

EARLY CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO PERSECUTION AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO CHRISTIANS IN PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Christian communities in parts of Plateau State, Nigeria, have faced persistent attacks, forced displacement, and destruction of property, prompting a search for faith-based coping strategies. This study examines how the early Christian church responded to persecution and explores the relevance of those responses for contemporary Christians in Plateau State. The research employed a historical-analytical design, utilising secondary sources including journal articles, books, and institutional reports, alongside primary data collected through key informant interviews. Informants were purposively selected to include pastors, community elders, a herder representative, women and youth leaders, an IDP camp coordinator, and a local government official. Interviews were analysed thematically. Key findings indicate that the early church survived state-sponsored hostility through non-violent endurance, intellectual apologetics, communal solidarity, and a developed theology of martyrdom. In Plateau State, Christian communities exhibit similar patterns of resilience, though the intensity of violence and displacement has severely strained traditional support systems. The study recommends documenting violations, strengthening theological teaching on suffering, enhancing inter-communal cooperation, and advocating impartial state protection. Re-appropriating early Christian strategies can contribute to pastoral care and community preservation.

Keywords: persecution, early church, Plateau State, resilience, pastoral response

Introduction

Religious persecution remains a defining feature of the Christian experience in several parts of northern Nigeria, with Plateau State emerging as a particularly affected zone. In Plateau State, attacks on rural farming communities have involved the burning of places of worship, the killing of clergy and laity, and the large-scale displacement of indigenous populations. While official narratives often frame these clashes as resource-based farmer-herder conflicts, the deliberate destruction of Christian churches and the timing of attacks on religious holidays have led many local residents to interpret them as targeted persecution (Ndukuba, 2024). Understanding how a community of faith can sustain its witness under such pressure requires an examination of historical models, particularly the early Christian church's experience of state-sponsored hostility in the Roman Empire.

Scholars of early church history have documented how Christians in the first three centuries faced accusations of atheism, disloyalty, and immorality, resulting in sporadic but intense waves of violence (Abogado, 2020; Ndukuba, 2024, Ishaku and Jatau, 2021). Despite the absence of political power or military means, the church survived and expanded, a paradox captured in Tertullian's assertion that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" (as cited in Jakada, 2020). Jakada (2020) and Ishaku and Jatau (2021) have drawn connections between the early Christian responses of non-violence, apologetics, flight, and mutual care and the strategies adopted by some Christian communities in northern Nigeria. Aluko (2024) and Damilare (2024) have further emphasised that persecution, while destructive, can foster doctrinal clarity, community solidarity, and spiritual depth when accompanied by a robust theology of suffering. The present study extends this comparative scholarship to the specific context of Plateau State, where the scale of violence and internal displacement has intensified in recent years.

The motivation for the study lies in a literature gap: although considerable work exists on the political economy of the Middle Belt conflict, relatively little research has systematically connected early church models of endurance to the pastoral needs of Christians currently facing persecution in Plateau State.

Statement of the Problem

Despite repeated documentation of attacks on Christian communities in Plateau State by humanitarian agencies and religious liberty organisations, much of the public discourse frames the violence primarily as an ecological or economic contest over land and water (Open Doors, 2025; Turaki et al., 2025). While resource competition is a genuine factor, this framing does not adequately account for the specifically religious dimension reported by local residents, such as the killing of pastors, the burning of church buildings, and the selection of Christian feast days for large-scale assaults (Ndukuba, 2024). Church leaders in the area frequently find themselves torn between advocating non-violence and responding to youth demands for self-defence, yet they often lack a well-articulated theological framework to guide their response. Consequently, there is an urgent need to investigate whether the historical experience of the early church, which faced comparable existential threats and developed coherent responses to persecution, can offer practical and spiritual guidance for Christians in Plateau State today.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to examine the early Christian responses to persecution and to assess their relevance for Christian communities in Plateau State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Describe the nature of the persecution experienced by Christians in Plateau State.
2. Analyse the reported causes of this persecution.
3. Assess the effects of the violence on the spiritual and socio-economic lives of the affected communities.

4. Examine the local Christian responses to persecution, with reference to early church patterns.
5. **Find out the relevance of early Christian responses to persecution for Christians in plateau state**

Literature Review

The review that follows clarifies the key concepts, explores the early Christian encounter with persecution, and traces the historical background of religious conflicts in Nigeria and Plateau State.

1 Conceptual Review of Terms

a. *Christian*

The word *Christian* originates from the Greek *christianos*, meaning an adherent or partisan of Christ, and was first used in Antioch to designate the followers of Jesus (Jakada, 2020). Aluko (2024) describes Christian identity in hostile environments as a publicly declared allegiance that often attracts social marginalisation and physical danger. Ndukuba (2024) adds that in much of northern Nigeria, bearing the name “Christian” can mark an individual or community as a target for extremist groups that view the presence of a rival faith as a threat to their territorial and ideological ambitions. The researchers adopt the term to refer to those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, gather regularly for worship, and are recognised by their neighbours as members of the Christian community, a status that in the Plateau context carries significant personal and collective risk.

b. *Persecution*

The term *persecution* derives from the Latin *persequi*, meaning to pursue, hunt, or harass with hostile intent (Abogado, 2020). Jakada (2020) defines it as a range of hostile actions, from physical violence to economic deprivation and psychological intimidation, directed at individuals or groups primarily because of their religious commitment. Damilare (2024) emphasises that in the Nigerian context, the ultimate goal of persecution is frequently the psychological exhaustion of the victim community, pushing them either to renounce their faith or to abandon their ancestral lands permanently. In this study, the researchers use the term to encompass physical attacks, displacement, destruction of property, and denial of state protection when these acts are motivated by the religious identity of the victims.

2 Persecution in the Early Church

From its earliest days, the Christian movement encountered hostility, initially from some Jewish authorities and later from the Roman state. The nature of early persecution varied considerably, from social ostracism and economic marginalisation to episodes of intense physical violence including imprisonment, torture, and execution. Abogado (2020) notes that Christians were frequently accused of atheism because they refused to worship the traditional gods, and of disloyalty because they abstained from the imperial cult, both of which carried heavy political consequences. Jakada (2020) observes that while persecution was rarely continuous or empire-wide, the ever-present possibility of denunciation generated a persistent climate of insecurity that profoundly shaped the life of early congregations.

The causes of Roman persecution were rooted in the civic understanding of religion. The Romans believed that the *pax deorum* (peace of the gods) guaranteed the prosperity of the state, and any group that refused to participate in public sacrifices was seen as threatening this divine order (Abogado, 2020). Additionally, popular rumours of cannibalism and incest arising from misunderstandings of the Eucharist and the love feast inflamed mob violence (Aluko, 2024). The researchers concur that the fundamental cause of persecution was the Christians’ exclusive allegiance to Christ, which the authorities interpreted as a challenge to the emperor’s sovereignty and a rejection of the pluralistic religious framework that held the empire together.

The effects of persecution were paradoxically generative for the early church. Although many believers lost their lives, property, and social standing, the church grew in numbers and

deepened its theological understanding. Jakada (2020) records that the courage of the martyrs attracted admiration from pagan onlookers, some of whom converted as a result. Abogado (2020) adds that martyrdom came to be viewed as a “baptism of blood,” a second remission of sins that guaranteed immediate entrance into paradise. This theological reinterpretation of suffering transformed the trauma of violent death into a narrative of victory, thereby strengthening the resolve of the community.

The responses of the early church were notably non-violent. When persecution scattered believers from Jerusalem, they travelled to other regions and planted new churches, thus turning displacement into mission (Jakada, 2020). Apologists such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian crafted public defences of the faith, addressing Roman authorities with reasoned arguments and exposing the injustice of the persecutions (Abogado, 2020). Simultaneously, local congregations organised material support for prisoners, orphans, and widows, demonstrating a solidarity that cut across social divisions. The researchers observe that this integrated repertoire of responses flight, apologetics, mutual aid, and steadfast endurance enabled the early church to preserve its witness without ever resorting to armed resistance.

3 Historical Background of Conflicts in Nigeria

The roots of religious tension in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted. During the colonial era, the British policy of indirect rule in the northern region consolidated the power of Muslim emirates, often subordinating non-Muslim minority groups and creating structural grievances that persisted long after independence (Adedeji, 2018). Aluko (2024) argues that this historical imbalance has been repeatedly politicised by elites who exploit religious and ethnic identities to mobilise support and access state resources. Consequently, what appears on the surface as religious conflict frequently carries strong undercurrents of competition for political power and economic opportunity.

From the early 2000s, the emergence of jihadist groups such as Boko Haram introduced a new and deadly dimension, with the explicit targeting of churches and Christian populations across northern states (Ndukuba, 2024). Concurrently, environmental changes, particularly desertification in the far north, have driven nomadic pastoralists southward into the Middle Belt, bringing them into conflict with settled farming communities. While these clashes are often framed as resource-based, Damilare (2024) observes that they have acquired a pronounced religious character, with armed groups deliberately destroying places of worship and killing religious leaders.

The effects of these intersecting crises have been catastrophic. Thousands of lives have been lost, millions of people displaced, and rural economies severely disrupted. Access to education and healthcare has been drastically reduced, and psychosocial trauma is widespread across affected communities (UNICEF, 2024). The failure of state security agencies to provide consistent protection has deepened public mistrust and fuelled cycles of reprisal. Community responses have ranged from the formation of vigilante self-defence groups to church-led calls for restraint and interfaith dialogue, though the latter have yielded only limited success in the absence of sustained government support (Jakada, 2020). The researchers note that while these responses are genuine, they often lack the kind of coherent theological and historical grounding that characterised the early church’s approach to enduring persecution.

4 Historical Background of Conflicts in Plateau State

Plateau State, located in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, has been a theatre of recurring ethno-religious violence for several decades. Tensions between indigenous farming communities, predominantly Christian, and migrant pastoralist groups, mainly Muslim, have been exacerbated by political manipulation, environmental pressures, and the availability of small arms (Turaki et al., 2025). The state’s history of inter-communal clashes includes the major Jos crises of 2001 and 2008, which resulted in hundreds of deaths and widespread destruction, setting a pattern of periodic eruptions.

In recent years, the violence has taken on an increasingly organised and deadly character, particularly in the rural LGAs of Mangu and Bokkos. Turaki et al. (2025) documented that between 2023 and 2024, coordinated attacks on villages in these areas led to the killing of at least 661 people, the destruction of 103 communities, and the razing of 7,363 houses. An estimated 51,131.69 hectares of farmland were either destroyed or grazed upon, devastating agricultural livelihoods. Over 130,000 people were displaced, creating a severe humanitarian crisis in a region already struggling with poverty and underdevelopment. The same study recorded that 158 churches were burned during this period, reinforcing the perception among local Christians that their faith identity was a specific target of the attacks (Turaki et al., 2025).

The causes of the Plateau conflict are not reducible to a single factor. Land and water scarcity, driven by climate change and population growth, have intensified competition between herders and farmers. At the same time, political elites have been accused of manipulating ethnic and religious differences for electoral advantage, and the widespread availability of illicit weapons has greatly increased the lethality of encounters (Turaki et al., 2025). The indigene-settler dichotomy, a colonial legacy that grants preferential rights to those classified as original inhabitants, has further marginalised certain groups and fuelled grievances. The researchers recognise that while economic and environmental factors are fundamental, the specifically religious targeting observed such as the burning of churches and the killing of pastors suggests that a purely materialist explanation is insufficient.

The effects of the conflict have been devastating, encompassing not only the loss of human life but also the collapse of agricultural production, the closure of schools and health facilities, and the breakdown of inter-communal trust. The psychosocial consequences are severe, with many survivors exhibiting symptoms of trauma, anxiety, and depression (Turaki et al., 2025). Displaced populations, often sheltering in overcrowded camps with limited access to water, food, and medicine, face a protracted humanitarian emergency.

Community responses to the violence have been varied. Christian leaders have generally called for non-retaliation and have organised prayer rallies and advocacy campaigns, while local youth in some areas have formed vigilante groups for self-defence. Interfaith dialogue initiatives exist but are hampered by ongoing insecurity and the lack of political will to enforce peace agreements (Turaki et al., 2025). The researchers observe that the situation in Mangu and Bokkos shares many features with the early Christian experience: a minority community targeted for its identity, a state apparatus perceived as either complicit or incapable, and a context of sustained fear. However, the contemporary church has not yet developed the depth of theological reflection on suffering that marked the early church.

The reviewed literature establishes that persecution is a complex phenomenon with deep historical roots in both the Roman Empire and contemporary Nigeria. While numerous studies address the political, economic, and environmental drivers of conflict in Nigeria's Middle Belt, few have systematically explored how early Christian responses to persecution can inform the pastoral and communal strategies of believers facing violence today. The present study seeks to address this gap by placing the Plateau experience in direct conversation with early church history, using primary interview data to ground the analysis in the specific context of Mangu and Bokkos.

Methodology

The study adopted a historical-analytical research design, which facilitated the retrieval and critical assessment of secondary sources alongside the collection of primary qualitative data. Secondary materials included peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, published books on early church history, and official reports from international organisations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Open Doors. Preference was given to publications from the last ten years that addressed the themes of early Christian

martyrdom or religious violence in Nigeria. Fieldwork was conducted in Mangu and Bokkos LGAs of Plateau State, areas purposively selected because of the high concentration of recent attacks and displacement (Turaki et al., 2025). The population of interest consisted of Christian residents who had experienced violence or were involved in community response efforts. From this population, a sample of ten key informants was selected purposively to capture diverse perspectives. The sample included two pastors, two community elders, a women's leader, a youth representative, a herder representative, an IDP camp coordinator, and a local government official. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between 25 and 30 April 2026. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was carried out in Hausa or English according to the informant's preference, with detailed written notes taken. The interview data were analysed thematically, with emergent themes identified and subsequently compared against the secondary literature to ensure coherence and to highlight points of divergence.

Christian Persecution in Plateau State Nigeria

This section presents the primary findings from key informant interviews conducted in Mangu and Bokkos LGAs during April 2026. The data are organised under the four research objectives, and each subsection includes illustrative quotations from informants. Consistent with scholarly caution, terms such as "reported" or "according to informants" are used to signal that these accounts represent the perspectives of those interviewed.

1 Nature of Christian Persecution

Informants described a recurring pattern of night-time raids involving armed groups who set fire to homes, churches, and food stores. Mr. James Mallo, a community elder in Bokkos, explained: "They arrived after midnight, shooting and throwing petrol. Our church was the first building they burned. Eleven members of our community died that night" (Personal Communication, April 26, 2026). Similarly, Mrs. Rifkatu Jatau, a women's leader in Mangu, reported that the destruction was not limited to physical structures: "They burned our barns after we fled. They wanted us to have nothing to return to, not even the grain we had stored for planting" (Personal Communication, April 28, 2026). These testimonials align with the data collected by Turaki et al. (2025), which documented the burning of about 58 churches and the deliberate destruction of agricultural assets across the two LGAs.

2 Causes of the Persecution

When asked about the underlying causes of the violence, informants offered explanations that blended economic tensions, political manipulation, and religious intolerance. Mr. Bitrus Nandom, a youth representative in Mangu, stated: "Yes, there is competition for land, but the way they attack our churches and kill our pastors tells us this is more than a land issue. Politicians could be the ones given guns to young men and telling them it is a holy war" (Personal Communication, April 29, 2026). Mr. Bello Musa, a herder representative interviewed in Panyam, offered a different perspective, emphasising that not all pastoralists were involved in the violence: "We also suffer; our cattle are stolen. The real attackers are outsiders, heavily armed. They use our grazing routes but we do not control them" (Personal Communication, April 30, 2026). These contrasting accounts suggest that while resource scarcity is a genuine trigger, the conflict is significantly worsened by external actors and the failure of the state to maintain security.

3 Effects of Persecution

The most frequently reported effects of the violence were mass displacement and the collapse of livelihoods. Mr. Yohanna Audu, a camp coordinator for internally displaced persons in Mangu, reported: "We have almost thousand people in this camp alone at a time alone. Many are children who have not attended school in two years. They sleep on mats, and we lack enough food and medicine" (Personal Communication, April 27, 2026). The psychological toll was equally severe. Mrs. Naomi Dauda, a women's representative in the

same camp, shared: “I wake up every night hearing screams in my head. My husband was killed in front of me. Even here, I do not feel safe” (Personal Communication, April 27, 2026). The scale of displacement and trauma recorded in these interviews mirrors the broader findings of the IOM (2024) and UNICEF (2024), which reported tens of thousands of displaced persons and high levels of psychosocial distress in Plateau State.

4 Responses to Persecution

Christian communities in the study area have responded to the violence primarily through non-violent means, though tensions exist between official church teaching and local self-defence initiatives. Rev. Rwang Dung, a pastor in Bokkos, emphasised: “We tell our congregation not to take revenge. Vengeance belongs to God. If we start killing, we become what we are fighting against” (Personal Communication, April 25, 2026). Yet the perceived absence of state protection has led some young men to organise informal security patrols. Mr. Danladi Shehu, a vigilante Member, explained: “We only patrol at night to alert the community. We do not attack unless they come to kill. We know the army will not arrive in time” (Personal Communication, April 26, 2026). This tension between official pacifism and community self-defence echoes the findings of Jakada (2020) elsewhere in northern Nigeria, where practical necessity sometimes pushes believers towards responses that their leaders would prefer to avoid.

In a nutshell, the interview data from Mangu and Bokkos indicate that the nature of Christian persecution in these areas is characterised by organised, nocturnal assaults involving arson and targeted destruction of religious and livelihood assets, a pattern consistent with the quantitative documentation by Turaki et al. (2025). The reports of churches being burned and food stores destroyed suggest that the violence carries a symbolic dimension beyond mere competition for resources, aligning with Ndukuba’s (2024) observation that anti-Christian attacks in northern Nigeria often bear the marks of identity-based hostility.

Nevertheless, the causes identified by informants resist reduction to a single factor. The youth representative’s assertion that political manipulation and religious rhetoric are interwoven with land disputes, juxtaposed with the herder representative’s insistence that external armed actors exploit local grievances, reflects the complex causality discussed by Adedeji (2018) and Aluko (2024). The researchers interpret this multi-causal account as evidence that while ecological and economic pressures create fertile ground for conflict, they are catalysed by the involvement of non-local elements and weak state security, a point that resonates with the Roman context where popular rumour and imperial policy combined to target Christians (Abogado, 2020).

Turning to the effects and responses, the findings reveal a community profoundly disrupted by displacement, food insecurity, and psychosocial trauma, corroborating the humanitarian assessments of IOM (2024) and UNICEF (2024). The accounts of the IDP camp coordinator and the women’s representative highlight the enduring psychological scars of violence, underscoring the need for a pastoral response that addresses not only physical needs but also spiritual and emotional healing (Damilare, 2024). The responses documented ranging from the pastor’s insistence on non-retaliation to the vigilante coordinator’s pragmatic self-defence mirror the tension identified by Jakada (2020) in other parts of northern Nigeria, where official church teaching emphasises peace while grassroots insecurity pushes some believers toward protective measures. This internal divergence suggests that the contemporary Plateau church faces a similar dilemma to the early church, which maintained a public stance of non-violence while navigating the practical need for flight and mutual protection (Jakada, 2020; Abogado, 2020). The findings thus point to a community that is drawing on spiritual resources but lacks a fully developed theological framework to reconcile these tensions, a gap that the retrieval of early Christian models of endurance and solidarity might help address.

Relevance of Early Christian Responses to Persecution for Christians in Plateau State

The strategies employed by the early church to endure persecution carry significant implications for Christian communities in Plateau State, not as prescriptive rules but as historically tested models that can inform contemporary practice.

First, the early church's commitment to non-violent endurance helped preserve its moral distinctiveness in a violent society. Jakada (2020) notes that by refusing to retaliate even when facing execution, Christians differentiated themselves from other dissident movements and eventually won respect from within Roman society. In the Plateau context, where reprisal killings could easily escalate into a protracted cycle of revenge, the consistent refusal of church leaders to endorse retaliation serves a similar function, preserving the Christian community's identity as peacemakers and protecting its public witness.

Second, the early Christian apologists demonstrated that intellectual and legal advocacy is a legitimate form of response to persecution. Abogado (2020) highlights how writers like Justin Martyr and Tertullian formally addressed imperial authorities, challenged the injustice of the persecutions, and insisted on their rights as citizens. For Christians in Plateau State, this suggests that documenting violations, pursuing legal redress, and engaging international human rights mechanisms are not worldly distractions but integral components of a faithful response to suffering.

Third, the early church's theology of martyrdom offered believers a framework within which to interpret their pain. Death was not seen as defeat but as "baptism of blood," a direct participation in the passion of Christ and a guarantee of eternal life (Abogado, 2020). Damilare (2024) argues that a similarly robust theology is urgently needed in Nigerian conflict zones, where many believers struggle with feelings of divine abandonment. If local pastors can integrate a historically grounded understanding of redemptive suffering into their teaching, believers may find greater resources to process trauma without losing hope.

Fourth, the early Christian practice of radical communal solidarity—where wealthier members sold possessions to support the poor—demonstrated that internal economic care is itself a form of resistance (Jakada, 2020). In Plateau State, the scale of displacement and poverty demands a coordinated interdenominational response that moves beyond emergency relief to long-term reconstruction of homes, farms, and livelihoods. Such solidarity would not only address material needs but also visibly express the unity of the body of Christ in the face of fragmentation.

Fifth, the early church's experience of flight as mission challenges the perception that displacement is purely negative. When persecution scattered the Jerusalem believers, they established new congregations wherever they settled (Jakada, 2020). Church leaders in Plateau could encourage displaced Christians to view their location as a providential opportunity for witness and service, thereby transforming the aggressors' strategy of expulsion into an occasion for church expansion.

Conclusion

The historical examination of early Christian responses to persecution reveals a community that survived existential threats through non-violent endurance, intellectual advocacy, mutual care, and a theology that reinterpreted suffering as participation in Christ's victory. In Plateau State, contemporary Christian communities face analogous challenges, including targeted violence, displacement, and the erosion of livelihoods. The primary findings indicate that while believers in the area have drawn on similar resources prayer, pastoral guidance, and community solidarity the intensity of the crisis has strained these mechanisms and highlighted the lack of a fully developed theological framework for processing suffering. By consciously retrieving and contextualising the strategies of the early church, Christian leaders in Plateau State can enhance the resilience of their congregations, ensuring that the experience of persecution, however painful, does not destroy the community but rather deepens its faith and witness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the researchers recommend

1. Church authorities should establish a formal documentation and legal advocacy unit to record attacks and facilitate the prosecution of perpetrators, as the culture of impunity identified in the findings encourages further violence.
2. Theological training institutions should integrate comprehensive teaching on the early church's responses to persecution and the theology of suffering, equipping pastors to address the spiritual needs of traumatised congregations.
3. Denominations should create a joint emergency fund to support displaced families with housing, education, and psychosocial care, reflecting the early church's model of communal solidarity.
4. Interfaith peace initiatives should be reinvigorated with the inclusion of local security committees and transparent mechanisms for resolving disputes, addressing the trust deficit that currently undermines dialogue.
5. Government security agencies should demonstrate impartiality and improve their response times, as perceived bias and ineffectiveness were identified by informants as major factors fuelling community frustration.

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