

From Division to Communion: Acts 6:1-7 and the Synodal Path to Peace Building

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Abstract

This study explores the resolution of conflict in Acts 6:1-7 due to the exponential growth in number that the early Christian community experienced, and its implications for leadership, inclusivity, and community participatory decision-making. Utilizing a qualitative exegetical approach that combines biblical literary analysis with theological reflection, the research examines how the Apostles' approach to internal disputes in the early Church embodies the principles of synodality – listening, dialogue, and shared responsibility – emphasized by Pope Francis as essential for the Church today. Rather than imposing unilateral decisions, the Apostles engaged in communal discernment, promoting unity through consultation and delegation. By engaging in a close textual reading alongside contemporary ecclesial interpretations, this study underscores the necessity of ethical leadership, transparency, and a commitment to the common good. It affirms that conflicts, though inevitable in human society, can be transformed into opportunities for growth and renewal when leaders embrace a synodal approach that prioritizes inclusion, mutual respect, and collective wisdom. Ultimately, the study advocates for a model of leadership that mirrors the Church as envisioned by Pope Francis – one that is participatory, mission-oriented, and deeply committed to fostering peace and justice.

Key words: Church, Acts 6:1-7, Conflicts, Inequality, Mission-driven, Participation, Peacebuilding, Walking together, Synodality

Introduction

Acts 6:1-7 sheds light on the early life of the Jerusalem Christian community, its rapid growth, and the challenges this posed to the Apostles. Scholars such as Richard J. Dillon, Luke Timothy Johnson, and Taylor infer that the early Christian community consisted of two linguistic and cultural groups: those who spoke Aramaic and those who spoke only Greek (Dillon 1990, 739; Johnson 1992, 105; Taylor 1998, 1593; Usman and Pilani 2024, 58). This distinction is significant, as the text does not refer to either group as 'Gentiles,' suggesting an internal diversity within the Jerusalem church. The passage narrates a moment of crisis when the Hellenistic widows were perceived to be neglected in the daily distribution of food, resources intended for the common good. This

inequality led to a communal dispute, highlighting the tensions that can arise in diverse faith communities.

This study employs literary analysis to examine the text and explore its relevance for present-day efforts to foster unity and reconciliation within and beyond the Church in the inspiration of synodality. The Apostles' model offers an alternative vision centered on dialogue, mutual respect, and collective participation in a world fractured by cultural, religious, and ideological divides. This analysis seeks to contribute to contemporary peacebuilding discussions by demonstrating how synodality principles, as seen in Acts 6, remain vital for navigating communal tensions and achieving lasting harmony in diverse societies (Karunanidhi 504, 505; Moons 78).

Synodality as a Conceptual Framework

This paper discusses the synodality based on the exegetical interpretation of Acts 6:1-7. Accordingly, it is appropriate to have a grasp of the meaning and implications of the concept and its application.

i. Introduction to Synodality as a Theological Concept

Synodality, derived from the Greek *synodos* meaning “journeying together,” has gained prominence as a foundational concept in contemporary ecclesiology, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church (Francis, 2018). It refers not only to formal synodal structures but also to a way of being Church that emphasizes communion, participation, and mission. Synodality envisions the entire People of God – bishops, clergy, religious, and laity – actively involved in discernment and governance under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (International Theological Commission, 2018; Kanu et al., 2024). This framework challenges exclusively hierarchical or clericalist models by promoting collaborative discernment and co-responsibility, thereby, reshaping ecclesial relationships toward greater inclusivity.

ii. Historical Roots and Patristic Foundations

The origins of synodality trace back to the early Church, where councils and synods were integral to resolving doctrinal disputes and maintaining ecclesial unity (Gaillardetz, 2015). The narrative of Acts 15 is often cited as a scriptural prototype for synodal processes, depicting the apostles and elders, together with the whole community, discerning the inclusion of Gentiles into the Church. In the patristic era, synods became normative expressions of conciliar governance, with both Eastern and Western churches practicing collegial decision-making (O'Malley, 2008; Okonkwo et al., 2024a). This historical continuity underscores synodality as intrinsic to the Church's identity, rooted in Scripture and early tradition. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) marked a crucial moment in retrieving synodality, emphasizing the Church as the People of God (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964). The Council's teaching on episcopal collegiality (LG §23) and the subsequent establishment of the Synod of Bishops by Pope Paul VI in 1965 reflected a renewed commitment to shared

responsibility and dialogical governance (Paul VI, 1965). Synodality, in this light, is not merely an administrative mechanism but a theological expression of the Church's Trinitarian communion (Francis, 2015). It invites all baptized members to exercise their ecclesial vocation by participating actively in discernment, mission, and pastoral decision-making (International Theological Commission, 2018).

iii. Synodality and the Authority of the "Sensus Fidelium"

Central to synodality is the recognition of the *sensus fidelium*, the spiritual intuition of the faithful by which the whole Church discerns truth in matters of faith and morals (Congar, 2014). This concept affirms that the magisterium does not function in isolation but remains in dialogue with the lived faith of the people (International Theological Commission, 2014). Synodality thus reframes ecclesial authority as participatory and relational, rather than top-down. It offers a dynamic vision of truth-seeking that integrates hierarchical leadership and the faithful's witness, fostering a Church attentive to the Holy Spirit's guidance through communal discernment (Francis, 2018).

iv. Synodality and Mission: A Church That Goes Forth

Pope Francis (2015) has underscored synodality as "constitutive" of the Church's nature, linking it intrinsically to mission. Synodality is not an end in itself but a pathway for becoming a "Church that goes forth" (*Evangeliium Gaudium*, 2013). Through listening, dialogue, and discernment, the Church becomes more responsive to the signs of the times and the needs of the marginalized (Francis, 2018). Synodal processes foster co-responsibility for evangelization, integrating diverse voices into a unified missionary commitment (Chiodi & Costa, 2021). In this way, synodality operates both as method and expression of the Church's outward-facing identity.

v. Challenges and Tensions in Synodal Practice

Despite its theological promise, synodality faces challenges in practice. Obstacles include clericalism, resistance to change, and institutional inertia (Phan, 2016). Balancing local autonomy with universal communion raises complex questions about authority and unity. Effective synodality requires formation in synodal spirituality, transparent processes, and genuine openness to dialogue (International Theological Commission, 2018). These challenges, however, signify the Church's dynamic engagement with its identity in changing contexts, pointing to an ongoing process of reform rather than a fixed achievement (Francis, 2018).

vi. Synodality as a Framework for Contemporary Ecclesiology

As a conceptual framework, synodality envisions the Church as a pilgrim people journeying together in communion, participation, and mission (International Theological Commission, 2018). It invites a relational, dialogical, and missionary ecclesiology that affirms the baptismal dignity and co-responsibility of all believers (Francis, 2015). Synodality offers a hermeneutic

for interpreting ecclesial life, governance, and mission in the 21st century, promoting a participatory Church responsive to the Spirit's movement in history. This paradigm also opens avenues for interdisciplinary engagement, integrating theology, pastoral practice, and social ethics toward a more inclusive and missionary Church (Okonkwo et al., 2024b).

Exegesis of Acts 6:1-7

The Historical Context of Acts 6:1-7

A careful examination of Acts 6:1-7 reveals that the Greek phrase "*En de tais hemerai taútais*" ("in those days") points to the historical backdrop of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. The tension described in this passage most likely arose shortly after the Pentecost events (Acts 2:1-13), when the message of the Apostles was expanding rapidly, bringing together a diverse group of converts. These new believers came from various cultural and national backgrounds, signifying the universal call of the Gospel to all people. As Haenchen observes, the phrase "these days" binds together two key realities: the exponential growth of the disciples and the inherent challenges such growth entails (Haenchen 1970, 260; Vanderpyl 2018, 1; Usman and Pilani 2024, 61).

To fully appreciate the crisis described in Acts 6, it is important to consider the cultural context of first-century Jerusalem. The city was a melting pot of Jews from various regions, including Hellenistic Jews who spoke Greek and were influenced by Greco-Roman culture. Despite their shared Jewish heritage, cultural and linguistic differences between Hebrew-speaking and Greek-speaking Jews created tension, particularly regarding resource distribution and caring for the needy (Haenchen 1970, 261; Rengstorf 1985, 126; Johnson 1992, 105; Zerwick and Grosvenor 1996, 368; Taylor 1998, 1593; Johnson 2009, 241, 242; Nwaoru 2015, 483; Vanderpyl 2018, 1, 2; Usman and Pilani 2024, 61). This tension, though rooted in ethnicity and culture, was a symptom of a deeper communal challenge, one that needed to be addressed for the unity and mission of the early Church.

In the Jewish tradition, the care of widows was a significant moral and religious duty, with roots in biblical injunctions on justice and compassion (Exod 22:22; Deut 24:17-21). The Old Testament prophets and New Testament leaders, such as Paul, emphasized the importance of caring for the marginalized, including widows (Romans 15:25-28; 1 Cor. 16:1-4).

Literary Context of Acts 6:1-7

Acts 6:1-7 falls within the early chapters of Acts, which focus on the birth and rapid growth of the church in Jerusalem following Pentecost. Prior to this moment, key themes emerge, including the explosive increase in the number of believers as seen in Acts 2:41 and 4:4, the portrayal of a communal and sharing church life in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37, and the experience of external

opposition and persecution described in Acts 4–5. Leadership during this period was concentrated in the hands of the apostles, who guided the community both spiritually and organizationally. Acts 6:1–7 introduces a transitional moment in the narrative: internal tensions arise when the Hellenistic Jews complain against the Hebraic Jews regarding the neglect of their widows in the daily distribution of food (Witherington, 2008). This complaint leads to a structural adaptation in church leadership through the appointment of the Seven, individuals selected to oversee this practical ministry. Although these men are often referred to as the first deacons, the text does not explicitly give them this title.

Looking at the context of broader literary, Acts as a whole is structured around a pattern of geographic and thematic expansion, following Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Spencer, 2019). Acts 6:1–7 represents the final stage before the narrative shifts beyond Jerusalem. The events that follow, including Stephen's speech and martyrdom in Acts 7 and the subsequent persecution in Acts 8, serve as catalysts that push the believers outward into broader mission fields. This passage underscores several important themes: the unity and organization of the early church, the strategic delegation of ministry responsibilities between the ministry of the Word and the ministry of tables, and the church's continued growth despite internal and external challenges (Keener, 2013), as summarized in verse 7 with the statement that “the word of God continued to spread.”

Structure and Exegetical Analysis of Acts 6:1-7

The passage of Acts 6:1–7 follows a chiasmic literary structure, where the theme of growth frames the narrative both at the beginning and the end. The story moves from a crisis caused by growth to a resolution that leads to even greater growth. It begins with A: the initial crisis situation (v.1), where the rapid increase in the number of disciples creates a problem within the community. In response, we see B: the first resolution (vv.2–5a), as the apostles propose a solution. At the center is C: the implementation of the resolution (v.5b) as the community selects seven qualified men, all respected and full of the Spirit and wisdom, to take on this task. The narrative then moves to B': the second resolution (v.6), where the apostles formally commission the Seven by praying and laying hands on them. Finally, the passage concludes with A': the closing situation (v.7), where the church experiences a renewed surge of growth. “The word of God spread; the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” The resolution of the crisis leads not only to restored unity but also to an even greater expansion of the gospel.

A: Initial Crisis Situation: Community Growth and Neglect of Hellenist Widows (v.1)

The initial crisis arises from the growth in number of believers in the early Christian community leading to the complaint of the Greek-speaking widows

who were overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The complaint, or “*gongysmòs*,” reflects a sense of discontent among the Hellenists, who felt marginalized. This moment mirrors a spirit of listening to the voices of those who are often overlooked or unheard (Arndt & Gingrich 1979, 164). The Apostles' recognition of this grievance exemplifies their commitment to the well-being of the entire community, regardless of cultural or linguistic differences.

B: First Resolution: Apostolic Proposal (vv. 2-5a)

In response to the crisis, the Apostles quickly convene a meeting with the community, seeking a resolution that includes everyone (Fitzmyer 1998, 344; Friberg et al., 2000, 530). This collaborative approach is a hallmark of mutual listening. The Apostles propose that the community elect seven individuals who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom to oversee the distribution of food. The proposal is a clear demonstration of participatory leadership, where the Apostles invite the community to take responsibility for addressing the issues of injustice, discrimination, and marginalization of vulnerable persons or groups (Arndt & Gingrich, 1979, 668; Johnson 1992, 106; Moons 82; Richardson and Kimo 2021, 64; Usman and Pilani 2024, 63).

C: Implementation of the Resolution: Election of the Seven Deacons (v. 5b)

The community responds to the Apostles' call by electing seven deacons, ensuring that the needs of both Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking believers are met. This selection process is not only a practical solution but also a sign of the community's active involvement in resolving the crisis. The selection was not an even cultural distribution between Hellenists and Hebraic Jews, but rather a culturally sensitive response that empowered those who had been marginalized. It reflects a leadership strategy that prioritized inclusivity and restored equity by giving voice and responsibility to the group that had raised the concern, since the Jewish divide already had representatives (Witherington, 2008). It reflects the principle of co-responsibility, where all members of the Church share in the mission and ministry of the Gospel (Moons 82, 88; Karunanidhi 504, 505, 506; Usman and Pilani 2024, 64).

B': Second Resolution: Commissioning of the Deacons (v. 6)

The Apostles' commissioning of the deacons through the laying on of hands is a powerful symbol of empowerment and trust. Through this act, the Apostles affirm the deacons' role in serving the community and supporting the Apostles' broader mission of preaching the Word (Haenchen 1970, 262; Johnson 2009, 242; Usman and Pilani 2024, 64). The role of serving by the deacons, would defuse the neglect suffered by the Hellenists leading to a peace among the early Christian community.

A': Closing Situation: Exponential Growth of the Gospel and Church (v. 7)

The resolution of the crisis leads to the continued spread of the Gospel, and the Church grows exponentially. This outcome highlights the importance of

resolving internal tensions to preserve unity and further the Church's mission. The Apostles' approach to addressing the crisis through a synodal process resolved the immediate issue and ensured the community's ongoing health and growth. It serves as a model for how collective dialogue can facilitate peace, unity, and mission within the Church and in society at large (Karunanidhi 504, 505, 506).

Reinterpreting Acts 6:1-7 Through the Lens of a Synodal Church

Addressing Inequalities and Power Imbalances

Acts 6:1-7 presents a challenge within the early Christian community, as the Hellenistic widows faced neglect in the daily distribution of food. This moment highlights the Church's responsibility to confront systemic imbalances and ensure the dignity of all members, the Hellenistic and Hebraic believers by the act of a shared sense of responsibility (Johnson 1992, 105; Taylor 1998, 1593; Butler 2001, 133; DESA 2009, 20; Usman 2020, 92; Usman and Paul, 2024, 66). The Synod on Synodality calls for an ecclesial culture where listening, dialogue, and discernment take precedence, ensuring that the marginalized are not merely acknowledged but actively included. Inspired by this biblical episode, the Church today must embrace a synodal path that promotes justice, addresses discrimination, and fosters genuine communion (*Evangelii Gaudium* nos. 190, 218, 228, 230, 238, 239; Obiorah 2015, 47; Karunanidhi 504, 506; Guzik 2018, c; Usman 2020, 92; Usman and Pilani 2024, 66).

Inclusive Leadership and Representation

The apostles responded to the emerging division by appointing seven deacons, chosen with the participation of the community, ensuring that leadership reflected the diversity of the faithful, the Hellenistic and Hebraic believers (Kroll 1990, 1; Pilani, 2022). This mirrors the synodal approach, which seeks a Church that is not clerical or hierarchical in a rigid sense but one that fosters co-responsibility and shared discernment. Leadership in the Church, as emphasized by Pope Francis, must be servant-oriented, ensuring that no group is marginalized and that decisions reflect the experiences and needs of all members (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 53, 187, 188, 189; Karunanidhi 504, 506; Ijezie 2015, 47, 194; Ngele and Peters 2019, 3; Pilani 2023b, 233; Usman and Paul 2024, 68, 69).

Collaborative Ministry and Shared Responsibilities

By delegating responsibilities to the newly appointed deacons, the apostles demonstrated that ministry thrives through shared participation. This resonates deeply with the synodal vision, where all the baptized are called to active engagement in the Church's mission. Rather than a model where a select few carry the burden of leadership, the Synod on Synodality calls for collaborative structures that empower diverse ministries and charisms, ensuring that the Church remains dynamic and responsive to contemporary challenges (504, 506).

Participatory Decision-Making and Communal Discernment

The apostles did not act unilaterally but involved the entire community in the selection of the deacons, demonstrating a participatory model of governance. The synodal process reaffirms this principle, urging the Church to embrace processes of listening and collective discernment. As Pope Francis frequently reminds the faithful, true ecclesial decision-making emerges from prayerful dialogue, where the Holy Spirit guides the community towards consensus and communion (504).

Empowerment and Formation for Mission

Acts 6:1-7 underscores the importance of equipping leaders with the necessary formation and spiritual authority to serve effectively. The apostles laid hands on the deacons, signifying a commissioning that empowered them for their ministry. In the synodal context, this calls for an investment in the formation of lay leaders, ensuring that they are equipped to contribute meaningfully to the Church's mission. Formation is not merely intellectual but must be holistic, fostering a spirit of service, discernment, and missionary outreach (Obiorah 2015, 47; Karunanidhi, 504; Usman and Paul, 2024, 69; Onukwuba et al., 2023).

Commitment to Unity and Reconciliation

The appointment of deacons was not just a functional decision but a symbolic act of unity, preventing deeper fractures within the early Church. Similarly, the Synod on Synodality urges the Church to prioritize healing and reconciliation, particularly in contexts of division and exclusion. A truly synodal Church recognizes that communion is not uniformity but a tapestry woven from diverse cultural, linguistic, and social realities, united in the love of Christ (504; Usman and Paul, 2024, 67; Pilani 2024).

The Fruitfulness of Synodality: Spiritual Growth and Evangelization

Following the resolution of the conflict in Acts 6, the Word of God continued to spread, and the Church experienced growth. This mirrors the synodal vision, where authentic dialogue and inclusion lead to a renewed missionary impulse. Pope Francis calls the Church to a spirit of encounter, one that reaches out beyond its walls, engaging the world with a message of love, justice, and hope. When the Church embodies synodality – walking together in communion, participation, and mission – it becomes a more effective witness to the Gospel (504, 506).

Applying Acts 6:1-7 to Contemporary Challenges

The lessons drawn from Acts 6:1-7 offer valuable insights for contemporary conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The study reveals that in the early Jerusalem church, the neglect of the Greek-speaking widows in the daily food distribution revealed a systemic bias. The situation, though seemingly administrative, had the potential to fragment the unity of the community. The Apostles' quick response to the complaints about food distribution demonstrates a synodal approach to leadership. They called an assembly of the

community, invited all voices to be heard, and worked collaboratively to address the issue. This approach allowed the Apostles to focus on their core mission of preaching the Gospel while also ensuring the practical needs of the community were met. This approach also emphasizing participation, accountability, and mutual respect, mirrors the Synodal principles promoted by Pope Francis (Hinze 215, 219; Prügl 191; Moons 78; Karunanidhi 504, 505; Usman and Pilani 2024, 62). The Synodal model emphasizes listening to the concerns of every member, particularly those on the margins, and working together to discern a course of action that promotes unity and mission (Prügl 210; Karunanidhi 504, 505; Usman and Paul, 2024, 63, 64).

This model of leadership, grounded in mutual respect and discernment, provides a timeless framework for building peace and unity in divided communities. In a world marked by cultural, religious, and ideological divisions, the synodal principles exemplified in Acts 6 remain relevant and inspiring for efforts to foster reconciliation and lasting peace (Karunanidhi 506). In this regard, a true exegetical interpretation of Acts 6:1-7 helps Synod on Synodality to continually challenge the Church to be a prophetic voice against structures of oppression, advocating for those who are often unheard. Just as the early Church navigated tensions through discernment and collaborative leadership, today's Church must embrace the same synodal path to address contemporary injustices, ensuring that it remains a credible witness to the kingdom of God (504).

Recommendations

Building on the insights from Acts 6:1-7 and in light of Pope Francis' vision of a synodal Church, this study offers the following recommendations for conflict resolution and peacebuilding within faith communities and broader society.

i. Leaders Should Act with Urgency to Address Conflicts at Their Earliest Stages. Inspired by the Apostles (*cf.* Acts 6:1), who promptly responded to the concerns of the Hellenistic widows, Church leaders today must remain vigilant and proactive in addressing emerging conflicts before they escalate. Pope Francis encourages a Church that listens and discerns together, fostering dialogue rather than allowing grievances to fester. Leaders should cultivate a culture of attentiveness, where the voices of the marginalized are heard, and swift, pastoral responses are prioritized to uphold justice and fraternity.

ii. Leaders Should Foster a Mission-Oriented Vision for Growth and Development. The apostles remained focused on their mission – proclaiming the Gospel – while ensuring that internal matters did not become a stumbling block to spiritual growth. Similarly, Pope Francis calls for a Church that moves outward in mission, seeking renewal and evangelization through active engagement with the world. Leaders should ensure that their decisions contribute to the holistic development of their communities, removing obstacles that hinder communion, participation, and mission.

iii. Leadership Must Be Rooted in Integrity, Honesty, and Transparency.

Acts 6 highlights the importance of trust in leadership. The Apostles maintained credibility by openly addressing concerns and delegating responsibility to trustworthy individuals. Pope Francis emphasizes that true leadership in the Church is one of service, not privilege. Leaders should embody integrity, fostering an environment where transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct are non-negotiable, ensuring that governance structures reflect the values of justice and communion.

iv. Leaders Should Promote a Culture of Dialogue and Consultation.

The apostles modeled a synodal approach by engaging the community in decision-making. Pope Francis insists that the Church must be a listening Church, where consultation and shared discernment guide decisions. Leaders should cultivate participatory structures that encourage dialogue among diverse members of the community. This requires humility, openness to the Spirit, and a commitment to walking together in unity.

v. Leaders Should Embrace Inclusivity and Shared Responsibility.

Synodality calls for an inclusive Church where all the baptized actively contribute to its life and mission. The appointment of the seven deacons in Acts 6 reflects a leadership model that values representation and shared responsibility. Today, Church leaders should empower laity, women, youth, and marginalized groups to actively participate in decision-making, recognizing that the Spirit speaks through all members of the People of God. By embracing co-responsibility, the Church fosters a spirit of communion and mission.

Conclusion

This research asserts that while human society is often plagued by conflicts and wars, peace remains an attainable goal. The primary obstacles to peaceful coexistence lie either in the absence of competent, visionary, and ethical leaders or in the use of ineffective peacebuilding approaches. While conflicts and disputes may never be entirely eradicated, their resolution depends on the presence of leaders who embody integrity, wisdom, and a commitment to justice – qualities emphasized in the recommendations of this study.

Acts 6:1-7 offers a compelling biblical model for conflict resolution rooted in the synodal Church. The Apostles' response – listening, communal discernment, and Spirit-led decision-making – transcends cultural divisions and fosters unity. These principles remain essential for the Church today, as it seeks to address internal and societal challenges through a synodal approach.

The events described in Acts 6 illustrate the transformative power of inclusive and collaborative conflict resolution. Rather than resorting to divisive or identity-based approaches, the Apostles addressed grievances through dialogue, consultation, and shared decision-making. This synodal approach,

which mirrors Pope Francis' vision of a listening and participatory Church, demonstrates that even deeply rooted conflicts can be resolved when leadership is guided by transparency, fairness, and a commitment to the common good.

Biblical narratives from both the Old and New Testaments affirm that conflict is as old as humanity itself. However, these examples also reveal that conflicts can be prevented from escalating into violence when key stakeholders exhibit honesty, sincerity, and a willingness to engage in constructive dialogue. The peaceful resolution between Abraham and Lot in Genesis 13, as well as the Apostles' handling of the early Christian community's internal dispute in Acts 6, serve as testaments to the power of ethical and consultative leadership. Thus, this research affirms that when those engaged in conflicts sincerely seek peace with honesty and transparency, the goal of fostering unity and harmony in human society becomes truly attainable.

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