

Sermon-based Messaging to Foster Social Cohesion in Conflict-affected Communities in Mindanao

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Abstract. Mindanao has faced decades of conflict driven by cultural, religious, and historical complexities. While secular peacebuilding has provided structural solutions, a gap remains in addressing the spiritual dimensions of reconciliation. This study employed a qualitative, multiple-case study approach, incorporating thematic content analysis of sermons and interviews with three Evangelical pastors serving in a Muslim-majority area, an Indigenous community, and a post-conflict barangay. The findings revealed that pastors used biblical storytelling, biblical exposition, and personal testimony as rhetorical strategies to promote unity. Sermons were adapted to address displacement, poverty, and trauma, consistently emphasizing forgiveness, humility, reconciliation, and peace as biblical imperatives. Pastors, however, faced challenges such as pride, mistrust, fear of retaliation, and perceptions of bias. Despite these obstacles, sermons often led to visible acts of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and stronger communal bonds. The study suggests that sermon-based messaging can inform faith-integrated peacebuilding policies in similar conflict zones in building inclusive and sustainable peace.

Keywords: Evangelical pastors; Faith-based communication; Sermon-based messaging; Social cohesion; Peacebuilding.

1.0 Introduction

Mindanao is marked by deep cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, yet this pluralism has also fueled decades of conflict rooted in political marginalization, historic injustice, and interfaith tensions. The Marawi Siege was among the most devastating chapters: ISIS-affiliated militants occupied the city for five months, displacing over 200,000 residents, destroying infrastructure, and inflicting profound psychosocial trauma on both Muslim and Christian communities (Banlaoi, 2019; Amnesty International, 2017). Following the siege, reconciliation became increasingly urgent. The crisis exacerbated pre-existing divisions, eroded social trust, and complicated peacebuilding by intertwining identity, urban spatiality, and relational fractures. Rehabilitating Marawi thus requires more than infrastructure repair; it demands processes that heal wounds and renew fractured relationships (Simangan, 2024).

Sermons, as a form of grassroots communication, provide a unique platform for addressing the psychosocial wounds of conflict (Garred & Abu-Nimer, 2018). Evangelical pastors in Mindanao address both spiritual and socio-political concerns through their sermons, drawing from a deeply rooted spirituality of struggle that emphasizes resistance, repentance, solidarity, and renewal (Aguilan, 2024a). Their preaching engages Christian traditions as resources for peacebuilding, offering moral clarity and communal hope to communities affected by violence and historical injustice. In contexts where state-led or secular peace efforts often face limited grassroots

trust, these sermons serve as culturally grounded platforms for moral transformation and social healing (Aguilan, 2024b).

Sermon-based messaging is thus a powerful and context-sensitive tool for fostering social cohesion and shaping attitudes toward reconciliation and coexistence. Pastors employ rhetorical strategies such as storytelling, scriptural exposition, personal testimonies, and moral questioning to engage their congregations and influence how they respond to intergroup tensions and community challenges (Oji, 2024). While the role of faith-based initiatives in peacebuilding has received growing academic attention, research has focused on sermons as local, community-level mechanisms for peace, particularly within conflict-prone areas such as Mindanao. Much of the existing literature on religious rhetoric focuses on formal interfaith dialogues or theological scholarship, often overlooking the vital role that regular Sunday preaching can play in grassroots peacebuilding (Ledesma et al., 2025).

This study explores how sermon-based messaging contributes to social cohesion in conflict-affected communities in Mindanao. It investigates how Evangelical pastors tailor their messages to respond to the cultural, religious, and conflict-related realities of their congregations. The multiple cases include churches operating in a predominantly Muslim community, a displaced Indigenous settlement, and a barangay recovering from conflict, each offering distinct insights into how religious communication can become a force for healing, unity, and sustainable peace.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a multiple case study approach combined with Thematic-Content Analysis, an approach well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena in their real-life contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Three Evangelical churches situated in distinct conflict-affected communities in Mindanao, a predominantly Muslim barangay, an Indigenous settlement, and a post-conflict barangay, were examined to understand how sermon-based messaging functions across diverse cultural and socio-political settings. The multiple case study design provided the depth and breadth necessary to compare cases comprehensively, enabling the identification of both common themes and unique patterns in sermon content, rhetorical strategies, and delivery methods within these varied contexts.

2.2 Sources of Data

The primary units of analysis for this study were sermon manuscripts and sermon transcripts, as they directly reflect the linguistic, rhetorical, and theological content of the messages delivered in evangelical churches within conflict-affected communities. Sermon manuscripts revealed the pastors' theological intentions, structured messaging, and planned rhetorical choices. These documents provided a window into how pastors crafted messages of peace, reconciliation, and moral instruction prior to delivery. Meanwhile, sermon transcripts, capturing the actual spoken sermons as delivered during live services, allowed the researcher to assess not only the content but also the spontaneous adjustments, emphases, and audience-directed cues that emerged during real-time preaching.

Both manuscripts and transcripts underwent thematic analysis, focusing on recurring patterns, rhetorical strategies, and theological framing used in sermon-based messaging. These texts were treated as central data for identifying how peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion were communicated in religious discourse. To supplement the textual analysis, the study employed semi-structured interviews and direct observations. Interviews with pastors were conducted to gain deeper insight into the sermon development process, including how they navigated cultural sensitivities, addressed the psychological and spiritual aftermath of conflict, and gauged congregational receptivity. These conversations also explored the pastors' intentionality in peace messaging, their homiletical choices, and personal experiences delivering sermons in challenging social environments.

In addition, direct observations during live sermons provided critical contextual data. These included non-verbal communication, emotional tone, audience responsiveness, and environmental factors that may have influenced sermon delivery. An observational checklist was used to systematically capture these elements, serving as a supplementary analytical layer to enrich the interpretation of the sermon transcripts. Following Creswell and Miller (2000), multiple data sources and perspectives were integrated to strengthen credibility through

triangulation, allowing for a holistic understanding of how sermons function as vehicles of peace messaging in post-conflict religious settings.

2.3 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling approach was employed to deliberately select three evangelical churches situated in diverse conflict-affected contexts in Mindanao. Selection criteria were based on the churches' geographic and socio-cultural contexts, the relevance of their sermons to themes of peacebuilding and unity, and the pastors' willingness to participate in the study. The purposive sampling strategy ensures the selection of cases that offer rich, contextually relevant data, a key principle in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Presented in Table 1 is the demographic and contextual Profile of the participants.

Table 1. *Demographic and Contextual Profile of Participants*

Participants	Age	Years of Experience	Context/Church Location
Pastor A	75	30 years	Predominantly Muslim area (North Cotabato)
Pastor B	48	10 years	Displaced Indigenous Community (Bukidnon)
Pastor C	58	8 years	Post-conflict Recovery Setting (Misamis Oriental)

2.4 Procedure of the Study

The research process commenced with an extensive review of relevant literature to identify existing gaps concerning how religious messaging, particularly within Evangelical churches, addresses violence, displacement, and intergroup tensions in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao. This foundational step guided the formulation of clear research questions and a focused problem statement, emphasizing the significance of sermon-based messaging in promoting peace and social cohesion. Key thematic variables were identified, and the initial chapters of the manuscript were drafted in close consultation with the thesis adviser and panel members to ensure academic rigor and contextual relevance. Data collection involved two primary methods: sermon observation and semi-structured interviews. An observation checklist was carefully developed and applied during on-site visits, wherein two Sunday sermons were observed in each of the three selected churches, totaling six sermons. These observations provided insight into the rhetorical and thematic content of peace-related messages.

To supplement and deepen the analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the pastors of each church. These interviews explored the pastors' perspectives, strategies, and contextual considerations in crafting and delivering messages of peace and unity. Data were then subjected to Thematic Content Analysis as the specific technique for examining sermon texts. A codebook was developed to guide the systematic coding process, ensuring consistency in identifying recurring themes, rhetorical patterns, and theological framings across different data sources. The codebook was refined during the analysis phase to reflect emerging insights from the data. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher applied member checking as a form of data validation. A summary of the preliminary themes and interpretations was returned to the pastors for feedback. This allowed participants to confirm the accuracy of the analysis, clarify ambiguities, and provide additional insights. Their feedback was incorporated into the final interpretation to ensure alignment with pastoral intent and contextual accuracy. Finally, the manuscript was completed with detailed documentation of the methodology, thematic findings, and interpretive discussions. It underwent a rigorous process of revision and panel review to ensure coherence, academic integrity, and practical relevance.

2.5 Data Gathering Instrument

This study employed three key instruments: a document analysis template, an observation checklist, and semi-structured interview guides. The document analysis template was a structured tool used to systematically examine sermon manuscripts and transcripts, focusing on thematic content, rhetorical strategies, and peace-related messaging. It supported consistent coding aligned with the study's codebook and enabled comparison between intended (manuscript) and delivered (transcript) sermons. The observation checklist was applied during live sermon deliveries to document non-verbal communication, emotional tone, contextual adaptations, and audience engagement. This allowed the researcher to supplement textual data with real-time behavioral cues and delivery dynamics. Semi-structured interview guides facilitated in-depth conversations with pastors, exploring their theological intent, rhetorical choices, and reflections on preaching in conflict-affected settings. These interviews provided critical insight into the pastoral rationale behind sermon construction and peace messaging.

All instruments were designed to align with the study's qualitative approach and support data triangulation. The use of member checking strengthened their validity, wherein participants confirmed the accuracy of

interpretations and provided clarifications (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To assess social cohesion outcomes, the study observed qualitative indicators such as expressions of trust, unity, reconciliation, participation in communal activities, and intergroup collaboration. These indicators emerged from sermon content, pastoral interviews, and live observations. Although not measured quantitatively, these patterns served as meaningful signs of how sermon-based messaging contributes to peacebuilding and the strengthening of community bonds (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

2.6 Data Analysis

This study employed Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) as the primary method for analyzing sermon manuscripts and transcripts. TCA is a qualitative approach that prioritizes interpretative over quantitative dimensions, aiming to uncover patterns of meaning, rhetorical strategies, and theological framing within texts. Sermon documents were examined line by line, using a structured codebook to identify recurring themes such as storytelling, biblical exposition, and reconciliation messaging. While the focus was interpretive, data triangulation was achieved through the integration of multiple sources. Observation checklists provided supplementary insight into sermon delivery, including emotional tone, audience engagement, and non-verbal communication. These observations helped contextualize and validate themes identified in the sermon texts. Additionally, data from semi-structured interviews with pastors were coded and analyzed in parallel to deepen understanding of the intent behind specific rhetorical choices and the perceived reception of peace-oriented messages. This combined approach ensured a rich, multidimensional interpretation of the data, enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of findings, and allowed the researcher to explore both the constructed content of sermons and their lived delivery within conflict-affected church communities (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

2.7 Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to ethical standards by securing informed consent from all participants after explaining the purpose, process, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by omitting names and identifying details in the final report. Data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. The researcher exercised cultural and religious sensitivity, especially in contexts involving Muslim-majority areas, Indigenous communities, and post-conflict settings.

2.8 Trustworthiness of the Study

Ensuring the trustworthiness of this qualitative study was vital, given its focus on how Evangelical sermons contribute to peace and social cohesion in conflict-affected communities of Mindanao. Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative framework, the study prioritized credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability throughout the research process. Credibility was ensured through a rigorous process of data triangulation, implemented across multiple stages of the study. This triangulation involved cross-validating findings from three primary sources: six sermon transcripts, three semi-structured interviews with pastors, and direct observations of live sermon delivery. The triangulated approach allowed the researcher to compare planned sermon content (manuscripts), actual delivery and audience engagement (observations), and pastoral intent (interviews), helping to identify recurring themes and rhetorical strategies with greater validity.

To further strengthen the study's trustworthiness, member checking was conducted during the interpretation phase. After completing the initial Thematic Content Analysis, the researcher compiled a summary of emerging themes and interpretations for each church. These summaries were sent individually to each participating pastor via Facebook Messenger, a platform already used for prior communication and preferred by the participants. The pastors were asked to review the summaries and provide feedback, either affirming, clarifying, or correcting the interpretations. Their responses were received within 2–5 days and were subsequently integrated into the final analysis. This process ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected the pastors' intended messages and the lived realities of their respective congregations (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Transferability was addressed by providing thick, contextual descriptions of each church's sociocultural and religious environment. This included details about local conflict dynamics, religious demographics, and pastoral backgrounds, enabling readers and future researchers to determine the relevance and applicability of findings to similar settings in other conflict-affected regions. Dependability was maintained through the use of a structured codebook. The codebook documented the progression from initial codes to broader categories and final themes, offering a transparent and consistent approach to thematic analysis. Procedures for transcription, coding, and interpretation were standardized and documented to support future replication or secondary analysis.

Confirmability was achieved through reflexive practices and supervisory oversight. The researcher maintained analytic memos and a reflexive journal to record methodological decisions, interpretive shifts, and personal reflections throughout the data analysis. These measures ensured that the study's findings are credible, contextually grounded, and analytically sound. By upholding trustworthiness across all phases of the research, the study offers a reliable account of how Evangelical sermons function as grassroots peacebuilding mechanisms in Mindanao's diverse and divided communities.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Rhetorical Strategies used by Pastors to Promote Social Cohesion in their Sermons

This section explores the recurring rhetorical strategies employed by pastors during Sunday sermons based on manuscripts and sermon transcripts. The observation checklist confirmed that all three pastors were consistently intentional in integrating theological messages, rhetorical tools, and pastoral sensibilities to promote social cohesion.

Pastor A consistently used the story of Peter (1 Peter 5:5) to illustrate the dangers of pride and the virtue of humility. By presenting Peter's transformation, he drew moral contrasts that listeners could identify with, especially in communities where pride and offense often trigger disunity. This was confirmed in the observation checklist, where Pastor A was noted for using scriptural narratives to draw moral reflection and encourage humility as a pathway to peace.

Pastor B preached from Isaiah 61:1–4, portraying the image of the Lord's anointed bringing healing and hope to the brokenhearted. This Old Testament passage served as both a promise and a pastoral call to action, an appropriate message for Indigenous communities still carrying collective trauma. The checklist noted that this approach effectively anchored the sermon in restorative themes, helping the audience locate themselves in the biblical vision of rebuilding ruins and restoring devastated places.

Pastor C grounded his message in Ephesians 4:3, emphasizing the need for humility, gentleness, and forbearance in preserving communal unity. This narrative framed Christian unity not as idealistic but as a Spirit-enabled practice, grounded in relational virtues. According to the observation data, Pastor C's consistent reference to practical virtues (like forbearance and gentleness) was effective in translating biblical unity into daily community life.

Storytelling in these sermons served to move listeners emotionally, while also anchoring calls for unity in familiar biblical accounts. These stories provided a theological and moral lens through which the congregation could interpret their real-life conflicts. All three pastors were observed using storytelling not merely as illustrative material but as a persuasive strategy to provoke empathy, reflection, and moral decision-making.

Participants were also observed using scripture passages to encourage peace and unity. The pastors were intentional in selecting biblical texts that reinforced the theological basis for peacebuilding and unity within the body of Christ. Drawing from both the Old and New Testaments, these scriptures were not only cited for authority but integrated into the sermon's rhetorical rhythm. Below are their statements.

"1 Peter 5:5 warns against pride and encourages humility. When we transform ourselves, community unity becomes possible." [Pastor A]

"As Isaiah 61 says, we are called by God to bring healing to the brokenhearted." [Pastor B]

"Ephesians 4:3 and 1 Corinthians 1:10 urge us to be united in mind and purpose. We must strive for unity in the church through humility and cooperation." [Pastor C]

Checklist data confirmed that scripture was used not only for doctrinal support but also to scaffold the moral reasoning of the congregation and create shared theological vocabulary around peace and reconciliation.

Participants were also observed to see if there were other rhetorical strategies, like personal testimonies and emotional appeals, present in their sermons.

Pastor A used a series of rhetorical analogies and questions to prompt moral reflection, comparing sin to a fatal disease and asking, “What would you do if the doctor told you it leads to death?” This dramatization of spiritual danger aimed to awaken ethical awareness through fear and urgency. The researcher noted strong emotional engagement from the audience during these moments, indicating successful use of pathos to encourage introspection and behavioral change. Pastor C shared how his family serves the Lord together, illustrating unity through personal witness. He explained that when people see unity modeled within a family, it reinforces the message that shared values and faith are foundational to broader community harmony. He said,

“When people see that my family and I serve the Lord together even in difficult circumstances, it becomes a testimony that unity is possible and powerful when Christ is at the center. Our unity is not just about being together physically, but about being one in purpose and faith. This encourages others to remain united in their families and communities.” [Pastor B]

According to the observation checklist, this testimony was a significant rhetorical moment that visibly moved listeners and elicited affirming responses, confirming the power of lived experience as a rhetorical tool. Furthermore, Pastor A drew from his background, stating, “I am a convert from Islam... that is why I can easily understand them.”

It revealed a unique positional empathy that strengthens his rhetorical ethos when addressing interreligious audiences. His personal conversion story allows him to serve as a cultural bridge, thus increasing trust and connection with Muslim listeners. Observers affirmed that this testimony enhanced the speaker's credibility (ethos) and built a stronger emotional and cultural connection with the community.

The confirmatory evidence from the observation checklist supports the conclusion that these pastors employed a combination of biblical exposition, storytelling, personal witness, and emotional appeal to promote social cohesion. Their rhetorical strategies were not only theological but deeply contextual, reflecting an awareness of their community’s needs, struggles, and shared aspirations for peace.

Presented in Table 2 are the rhetorical strategies used by pastors to provide social cohesion in their sermons.

Table 2. *Rhetorical Strategies used by Pastors to Provide Social Cohesion in their Sermons*

Rhetorical Strategies used by Pastors	Themes
The story of Peter was shared to illustrate how humility draws God's favor, while pride leads to disunity.	Storytelling
The prophetic mission of God's servant was used to proclaim healing for the broken and hope for the afflicted.	
The early church's call to unity was emphasized, urging believers to maintain peace and stand together in one purpose.	Biblical
Key texts like Ephesians 4:3 and Isaiah 61 were used to teach unity and peace as divine commands.	
Sermons drew theological themes like forgiveness and reconciliation from Scripture.	Exposition
Biblical truths were applied to real-life issues like conflict, poverty, and displacement.	
Pastor A shared his background as a former Muslim to express empathy and connection.	Testimony
Pastor C testified about his family’s shared service to the Lord, showing unity through action and faith.	

Storytelling

The use of biblical storytelling in sermons revealed a compelling rhetorical strategy that personalized theological messages and made moral teachings accessible to the community’s real-life experiences. Pastors employed narratives such as Peter’s transformation, Isaiah’s prophetic call to bind the brokenhearted, and the early church’s pursuit of unity to reflect the congregation’s struggles with pride, trauma, and division. These stories served to engage listeners emotionally, reinforce moral clarity, and inspire reflection and healing, particularly in contexts marked by conflict, displacement, or religious marginalization. Sermons, therefore, became both a spiritual guide and a communal intervention (Martin, 2024).

This finding aligns with Obregón & Tufte (2017) that storytelling as a communication strategy empowers marginalized voices and strengthens community agency by promoting reflection, solidarity, and collective transformation through familiar and trusted channels. Moreover, it parallels Moyer-Gusé & Dale’s (2017) finding that stories can influence attitudes and behaviors by reducing cognitive resistance and fostering emotional engagement and identification with characters and values. In this context, pastors strategically use storytelling to immerse congregants in scriptural plots of struggle, redemption, and transformation narratives that mirror their own lived experiences. This narrative transportation allows for deeper internalization of moral and spiritual

lessons, making storytelling a powerful tool for shaping values, reinforcing identity, and promoting reconciliation and hope in conflict-affected communities.

BibleExposition

Biblical exposition served as the theological backbone of the observed sermons, offering congregants both moral guidance and spiritual grounding. Pastors did not merely quote passages such as Ephesians 4 and Isaiah 61; they unpacked these texts to emphasize forgiveness, unity, and reconciliation as divine imperatives. By carefully interpreting Scripture within the lived realities of their congregations, such as poverty, displacement, and interpersonal conflict, pastors transformed the sermon into a moment of both spiritual reflection and ethical instruction.

This practice affirms Robinson (2025) that peacebuilding is not only a human responsibility but a spiritual calling embedded in Christian doctrine. In addition, Adam (2017) explains that expository preaching emerges as a strategic form of message framing. Rather than offering vague moral encouragement, pastors communicated structured, biblically grounded arguments that invited collective reflection and behavioral transformation. The integration of scriptural authority with contextual relevance strengthened the credibility of the message and positioned the pulpit as a trusted platform for social change.

Furthermore, this finding draws on Giddens (1982) in hermeneutics and social theory, suggesting that this practice can be understood as an interpretive social act where Scripture is not only explained but re-contextualized within the lived realities of the congregation. Hermeneutics involves interpreting human actions within structural conditions. In this case, pastors applied Scripture to conditions such as poverty, displacement, trauma, and social fragmentation, transforming the sermon into a moment of both spiritual reflection and ethical instruction.

Testimony

Personal testimony emerged as a powerful rhetorical strategy that deepened the authenticity and emotional impact of the sermons. When a pastor shared his conversion from Islam, it created a bridge of empathy and understanding for Muslim listeners, fostering trust across religious divides. Another pastor's account of his family's united service to God illustrated the practical expression of unity within the household, reinforcing the sermon's core message of relational harmony.

This finding aligns with narrative-developmental theory, which integrates Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Robert Kegan's developmental theory. Testimonies in sermons can be understood as formative acts that shape both personal meaning and moral growth. In the observed sermons, testimonies emerged as lived narratives, authentic accounts of struggle, faith, and renewal that engaged both emotion and reflection. Furthermore, Lunde-Whitler (2025) explains that stories invited listeners into a relational and transformative process, fostering empathy, spiritual insight, and a shared vision of reconciliation.

3.2 Sermon-based Messaging to Address the Cultural, Religious, and Conflict-related Challenges

Through sermon observations, transcript analysis, and interviews, pastors were found to incorporate culturally grounded, socially responsive messages that addressed the multifaceted realities of life in conflict-affected communities of Mindanao. Thematic coding of transcripts revealed intentional efforts by pastors to acknowledge the island's diverse cultural and religious identities, including Muslims, Indigenous Lumad peoples, and Christians, and to integrate these into their theological and rhetorical messaging.

This confirms from the data observation that Pastors A and B preached sermons that directly addressed ethnic and interfaith dynamics, aiming to build spiritual bridges between historically divided groups. Checklist entries confirmed these sermons as examples of "inclusive pastoral voice" and "intercultural reconciliation." Interviews with the pastors also revealed their deliberate efforts to deconstruct biases and highlight shared moral values between faith groups. Pastor C, on the other hand, focused on structural issues such as poverty, displacement, and violence. His sermons were observed and coded under "contextual awareness" and "communal healing" as he tailored his preaching to promote resilience in post-conflict settings.

From a rhetorical standpoint, all three pastors employed probing questions, personal appeals, and Scripture-based moral reasoning. Pastor A, in particular, used reflective questioning to prompt deep spiritual self-examination.

Checklist notes confirmed that these questions were rhetorically effective, as listeners were observed nodding in agreement or responding softly. Interviews with congregants further revealed that such questions encouraged personal reflection and often became discussion points after the service.

Pastor B, preaching to an Indigenous congregation, drew from Isaiah 61:1–4 to affirm divine concern for the wounded and marginalized. At the same time, Pastor C offered a theological explanation for the recurring breakdown of peace. Below are their statements.

“Which do we like, to be enemies of God through pride or friends of God with abundant blessings? Why do we make God our enemy? Can we defeat God?” [Pastor A]

“The Word of the Lord sends His Anointed to heal the brokenhearted, free the captives, and give hope to the hopeless.” [Pastor B]

“So let us continually strive to do what brings peace and strengthens one another.” (Even when people know that peace is in Christ, they still stray.” [Pastor C]

Observation records confirmed a strong emotional response from the audience, including verbal affirmations and tearful reactions. Interview feedback from Indigenous members indicated that this message resonated with their historical and emotional pain, affirming their value in God's eyes. The data highlighted that this blend of realism and hope struck a chord with congregants, many of whom face daily reminders of past violence. Interview responses confirmed that this call to action inspired reflection on personal and communal roles in peacebuilding.

All three pastors demonstrated an understanding that sermon-based messaging can serve as a form of local moral leadership. Rather than offering abstract theological teachings, they grounded their sermons in lived experiences, community narratives, and biblical mandates. The pulpit thus became a strategic platform for spiritual formation and social cohesion where doctrinal conviction met contextual relevance. Presented in Table 3 are the tailored sermon messages to respond to cultural, religious, and conflict-related challenges.

Table 3. Tailored Sermon Messages to Respond to Cultural, Religious, and Conflict-related Challenges

Contextual Adaptation	Themes
Pastor A employed reflective questioning to challenge congregants’ pride and spiritual resistance, emphasizing the consequences of opposing God.	Moral Self-Examination
Pastor B invoked prophetic language from Isaiah 61:1–4 to affirm God’s healing and restorative mission for the afflicted and brokenhearted.	Hope and Restoration
Pastor C acknowledged the human tendency to stray from peace, while urging the community to actively pursue actions that strengthen unity.	Call to Peacemaking
All pastors intentionally addressed Muslims, Lumads, and Christians in their sermons, framing unity and peace as shared moral and spiritual goals.	Intercultural Unity
Sermons integrated specific local challenges such as poverty, displacement, and violence into biblical teaching to ensure contextual relevance.	Contextual Engagement

Moral examination

Moral examination emerged as a significant theme in sermons delivered in conflict-affected communities. Pastors addressed the internal struggles of their congregants, such as pride, unforgiveness, and apathy toward unity, as key barriers to peace. These messages were not merely theological teachings but personalized appeals, encouraging listeners to confront attitudes that may contribute to division. This finding aligns with Jack et al. (2016), emphasizing participatory and reflective messaging, where listeners are not merely passive recipients but are invited to engage with their beliefs and behaviors critically. Religious belief is often sustained not only by analytical reasoning but also by mentalizing, the capacity to reflect on others’ perspectives and one’s moral standing.

Furthermore, this finding aligns with the core of Transformative Learning Theory by Taylor & Cranton (2012), where change begins with critical self-reflection that leads to shifts in worldview and behavior. In the context of faith-based peacebuilding, sermons serve as dialogic spaces where moral introspection supports both spiritual renewal and social healing. By encouraging self-examination, pastors were not only guiding spiritual growth but

also fostering the moral foundation necessary for sustained peace in conflict-vulnerable communities.

Hope and Restoration

Pastor B's use of Isaiah 61:1–4 highlights a redemptive message directed toward those who are economically, emotionally, or spiritually broken, especially relevant in Indigenous communities affected by marginalization. Contextualized messages of hope serve as non-coercive forms of development communication, providing psychological and moral support for post-conflict healing and reintegration. This aligns with Aguilan (2024), who notes that when sermons acknowledge suffering and articulate a vision of renewal, they become tools for social healing and community resilience. Filipino Christian traditions, rich in narrative and liturgical resources, can be mobilized to strengthen morale and promote reconciliation in conflict-affected settings.

Moreover, this finding aligns with Ganzevoort's (2011) narrative approaches in practical theology, which hold that communities make meaning through stories that frame identity and suffering within a sacred narrative. In addition, hope-centered preaching allows congregants to reframe hardship, such as displacement or trauma, as part of a redemptive story, transforming despair into resilience and enabling fractured communities to envision healing and a renewed future.

Call to Peacemaking

In the broader framework of post-conflict and interreligious settings, sermon-based calls to peacemaking serve as vital communicative interventions. Effective faith-based peacebuilding requires messages that balance moral vision with grounded realism, messages that not only imagine peace but model its practice through culturally embedded narratives and ethical instruction. Sermons can therefore act as tools for reshaping communal mindsets, offering not just theological explanations but alternative social scripts that empower listeners to become agents of reconciliation in their families, churches, and communities (Garred and Abu-Nimer, 2018).

Theologically, this finding confirms and aligns with the Christian concept of shalom, peace as wholeness and restored relationship. Moreover, sociologically, it reveals core tenets of Peacemaking Theory, which underscores the role of moral agency, narrative, and relational transformation in addressing entrenched societal divides (Brewer, 2022). Furthermore, Brewer explains that religion contributes to sustainable peace not merely through institutional efforts or formal mediation, but by shaping everyday attitudes, behaviors, and community norms. Sermons thus serve a dual role: they are acts of proclamation and moral performance, functioning both as religious instruction and as grassroots-level peacebuilding tools. In this sense, the preacher is not only a spiritual guide but a social communicator, one who challenges cycles of retaliation and models a vision of restored humanity grounded in faith.

Intercultural Unity

The pastors' deliberate address of Muslims, Lumads, and Christians reflects a theologically informed approach to intercultural and interfaith sensitivity. The pastors' use of culturally responsive and dialogic preaching aligns with Bessette's (2004) Participatory Development Communication framework, which advocates for co-created, locally rooted communication that empowers communities. In this study, sermon-based messaging functioned as a dialogic tool that integrated faith with lived realities, promoting interreligious empathy and peacebuilding in a participatory manner.

In addition, these intercultural preaching practices align with Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) Theory, which highlights the importance of self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and reflective listening in communicating across cultural divides (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022).

Contextual Engagement

All three pastors rooted their sermons in the specific lived experiences of their community, mentioning poverty, conflict, and displacement. McMahon (2018) describes the contextual appropriation of Scripture that helps bridge the gap between doctrine and daily life, allowing religious discourse to engage with pressing socioeconomic concerns meaningfully. This also aligns with Del Castillo's (2022) concept of laylayan theology, where faith is articulated from the margins, rooted in the lived experiences of the poor and oppressed. The finding further draws from Communication for Social Change Theory, which highlights the role of locally grounded narratives in enabling transformative social dialogue (Figuerola et al., 2003).

3.3 Patterns in Sermon Content or Themes across Mindanao's Evangelical Churches

Analysis of sermon observations revealed that while each pastor tailored their message according to the specific context and challenges faced by their congregation, several overarching patterns emerged. Central to these sermons was the emphasis on divine intervention and faith as essential mechanisms for resolving conflict, promoting reconciliation, and fostering hope amid adversity. Despite variations in geographic and cultural settings ranging from predominantly Muslim areas to Indigenous and post-conflict recovery communities, all pastors consistently anchored their messages in Scripture and framed peacebuilding as a spiritual mandate, not merely a social initiative.

These themes were confirmed by both checklist data and post-sermon interviews, which documented recurring references to reconciliation, forgiveness, and God's redemptive role in times of hardship. The participants were also observed with their preaching approaches and style, which revealed four distinct yet interconnected preaching approaches that reflected both the theological convictions of the pastors and the sociocultural realities of their congregations.

The expository and reflective style was marked by structured, Scripture-based sermons infused with moral reasoning and self-examination. Pastors used rhetorical questions and direct appeals to provoke thought and repentance. The narrative and empathetic style emerged prominently in trauma-affected Indigenous settings. Pastors relied on biblical stories that paralleled local experiences, fostering solidarity and emotional healing. Checklist notes highlighted the frequent use of biblical characters and prophetic texts. A third preaching pattern, the relational and situational style, localized biblical messages by addressing concrete social realities such as displacement, fear of red-tagging, or political instability. Confirmatory interviews revealed that these sermons resonated because they named specific local challenges, making faith feel relevant and empowering.

Lastly, pastors demonstrated adaptive communication strategies, adjusting tone, language, and illustrations based on their congregation's context. Checklist observations marked this under the code "audience awareness," with annotations describing how Indigenous communities received more storytelling, while urban congregations experienced a balance of doctrinal clarity and practical testimonies. Interviewees noted that this flexibility helped them understand and internalize the message more effectively.

Altogether, these preaching approaches were not merely rhetorical choices; they were strategic, context-sensitive methods confirmed through systematic observation and post-sermon conversations. The pastors transformed the pulpit into a platform for peacebuilding and spiritual formation, enabling theology to intersect with lived experience.

These verbatim lines captured in both checklist documentation and validated through in-depth interviews offer not only a glimpse into the pastors' theology but also serve as living proof that sermon-based messaging can function as moral leadership rooted in cultural relevance and spiritual authority. At the heart of these preaching strategies were powerful statements that shaped the moral and emotional tone of the sermons. Below are their statements:

"I have seen that through simple words, people understood that peace and reconciliation are not just for the church but for the whole community." [Pastor A]

"Brothers and sisters, just like the Israelites who were displaced from their land, the Lord knows your pain and He has a plan for your return." [Pastor B]

"There is a neighboring church that stopped doing outreach because of fear of red-tagging, since some of their members were former rebels or relatives of NPA members. However, in our church, we continued because the people had already risen and recovered." [Pastor C]

"So be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. He will strengthen you until the end." [Pastor C]

Presented in Table 4 are the patterns in sermon content and preaching approaches across Mindanao's evangelical churches.

Table 4. *Patterns in Sermon Content and Preaching Approaches across Mindanao's Evangelical Churches*

Patterns in Sermon Content and Preaching Approaches	Themes
Sermons addressed pride, disobedience, and division as spiritual causes of conflict.	Scripture-Grounded Instruction
Biblical texts (Isaiah 61, 1 Peter 5:5) were used to promote humility, peace, and renewal.	
Reconciliation with God was framed as key to interpersonal peace.	
Peacebuilding was presented as a biblical command, not just a social goal.	Contextualized Peacebuilding
Unity and forgiveness were emphasized through Scripture-based moral teaching.	
Sermons responded to issues like displacement, poverty, and conflict.	
Addressed interfaith tensions among Muslims, Christians, and Lumads.	Expository and Reflective Style
Used real-life issues, family disputes, mistrust, and violence, to apply Scripture.	
Encouraged active peacebuilding as a faith-driven responsibility.	
Used structured preaching with rhetorical questions to prompt reflection.	Narrative and Empathetic Style
Presented moral dilemmas to confront pride and spiritual indifference.	
Used rhetorical questions to provoke spiritual reflection and self-examination.	
Framed pride and disobedience as spiritual causes of conflict.	Relational and Situational Style
Delivered moral challenges to stir repentance.	
Shared biblical prophecy and stories to affirm God's justice and healing.	
Used narratives that resonate with displacement and trauma.	Adaptive Communication Strategy
Spoke in a tone of compassion and solidarity.	
Related Scripture (Isaiah 61) to the experiences of Indigenous communities.	
Used real-life issues (land conflict, red-tagging, family disunity) to illustrate peace principles.	
Offered personal testimonies to model unity and resilience.	
Contextualized biblical teaching to community realities.	
Varied tone, structure, and rhetorical tools (storytelling, exposition, imagery).	
Adjusted message style for the audience's cultural and literacy backgrounds.	
Incorporated voice modulation, pacing, and pauses to enhance clarity and emotional engagement.	
Used narratives among Lumad communities and direct moral appeals in mixed-faith urban areas.	

Scripture-Grounded Instruction

This theological anchoring aligns with Martin's (2024) faith-based communication strategies in development work, where scriptural narratives are used to transmit values and catalyze behavioral change. By drawing on what Martin terms pathological narrative emotional appeals embedded in Scripture, pastors fostered empathy, accountability, and ethical reflection. This exemplifies culturally embedded messaging, where theological storytelling becomes a medium for reconciliation, civic responsibility, and conflict sensitivity within faith communities.

Furthermore, this approach reflects Clines' (1982) understanding of biblical hermeneutics in practice, where interpretation is not confined to academic exegesis but is deeply situated in the sociocultural and historical contexts of the listeners. The pastors in this study demonstrated what Clines describes as the bridging of the ancient text with contemporary realities, allowing Scripture to shape both personal conscience and collective behavior actively. In doing so, they made the pulpit a site not only of theological instruction but of moral and communal transformation.

Contextualized Peacebuilding

This pattern illustrates how sermons can serve as localized, culturally sensitive communication tools. Pastors, as trusted faith leaders, act as intermediaries who bridge sacred texts and social realities, challenging harmful narratives and modeling peace-oriented behaviors. This affirms with participatory and culturally grounded communication strategies in development, where messages are dialogic, co-created, and anchored in community values (McMahon, 2018).

Theologically, this finding aligns with Del Castillo's (2022) core of Laylayan Theology, which centers theological reflection in the voices and struggles of the margins. It also parallels the Transformative Communication Theory, which advocates for inclusive, context-sensitive dialogue as a pathway to social change.

Expository, Narrative, and Adaptive Preaching Styles

The pastors' reliance on stories and testimonies made biblical messages accessible and emotionally resonant, especially in communities with varied literacy levels and theological exposure. This finding dynamic preaching aligns with Servaes' (2022) principles of audience-centered messaging and participatory dialogue, where communication is shaped by the listeners' needs, capacities, and experiences.

Rhetorically and theologically, these preaching patterns reflect Okeke's (2022) emphasis on rhetorical flexibility

as a key competency in culturally diverse congregations. Within the framework of Transformative Communication Theory, adaptive preaching fosters dialogic engagement, where shared meaning is co-constructed and where messages become more impactful through context-sensitive delivery. Furthermore, transformational pastoral leadership is the ability to communicate with empathy, spiritual authority, and a vision for communal renewal (Gregory, 2019).

3.4 Pastoral Experiences and Challenges in Delivering Peace-Oriented Sermons

The pastors' interview reflected on the complex spiritual, emotional, and social terrain they must navigate when preaching peace in communities shaped by violence, loss, and historical division. Despite different cultural and denominational contexts, a shared pattern of challenges emerged across interviews, observation checklists, and member feedback. The participants were asked about the challenges they faced when delivering sermons that promote peace in their conflict-affected communities.

One significant challenge shared by Pastor A was the prevalence of pride and ego, which he identified as a significant barrier to unity. His sermons often sought to confront this moral obstacle, as evidenced in the observation checklists that noted repeated appeals to humility, self-examination, and spiritual surrender.

For Pastor B, ministering in an Indigenous community meant addressing collective trauma and deep wounds caused by conflict, land loss, and neglect. His sermons, as captured in the checklists, were consistently marked by a "trauma-aware tone" and references to both biblical healing and cultural identity. Through interviews and member checking, community members validated that his messages were received as a source of hope and relevance. One member remarked, "We feel understood when the Pastor speaks. It is like he carries our pain but also lifts us with the Word." This feedback demonstrates that peace preaching in post-conflict settings must be both compassionate and contextual.

Meanwhile, Pastor C described a broader set of challenges, including emotional resistance, fear of retaliation, and mistrust toward the church. His sermons were annotated in checklists for their direct tone and bold confrontation of internal church conflicts. Member-checking interviews confirmed that these messages resonated, albeit slowly. A youth leader commented, "Sometimes people do not respond immediately, but they remember his words. We talk about it later among ourselves." This suggests that while resistance may initially cloud reception, consistent and honest preaching can cultivate reflection and transformation over time.

Despite the difficulties, all three pastors shared instances where their sermons led to remarkable and visible transformation in their communities. These testimonies, validated through observation and member-checking feedback, demonstrate how contextual and scripture-based sermons can be catalysts for healing and restored relationships.

Pastor A recounted a decisive moment among the Iranun people where his sermon on unity led congregants to stand, embrace, and forgive each other. Checklist notes described the atmosphere as "charged with emotion and healing," and members later confirmed that it was a significant moment. One young adult said, "That was the first time I saw people cry and reconcile in church. It felt like God was moving." This shows the pulpit's role in initiating profound moral and social change.

Pastor B shared a striking event in which an older man publicly sought forgiveness from his long-time enemy during worship. Checklist observations recorded this as "a spontaneous act of reconciliation." Through member checking, several attendees affirmed its impact.

Pastor C also emphasized how persistent preaching on humility, eternity, and forgiveness gradually softened people's focus on property disputes and self-interest. Observation records noted "frequent emphasis on eternal values," and congregational members affirmed in interviews that these sermons shifted their thinking. One churchgoer said, "Before, people were obsessed with land. Now, we talk more about how to be right with God and one another." These affirmations show how theological clarity and contextual relevance can reshape a community's moral priorities. Below are the pastors' statements.

"The challenge is how to weaken or break their egoistic attitude, which is often based on pride. That pride creates disunity."
[Pastor A]

"Praise God, I experienced among the Iranun people that after I discussed the disadvantages of disunity and the beauty of unity, the hearers stood, embraced one another, asked for forgiveness, and released forgiveness." [Pastor A]

"Many of our members have trauma due to conflict, loss of land, and lack of assistance." [Pastor B]

"On one worship day, an elderly man came up to the pulpit and asked forgiveness from his neighbor, whom he had conflicted with since the time of war... Many members repented and began helping each other again." [Pastor B]

"There are many challenges. The hardest part is the resistance from hardened hearts. Sometimes there is also fear of retaliation... Another challenge is the mistrust toward the church. However, I believe the church must be a light, even in dark situations." [Pastor C]

"Even within the church, we are not exempt from conflicts... I preached on biblical attitudes in conflict... I reminded them that our land properties, no matter how large or valuable, cannot be brought to heaven." [Pastor C]

Presented in Table 5 are the experiences and challenges of Pastors in delivering peace-oriented sermons in conflict-affected communities.

Table 5. Pastoral experiences and Challenges in delivering Peace-Oriented Sermons in Conflict-Affected Communities

Pastoral Challenges and Experiences in Delivering Peace-Oriented Sermons in Conflict-Affected Communities	Themes
Faces resistance due to pride and offense Trauma hinders openness to forgiveness Fear of being misunderstood or provoking tension Risk of being seen as biased Perception that peace preaching is not the church's role Mistrust of religious institutions	Spiritual, Emotional, and Social Resistance to Peace Messaging
Sermons resulted in forgiveness and restored relationships Inspired public acts of repentance and healing Helped shift values from materialism to humility and peace through consistent Gospel preaching	Sermons Inspiring Reconciliation and Communal Healing

Spiritual, Emotional, and Social Resistance to Peace Messaging

Resistance to peace messaging within faith communities stems from various interwoven factors like spiritual convictions, emotional wounds, and entrenched social identities, all of which shape how sermons are received. This finding underscores the need for trauma-informed, emotionally intelligent communication approaches in faith-based peacebuilding. As Garred and Abu-Nimer (2018) explain, religious peace communication must blend theological conviction with cultural awareness and emotional sensitivity, especially in post-conflict contexts. Pastors thus serve not just as message bearers but as trusted interlocutors who mediate peace through patience, relational presence, and moral authority. In such settings, communication is not simply about delivering content but about cultivating emotional safety and rebuilding trust.

This finding also resonates with Transformative Learning Theory as articulated by Mezirow and Taylor (2009), which posits that individuals are most likely to change when faced with disorienting dilemmas that disrupt entrenched assumptions. Sermons that challenge revenge or urge forgiveness amid trauma often provoke this kind of inner conflict. However, transformation, according to the theory, is a gradual process requiring critical reflection, emotional support, and trust in the facilitator. In this light, pastors act not merely as preachers but as facilitators of moral and spiritual transformation, helping their communities confront pain, reevaluate deeply held attitudes, and take slow, meaningful steps toward healing and restored relationships.

Sermons Inspiring Reconciliation and Communal Healing

Despite resistance, many sermons in Mindanao's evangelical churches have proven effective in shifting mindsets and softening hearts. When strategically crafted, sermon-based messaging becomes a spiritual bridge moving congregants from grievance to grace, from division to dialogue, and from trauma to transformation.

This finding affirms the theology of shalom, which envisions peace not merely as the absence of conflict but as the holistic restoration of relationships with God, others, oneself, and the broader community (Tizon, 2016). This finding parallels the view of Kwuelum (2024) that reconciliation is a complex ongoing process that demands

sustained moral commitment and relational engagement within and across faith communities. Sermons that consistently addressed both the individual conscience and the shared experiences of the community functioned as more than spiritual instruction; they became vehicles for healing, trust-building, and restoration. Especially in contexts marked by deep division and intergroup mistrust, such sermons offered a steady moral presence. They contributed to the long-term work of reconciliation through faith-rooted dialogue and communal reflection.

3.5 Framework Derived from the Themes

The derived framework from the findings of sermon-based messaging to foster social cohesion in conflict-affected communities in Mindanao reveals interrelated themes that reflect both pastoral practice and theoretical grounding.

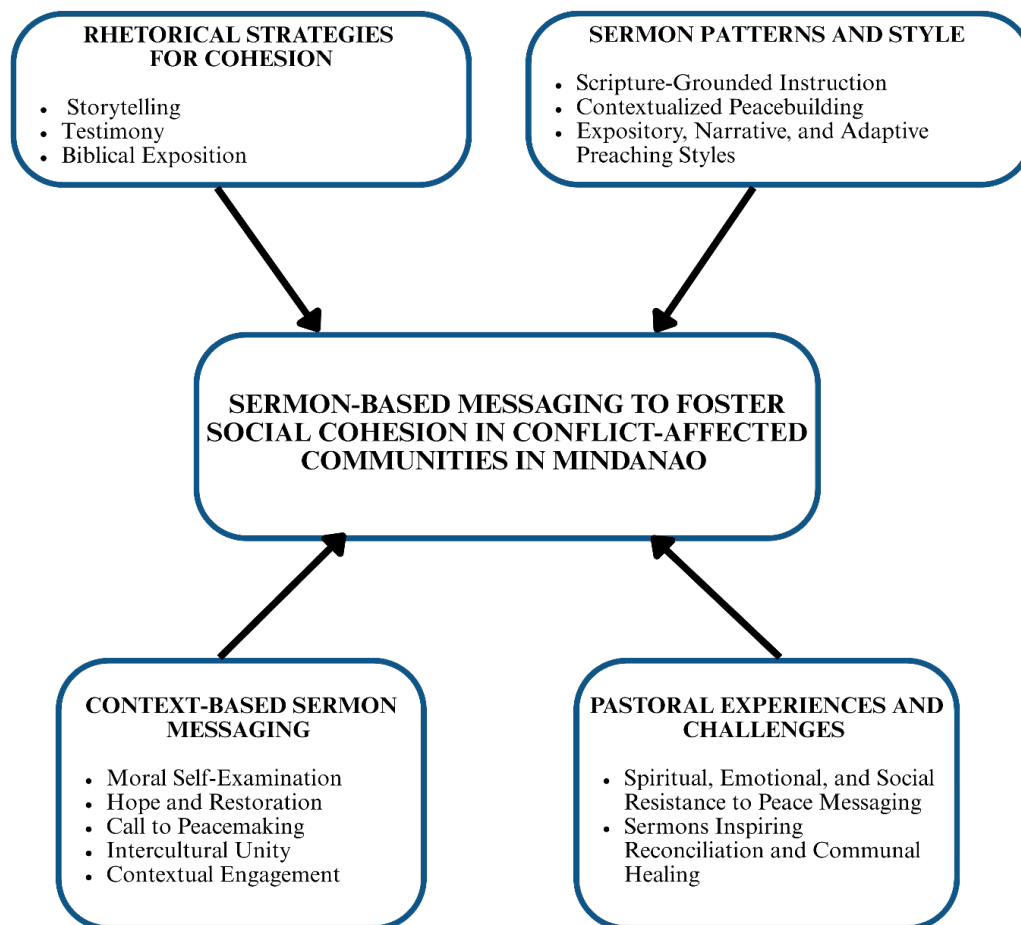


Figure 2: Framework of the Sermon-based Messaging to Foster Social Cohesion in Conflict-affected communities in Mindanao

Pastors employed rhetorical strategies such as storytelling, biblical exposition, and personal testimony to challenge entrenched attitudes and encourage moral reflection. This aligns with Aristotelian Rhetoric, which emphasizes the persuasive power of logic (logos), emotion (pathos), and speaker credibility (ethos) in fostering change. Sermons were also carefully contextualized to the cultural and emotional conditions of the congregations, particularly among Indigenous and trauma-affected communities. Pastors adapted their language, tone, and delivery to ensure relevance and resonance. This reflects the principles of Faith-Based Development Theory, which stresses the importance of culturally responsive and contextually grounded religious communication in promoting development and transformation.

Across the churches, consistent sermon patterns emerged, with messages centered on forgiveness, humility, reconciliation, and unity. These thematic emphases helped rebuild interpersonal relationships and promote shared moral values. Such outcomes align with Social Cohesion Theory, which highlights the importance of trust, mutual respect, and shared norms in fostering peaceful and resilient communities.

Pastors, however, faced significant challenges in preaching peace. Emotional resistance, pride, fear of retaliation, and mistrust of institutions often hindered acceptance of their messages. Despite these barriers, pastors maintained their commitment to preaching reconciliation and healing. These realities reflect Peacebuilding Theory, which views peace as a long-term, relational process that requires the rebuilding of trust, the healing of trauma, and the transformation of conflict.

Overall, the framework illustrates how sermon-based messaging, when rooted in Scripture and delivered with rhetorical skill, cultural sensitivity, and pastoral empathy, can serve as an effective tool for peacebuilding and social cohesion in communities marked by division and historical conflict.

4.0 Conclusion

This study concludes that sermon-based messaging is a vital and context-sensitive strategy for fostering peace and reconciliation in conflict-affected communities in Mindanao. Through storytelling, biblical exposition, and personal testimony, Evangelical pastors serve as transformative communicators who address both spiritual and social fractures. The findings enrich and extend Faith-Based Development Theory, Aristotelian Rhetoric, and Social Cohesion Theory by illustrating how sermons function as vehicles for moral reflection, emotional healing, and collective identity formation. Compared to secular peacebuilding strategies, sermon-based approaches offer deeper cultural resonance and ethical influence at the grassroots level, particularly in areas where state-led or institutional efforts have limited reach. This underscores the importance of integrating faith-based communication into broader peacebuilding frameworks to create more holistic, inclusive, and sustainable pathways toward social cohesion.

Implications for practice center on equipping pastors and faith leaders with skills in contextualized communication and trauma-informed preaching. Pastors can intentionally integrate peace and reconciliation themes into regular sermons, making the pulpit a consistent platform for healing and bridge-building. Policy implications include encouraging local governments and NGOs to partner with faith-based institutions, recognizing their unique moral influence and community trust in areas where secular interventions face resistance.

In education, Bible schools may embed peacebuilding modules into their curricula to prepare future ministers for the dual task of spiritual care and social transformation. For research, this study lays the groundwork for longitudinal inquiries on the sustained impact of sermon-based messaging in rebuilding fractured communities. Future studies may also explore comparative analyses across denominations, faith traditions, or regions beyond Mindanao, and evaluate the effectiveness of integrating multimedia or digital platforms into sermon-based peace communication.

Ultimately, this study affirms that when sermons are crafted with theological depth, cultural sensitivity, and a vision for reconciliation, they can become powerful grassroots instruments for advancing durable peace in divided societies.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

The sole author initiated and completed this study.

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7.0 Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in the conduct of the study.

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