arrangements for displaced learners, targeted assistance with school-related costs, and coordination among education authorities, communities, humanitarian organisations, and faith-based groups.

4.2.5 Implications for Christian life and evangelization

Insecurity presents significant challenges to the Church's pastoral activities, although its mission remains unchanged. The Second Vatican Council's *Ad Gentes* emphasises that missionary work must respond to different circumstances and includes Christian witness, charity, and works of mercy (nos. 6, 14). This principle is relevant in Sankera, where insecurity has restricted movement and disrupted ordinary religious activities.

Participants' accounts suggest that fear of travelling to church, gathering with others, damage to worship facilities, and restrictions on movement have reduced participation and limited congregations' ability to provide pastoral care, mutual assistance, and community support. Some interviewees reported declining participation in church activities and the destruction or closure of churches. They also perceived that some attacks occurred around major religious festivities. Because these are interview-based accounts and were not independently verified as statistical evidence, they should be understood as residents' reported experiences rather than general conclusions about all attacks or communities.

Worship, particularly the Eucharistic celebration, sustains Christian faith and ecclesial communion. Continued worship where it is safe can express perseverance and provide spiritual strength. However, displacement has separated some families from their parishes, while insecurity has restricted the movement of priests and lay

pastoral workers. Although the interviews did not quantify the frequency of sacramental celebrations, reported church destruction, displacement, and reduced participation suggest that ordinary sacramental life has been disrupted. The pastoral task is therefore not simply to preserve church buildings, but also to maintain displaced and threatened people's connection with the sacramental life of the Church through safe, flexible pastoral care.

Catechesis is equally important because evangelization involves forming mature disciples, not merely encouraging attendance at religious activities. *Ad Gentes* describes Christian initiation as formation in faith, liturgy, and charity (Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes*, no. 14). Participants indicated that insecurity and poverty had reduced some people's involvement in church activities, potentially weakening Christian formation and communal identity. Continued catechesis and appropriate pastoral support can help people sustain their relationship with Christ and resist despair during prolonged hardship.

The educational disruption described by participants also affects evangelization because schools and catechetical programmes contribute to children's intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation. Evidence from Katsina-Ala, Ukum, and Logo similarly links conflict with displacement, property destruction, economic hardship, absenteeism, and reduced school participation (Jato & Iornumbe, 2025; Adamgbe, 2025; Yange et al., 2026; Mnda et al.,2026). When children are separated from schools and Christian communities, the transmission of faith and values between generations may be weakened.

Evangelization in insecure areas must extend beyond formal preaching to pastoral visitation, community presence, service, and safe expressions of faith. Where travel to remote communities is dangerous, smaller gatherings, locally led support, or other safe forms of contact may be appropriate. Such arrangements should reflect residents' safety and preferences rather than presume that religious activities must continue in their usual form. Humanitarian assistance provided by churches and other faith-based organisations should be inclusive, non-coercive, and based on need.

4.2.6 Trauma, resilience, and community support

Participants described grief, anxiety, uncertainty, and painful loss, while also identifying faith and interpersonal relationships as sources of strength. Prayer, family ties, congregational networks, and mutual assistance may provide emotional connection, meaning, and practical help. These resources should not, however, be treated as sufficient to resolve the psychological effects of violence. The World Health Organization, War Trauma Foundation, and World Vision International (2011) recommend humane, practical, and culturally respectful support for people affected by crises, while WHO (2011, 2025) emphasises integrating mental-health and psychosocial support into emergency responses.

A layered response would strengthen community and faith-based support, train trusted local helpers in psychological first aid, identify people who need specialised care, and establish referral pathways to appropriate health and mental-health services.

4.2.7 Justice, accountability, reconciliation, and peacebuilding

Participants' calls for investigation, protection, compensation, and accountability suggest that recovery depends partly on whether institutions acknowledge harm and respond credibly. Justice includes fair investigation, protection of affected communities, recognition of losses, and access to lawful remedies. These concerns align with research indicating that responses to farmer–herder conflict in Benue are influenced by perceptions of state capacity and the effectiveness of conflict-management institutions (Okoye et al., 2025). The findings describe participants' expectations for accountability; they do not establish the legal responsibility of any particular person or group.

Dialogue, listening, mediation, and coexistence may help communities express grievances and identify practical ways to reduce tension. However, reconciliation is unlikely to endure if victims are expected to remain silent about harm or if forgiveness is treated as a substitute for protection and accountability. Sustainable peacebuilding should combine dialogue with impartial security, transparent complaint procedures, attention to livelihood and land-use concerns, and meaningful participation by affected groups. Religious and traditional leaders may

facilitate dialogue and challenge hostile stereotypes, provided that processes are inclusive and recognise that community members may hold different views of the conflict.

4.2.8 Theological interpretation of suffering

Participants referred to prayer, suffering, hope, and difficulty understanding why their communities were experiencing violence. These accounts suggest that faith can help some people interpret suffering and sustain hope and moral purpose amid uncertainty. The language of lament is particularly important because it allows grief, protest, and unanswered questions to be expressed rather than explained away. This discussion does not label participants as martyrs or assume that all Christians interpret suffering in the same way; but presents the range of meanings expressed by participants.

Religious hope may support coping, but it should not normalise violence, discourage people from seeking help, or displace demands for justice. A balanced theological interpretation should hold together lament, compassion, human dignity, protection of life, and the pursuit of peace.

4.2.9 Institutional responses and the limits of relief

Participants recognised assistance from churches, government agencies, traditional authorities, civil-society groups, and humanitarian organisations. While they valued support reaching affected families, they also called for lasting protection and better coordination. Immediate relief, such as food, shelter, and pastoral support, can meet urgent needs, but reducing long-term vulnerability also requires security, restored services, and livelihood recovery. IOM's reporting on incidents in Benue identifies needs that may follow conflict-related displacement, including security, health care, food, non-food items, and psychosocial support (IOM, 2025).

4.2.10 Development, reconstruction, and sustainable recovery

Participants understood recovery as requiring more than the end of attacks. Rebuilding homes must be accompanied by opportunities to return to productive work, restore education, and access essential services. Recovery priorities therefore include housing, roads, schools, agricultural livelihoods, and basic infrastructure. Reconstruction should be coordinated with security and protection measures; rebuilding physical assets without reducing the risk of renewed violence may expose households to further loss.

Recovery planning should include displaced households, host communities, women, young people, local leaders, farmers, and herders, whose priorities and constraints may differ. Transparent criteria for assistance and meaningful community participation can reduce grievances and improve the relevance of programmes. Sustainable recovery in Sankera consequently requires coordinated measures for security, justice, psychosocial support, education, livelihoods, and infrastructure rather than isolated interventions.

4.2.11 Family relationships, displacement, and Christian resilience

Insecurity also affects family relationships and community bonds. Families ordinarily provide security, emotional support, economic cooperation, religious formation, and belonging. Participants identified family separation, broken homes, and divorce among the consequences of insecurity, describing how displacement and loss of access to ancestral homes disrupted family life. When parents are displaced, impoverished, or deeply affected by violence, their ability to provide stable care and religious and moral formation for their children may be weakened.

The Church can support affected families through accompaniment, prayer, counselling, Christian formation, and communal solidarity. Such pastoral care can help restore belonging and hope, while recognising that rebuilding communities involves repairing relationships and trust as well as physical structures. Displaced people may lose access not only to shelter but also to farms, schools, churches, markets, social networks, and ancestral communities, making displacement a multidimensional humanitarian crisis.

The Christian response to displacement is grounded in human dignity and solidarity. Pope Francis calls for closeness to vulnerable people and for social development that begins with those most at risk (*Fratelli Tutti*, nos.

233–235). Displaced people should remain part of the Church's community rather than experience spiritual abandonment. Pastoral visitation, sacramental ministry, prayer, catechesis, material assistance, and ongoing accompaniment can help maintain their connection with the Church while they live away from their original communities.

The accounts also provide a basis for reflecting on Christian resilience and hope. Resilience does not mean denying pain or passively accepting injustice; it involves sustaining faith, mutual support, and meaningful ways of continuing life despite adversity. Biblical traditions of suffering, lament, perseverance, and hope offer resources for this reflection. The Book of Job confronts undeserved suffering, the Psalms give voice to anguish and appeals to God, and Christian belief in the Resurrection affirms that suffering and death do not have the final word. These themes can help frame how affected Christian communities in Sankera seek to preserve faith, rebuild communal life, and sustain hope amid continuing hardship.

In summary, the findings portray insecurity in Sankera as a connected crisis affecting protection, belonging, livelihoods, education, religious practice, psychological well-being, family relationships, justice, and development. The interviews suggest that the effects of violence persist beyond individual incidents through fear of returning home, restricted access to farms and schools, disrupted worship and outreach, and uncertainty about institutional protection. Faith communities, families, local leaders, and mutual-support networks are important resources for coping and recovery, but their efforts need to be complemented by credible public protection, access to justice, professional support where required, and restoration of essential services and livelihoods.

The central significance of the findings is that insecurity undermines both the social conditions needed for human development and the activities through which Christian communities sustain their faith and participate in evangelization. A theological interpretation must therefore recognise victims' dignity, take suffering seriously, uphold Christian solidarity, support justice, and preserve hope. This provides a foundation for examining the pastoral and developmental responsibilities of the Church toward affected communities.

4.3 Synthesis by Research Question

Research Question 1: Nature and pattern of violence.

Participants described recurrent threats, attacks, fear, displacement, and damage to homes or worship facilities. These accounts establish the experiences reported by participants, but they do not independently establish the motive for each incident or satisfy the evidentiary requirements for a legal finding of genocide. Theologically, the Cross invites solidarity with those who suffer; it does not replace factual investigation or legal accountability.

Research Question 2: Factors associated with violence.

Participants' explanations referred to overlapping concerns, including land and resources, insecurity, and perceived religious targeting. These are participants' interpretations and should not be treated as verified causal findings unless corroborated by independent evidence. A contextual-theological reading therefore requires listening to local testimony while resisting single-cause explanations and collective blame.

Research Question 3: Socio-economic, educational, pastoral, and developmental effects. Accounts identified barriers to farming and market access, loss of income, school interruption, family strain, reduced participation in worship, and difficulty sustaining pastoral outreach. The themes show how insecurity can connect material deprivation with diminished opportunities for education, community participation, and religious life.

Research Question 4: Christian and institutional responses.

Participants identified prayer, congregational and family support, mutual assistance, and responses by community, religious, and public institutions. These resources may support resilience, but they are not substitutes for protection, justice, trauma-informed care, and restoration of services. Joban lament offers a theological language for grief and protest, while the theology of the Cross calls the Church to accompaniment rather than passive acceptance of violence.

Research Question 5: Approaches to peacebuilding and development.

The findings support coordinated protection, transparent investigation, safe and voluntary return, livelihood and education support, psychosocial referrals, pastoral care, and inclusive dialogue. Theologically, reconciliation should be pursued alongside truth, accountability, and recognition of harm; it should not be imposed on survivors or used to silence legitimate grievances.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined insecurity in Sankera, Benue State, with attention to its social, economic, educational, psychological, institutional, and Christian dimensions. Participants' accounts describe fear, displacement, loss of access to homes and farmland, interrupted schooling, constrained religious activities, strained family relationships, psychological distress, and uncertainty about institutional protection. These accounts suggest that insecurity affects interconnected aspects of everyday life rather than only immediate physical safety.

The findings indicate interdependence among these effects. Displacement or unsafe access to farmland can reduce household income and food production, making it harder to meet basic needs and education costs. School interruption can affect children's learning and future opportunities, while restrictions on movement and damage to worship facilities can limit worship, pastoral care, catechesis, and congregational support. Displacement may also weaken family and community ties, complicating recovery and belonging.

Faith, prayer, family networks, congregations, traditional leadership, and mutual assistance were described as coping resources. They cannot, however, substitute for effective civilian protection, access to justice, appropriate psychosocial services, livelihood recovery, or restoration of basic services. Dialogue and reconciliation are more likely to be durable when accompanied by accountability, recognition of harm, and practical measures to reduce renewed violence.

Sustainable recovery in Sankera requires an integrated, inclusive, and conflict-sensitive response. Protection should be linked to support for displaced households, safe access to farmland, restoration of education and health services, psychosocial care, infrastructure reconstruction, and pastoral accompaniment. The qualitative evidence illuminates participants' reported experiences and interpretations; it does not independently verify responsibility or motive for specific attacks, quantify the prevalence of each effect, or establish that the legal threshold for genocide has been met.

5.2 Implications of the Study

5.2.1 Policy and security implications

Responses to insecurity should prioritise residents' protection and create conditions in which people can move, farm, attend school, worship, and return home safely. Security interventions should be coordinated with transparent complaint mechanisms, fair investigations, and regular engagement with affected communities. Return and resettlement should be assessed in terms of safety, access to housing and land, freedom of movement, and essential services rather than physical return alone.

5.2.2 Economic and food-security implications

Because agriculture and related trading activities are important to community livelihoods, insecurity can undermine household income, local food production, and access to markets. Recovery planning should include safe access to farmland, appropriate farm inputs, restoration of transport and market routes, and livelihood support for affected households. Assistance should be delivered transparently and sensitively to the needs of displaced people and host communities.

5.2.3 Educational and child-protection implications

Reported school interruption points to the need for safe learning environments, flexible arrangements for displaced learners, and targeted assistance with school-related costs. Education authorities, community leaders, schools, and humanitarian and faith-based organisations should coordinate efforts to reduce barriers to attendance and help children resume learning. These measures support both children's immediate protection and longer-term development.

5.2.4 Pastoral and theological implications

Churches and other faith communities should maintain pastoral contact with displaced and threatened people, support families, and adapt worship and catechetical activities to prevailing safety conditions. Responses may include visitation, prayer, sacramental ministry where feasible, counselling referrals, Christian formation, and practical assistance. Such support should respect people's safety and choices and should not imply that faith requires passive acceptance of violence or replaces the pursuit of justice.

5.2.5 Psychosocial and community implications

Grief, anxiety, uncertainty, and loss suggest that recovery programmes should address emotional and social well-being alongside material needs. Community and faith-based support can be strengthened through training in basic psychological first aid, identification of people who need specialised help, and referral pathways to appropriate services. Family support and community activities may also help restore trust and belonging.

5.2.6 Research implications

The findings demonstrate the value of qualitative accounts for understanding how insecurity is experienced and interpreted by residents. They also show the importance of distinguishing participants' perceptions from independently verified facts. Future assessments would benefit from combining interviews with broader survey evidence, service and displacement records, and longitudinal research.

5.3 Limitations of the Study

First, the discussion is based on interview accounts and qualitative themes. These provide insight into participants' experiences and interpretations but do not establish the frequency or magnitude of each reported effect across the whole Sankera population.

Second, participants' descriptions of the causes, perpetrators, or religious character of attacks represent reported perceptions unless independently corroborated. The accounts alone cannot establish responsibility for specific incidents or determine the motive behind every attack.

Third, the experiences represented in the interviews may not capture the full range of views among all affected groups, including displaced and host households, women, young people, farmers, herders, and people with different religious or community backgrounds. The extent to which the findings apply beyond the participants and communities represented should therefore be treated cautiously.

Fourth, although the discussion identifies interconnected consequences involving livelihoods, education, family relationships, religious practice, psychological well-being, and institutional responses, the qualitative material does not quantify the independent effect of insecurity on each outcome or establish statistical causation.

Finally, the findings relate to a particular local context and period. Conditions and community needs may change, so the results should not automatically be generalised to all of Benue State or other conflict-affected settings.

5.4 Contributions of the Study

The study's principal contribution is an integrated, context-specific account of how insecurity connects physical safety with displacement, livelihoods, education, psychological well-being, family relationships, religious

practice, and development in Sankera. Rather than treating these as separate outcomes, the findings show how disruption in one area may intensify vulnerability in others.

A second contribution is its analysis of the relationship between material conditions and Christian life. Unsafe travel, displacement, economic hardship, and school interruption can constrain worship, sacramental access, catechesis, pastoral outreach, and the intergenerational transmission of faith. This supports an understanding of evangelization that includes accompaniment, service, solidarity, and protection of human dignity.

Third, the study places participants' calls for justice and accountability in direct conversation with reconciliation and peacebuilding. The findings suggest that dialogue alone is insufficient where communities continue to fear violence or perceive that losses have not been acknowledged and investigated.

Fourth, the study identifies both the value and the limits of community resilience. Faith, family networks, congregations, and mutual assistance can sustain people during crisis, but these resources need to be complemented by public protection, professional support where needed, and restoration of essential services.

Finally, the study offers a practical basis for recovery planning that connects protection, justice, psychosocial support, education, livelihoods, infrastructure, family support, and pastoral care. Its contribution is a contextual-theological synthesis of qualitative testimony, not a legal classification of the conflict or a representative estimate of population-wide effects.

5.5 Recommendations

1. **Strengthen community protection and early response.**
   Relevant security agencies and local authorities should improve safe reporting channels, timely response to threats, and communication with affected communities. Measures should be lawful, impartial, accountable, and attentive to civilian protection.
2. **Improve investigation and accountability**
   Allegations of attacks and abuses should be investigated fairly and transparently, with appropriate protection for complainants and witnesses. Victims should have clear information about complaint procedures and lawful remedies.
3. **Support safe and voluntary return or resettlement**
   Decisions about return should account for security, housing, land access, basic services, and the wishes of displaced households. People should not be pressured to return before conditions are reasonably safe.
4. **Restore agricultural livelihoods and market access**
   Where security permits, recovery programmes should support safe farm access, replacement of essential inputs, rehabilitation of transport routes and markets, and livelihood assistance for affected and host households.
5. **Protect children's access to education**
   Education authorities and partners should provide safe learning spaces, flexible arrangements for displaced children, and targeted support for essential school expenses. Schools should coordinate with families and community structures to identify barriers to attendance.
6. **Expand psychosocial support and referrals**
   Community organizations, health services, and faith-based groups should strengthen emotional support, train suitable local helpers in psychological first aid, and establish referral pathways for people needing specialized care.
7. **Strengthen pastoral care for affected Christians and families**
   Churches should maintain contact with displaced households, provide pastoral accompaniment and family support, and adapt worship, catechesis, and other activities to safety conditions. Pastoral support should respect people's choices and coordinate with appropriate social services.
8. **Promote inclusive dialogue and peacebuilding**
   Traditional rulers, religious leaders, farmers, herders, women, young people, and other affected groups should be included in dialogue and mediation. Peacebuilding should address grievances and practical land-use or livelihood concerns without replacing protection and accountability.
9. **Coordinate assistance and reconstruction**

Government agencies, civil-society organizations, humanitarian bodies, and faith-based institutions should coordinate needs assessments and assistance. Transparent eligibility criteria and community participation can reduce perceptions of favouritism and duplication.

10. **Monitor recovery beyond the end of immediate violence**
    Recovery programmes should track safety, access to farmland and markets, school attendance, housing, availability of services, psychosocial support, and displaced households' ability to make informed decisions about return.

Suggestions for Further Studies

1. **A broader mixed-methods study**
   Future research could combine a larger, clearly described survey with in-depth interviews and focus groups to assess how widely the experiences identified here are shared across Sankera.
2. **Comparative research across communities**
   Studies comparing affected and less-affected communities or different local government areas could explore variation by location, livelihood, displacement status, age, gender, and access to services.
3. **Longitudinal research on displacement and recovery**
   Following displaced and returning households over time could clarify how safety, livelihood recovery, education, family relationships, and community belonging change.
4. **Research on agriculture and household food security**
   Further studies could examine farm access, cultivated land, crop production, income, market participation, and household food access, using appropriate quantitative measures alongside participant accounts.
5. **Education and child well-being**
   Research could investigate school attendance, learning continuity, school costs, child protection, and the experiences of displaced learners, parents, and teachers.
6. **Psychosocial well-being and community resilience.**
   Future work could explore grief, anxiety, coping strategies, social support, and barriers to mental-health services, using ethically appropriate tools and referral procedures.
7. **Religion, pastoral care, and evangelization**
   Further studies could examine how insecurity affects worship attendance, sacramental access, catechesis, pastoral visitation, Christian education, and displaced congregations, without assuming that all participants interpret events in the same way.
8. **Family relationships and social cohesion**
   Research could explore reported family separation, marital strain, household responsibilities, trust, and social networks, while distinguishing participants' accounts from verified administrative or legal records.
9. **Institutional trust and peacebuilding**
   Studies could assess community perceptions of security agencies, local authorities, traditional institutions, and humanitarian assistance, and identify which forms of dialogue and conflict management are considered credible by different groups.
10. **Evaluation of recovery interventions**
    Future research could assess the reach, fairness, and outcomes of livelihood, education, psychosocial, reconstruction, and pastoral programmes. Evaluations should use transparent methods and avoid attributing changes to a programme without suitable evidence.

Author Contributions

The study was conceptualized, drafted, and data collected by Moses Aondoanenge Igba while Dr. Terngu Paul Ugosor was responsible for the design and manuscript preparation. All authors contributed to the critical review and revision of the manuscript, participated in the final editing process, and approved the final version for submission.

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical principles relating to voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Consent for Publication

All participants provided consent for the use of their anonymized responses for research reporting and publication of the findings. No personally identifiable information was included in the presentation or publication of the study results.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests or financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the conduct, analysis, or reporting of this study.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

In the course of preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to paraphrase the original text for improved grammatical clarity. After that, the authors carefully revealed and edited the content and take full responsibility for the publication of the content.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Study title: Bearing Witness in the Fire: Theological Reflection on Christian persecution and genocide discourse, Evangelization, and Development in Sankera, Benue State, Nigeria.

Purpose: To understand participants' experiences and interpretations of insecurity and violence in Sankera, and perceived implications for Christian life, evangelization, community resilience, justice, and development.

A. Interview identification and consent

Interview code: _____

Date: _____ Community/LGA: _____

Participant category (e.g., resident, displaced person, religious leader, community leader, other): _____

Preferred interview language: _____

Interviewer: _____

Has the study been explained and informed consent obtained? Yes / No

Permission to audio-record obtained separately? Yes / No / Not applicable

B. Opening script

Thank you for considering taking part in this interview. The study explores how insecurity and violence have affected communities in Sankera, including Christian life, evangelization, livelihoods, and community responses. Taking part is your choice. You may decline to answer any question, ask for a break, or stop the interview at any time. Your name will not be used in the report, and we will take steps to protect your privacy. Some topics may be upsetting; we do not need you to describe anything you do not wish to discuss. Do you have any questions before we begin, and do you agree to participate?

C. Background and community context

1. What would you like me to know about your role or connection to this community?
2. How would you describe life in this community before the period of insecurity you are referring to?
3. Which changes in community life have been most significant to you?

D. Experiences and perceived patterns of violence

1. Without sharing details, you would prefer to keep private, how has insecurity affected you, your household, or this community?

2. What kinds of effects have been most visible in the community?
3. How have people's movements, displacement, or access to land and livelihoods been affected?
4. What factors do you think have contributed to the continuation or escalation of insecurity?

E. Effects on Christian life and church communities

1. How, if at all, has insecurity affected church attendance, worship, pastoral care, or other Christian activities?
2. Have church buildings, religious leaders, congregations, or faith-based services been affected? Please share only what feels safe to discuss.
3. What forms of support have churches or religious groups provided to affected people?
4. Have relationships among Christian communities and other religious or community groups changed? In what ways?

F. Evangelization and pastoral response

1. What does evangelization mean in the present circumstances of this community?
2. How has insecurity affected the ability of churches to carry out evangelization or other pastoral activities?
3. What approaches have helped churches remain present and serve people during difficult periods?
4. What should churches prioritize when responding to violence, displacement, and community needs?

G. Socio-economic and developmental consequences

1. What effects have you observed on farming, markets, employment, education, housing, or access to health and other services?
2. How has displacement affected family income, social networks, or children and young people?
3. Which needs are most urgent for affected households and communities?
4. What would meaningful recovery and sustainable development look like here?

H. Resilience, justice, peacebuilding, and reconciliation

1. What have individuals, families, churches, traditional institutions, or community groups done to cope with the situation?
2. Which local or external responses have been helpful, and which have been inadequate?
3. What does justice mean to you in this context?
4. What conditions would make reconciliation or peaceful coexistence possible?
5. What roles should government, security agencies, traditional institutions, civil society, churches, and affected communities play?

I. Theological reflection: suffering, lament, witness, and hope

1. If you wish to reflect in religious or theological terms, how do you understand suffering in the context of these events?
2. Do ideas such as bearing witness, martyrdom, the Cross, or Job's lament have meaning for you or your community? Why or why not?
3. How can religious language offer comfort or hope, and when might it risk minimizing people's suffering or discouraging action for justice?
4. What messages of hope, faith, or resilience (if any) have helped people endure?

J. Recommendations and closing

1. What are the three most important actions needed to protect people and support recovery?
2. What should be done to restore livelihoods, education, worship, and community trust?
3. Is there anything important that I have not asked about?
4. Would you like to clarify, withdraw, or restrict the use of anything you have shared?

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D. Interviewer's closing checklist

1. Thank the participant and check whether they need a pause or support information.
2. Ask whether they have questions about the study or the use of their information.
3. Confirm whether audio recording was permitted and stop recording before any off-record discussion.
4. Record non-identifying contextual notes and any follow-up actions the participant has agreed to.
5. Store notes and recordings securely; do not include unnecessary names or identifying details.