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Nurturing Religious Tolerance Early: The Ghana Example



On Wednesday, September 9, 2026, The Ghanaian Times published a story with the headline, “Christian pupil tops BECE at Chief Imam’s school.” At first, the report's significance might seem to lie simply in an exceptional Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) performance. Yet the story’s second paragraph connected the achievement to the school's commitment to academic excellence, religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence, as Muslim and Christian children continued to receive education at the institution (The Ghanaian Times, 2026).

The story is about more than one child's academic achievement; it also offers a lens for considering Ghanaian society. A Christian child emerging as the best-performing pupil in a school associated with the Chief Imam highlights an important possibility: religious identity is strong, but religious difference need not become a barrier to social interaction. Such an example aligns with evidence of broadly positive interreligious neighbourliness in Ghana, although survey findings also reveal experiences of religious discrimination in school settings (Bortey & Armah-Attoh, 2015; Osse Essima, 2021).

The Ghanaian Classroom as a Meeting Place

Ghana's schools offer an important starting point for understanding religious tolerance. For decades, Christian mission schools established by Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican and other denominations have educated children from diverse religious backgrounds. Similarly, Muslim-founded schools admit non-Muslim pupils. Consequently, Christian and Muslim children may study, play, compete academically and hold student leadership positions despite differences in beliefs, worship and family traditions. However, shared attendance alone does not guarantee equal treatment or meaningful interfaith understanding.

This arrangement can serve as informal social education, but it can also expose inequalities when religious practices are not accommodated.

A qualitative exploratory study in three senior high schools in the Upper West Region, involving interviews and focus groups with 71 student executives and 20 key informants, identified compulsory church services, restrictions involving hijab and religious items, competition over worship space, doctrinal differences and power struggles among reported sources of interreligious tension (Marfo et al., 2018). The National Peace Council has likewise recognised disputes concerning Muslim students’ fasting and hijab in Christian mission schools and worked with religious and educational bodies to develop guidance (National Peace Council, 2024a).

In September 2025, the Council launched a Memorandum of Understanding to help mission schools accommodate religious diversity while respecting students' freedom of worship and institutional regulations (National Peace Council, 2025). By February 2026,

education officials and school heads in Greater Accra were receiving sensitisation on implementing the agreement (National Peace Council, 2026a).

These developments demonstrate that tolerance does not occur automatically. Disagreements over students' rights and schools' religious identities require negotiation. Empirical evidence cautions against treating Ghana's generally peaceful interfaith relations as proof that discrimination is absent: a nationally representative Afrobarometer survey of 2,400 adults conducted in 2019 recorded that 18.1% reported having been treated unfairly by other Ghanaians based on religion at least once in the preceding year (Afrobarometer, 2019; Osse Essima, 2021). Institutional efforts to address tensions therefore matter not only as symbols of harmony but as responses to documented experiences.

Familiarity Can Weaken Religious Prejudice

People may find it harder to distrust those they know personally. Children exposed only to stereotypes about other religions may develop suspicion, while classmates, roommates, football teammates or student prefects from different faiths can create opportunities to challenge such assumptions. However, contact is not necessarily beneficial if it occurs amid unequal status, exclusion or coercion.

Religious identities are embodied in individual classmates, neighbours and friends rather than remaining abstract categories: the abstract "Muslim" becomes Mohammed, while the abstract "Christian" becomes Peter. This proposition is supported by the broader research literature: Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analysis of 515 studies found that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice, with effects observed across a range of groups and settings. Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis emphasised conditions such as equal status, cooperation and institutional support. These findings provide a theoretical and empirical basis for the argument, but they do not by themselves establish that every Ghanaian school's contact experiences reduce prejudice.

Ghanaian schools may therefore perform an understated peacebuilding function when they provide genuinely inclusive interaction. Yet empirical evidence also points to a gap between friendship and religious literacy. A nationwide study reported in 2026 by The Sanneh Institute, surveying more than 6,500 students in over 50 senior high schools across 12 regions and engaging about 300 school authorities, found that over 80% of respondents had limited knowledge of religions other than their own, while about 90% of students said they had friends from different faith backgrounds; roughly one in three students reported experiencing or witnessing religious-rights violations (Krabill, as reported in Nyadzi, 2026; The Sanneh Institute, 2026). This suggests that social contact may coexist with limited understanding and perceived unequal treatment.

A Religious Society Without Sustained Religious Conflict

Ghana's tolerance should not be mistaken for religious indifference. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, Christians constituted approximately 71 per cent of the population, Muslims 20 per cent, Traditional Religion adherents 3.3 per cent, and people reporting no religion 4.5 per cent (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

Religion remains prominent in communities, public discourse and political life. Churches and mosques are visible, while religious leaders command considerable respect. Afrobarometer data nevertheless show a dual picture: in 2021, 91% of Ghanaians expressed tolerance toward neighbours of a different religion, while about 18% reported unfair treatment based on religion during the preceding year (Osse Essima, 2021). High expressed neighbourly acceptance and reported discrimination can coexist; the former measures stated attitudes, whereas the latter captures personal experience. Thus, Ghana’s relative absence of sustained national religious conflict should not be equated with the absence of everyday prejudice or unequal treatment.

The Constitution Provides the Foundation

Ghana's constitutional framework provides an essential foundation for religious tolerance. The 1992 Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and belief, including the freedom to practise and manifest one's religion (Republic of Ghana, 1992, Art. 21). It also protects individuals' rights to practise and promote their religion and culture (Art. 26).

These provisions establish that the state belongs equally to citizens of different religious backgrounds. Furthermore, restrictions on forming political parties along religious, ethnic or regional lines help prevent identity from becoming an instrument of political mobilisation (Republic of Ghana, 1992, Art. 55).

Nevertheless, constitutional guarantees alone cannot eliminate prejudice. Ghana's relative success depends on the interaction between legal protections and everyday social practices. The Constitution establishes the framework, while ordinary relationships give tolerance practical expression.

Communal Living and Shared Experiences

Ghana's tradition of communal living may encourage interaction across religious boundaries. Historically, compound houses brought people from different backgrounds into close contact, although urbanisation and changing housing patterns are transforming this tradition. This is a plausible social mechanism, but its specific effect on religious attitudes over time would require longitudinal or directly comparative Ghanaian evidence.

Within such communities, religious identity becomes only one aspect of a person's identity. A Muslim neighbour may help care for children, a Christian landlord may provide assistance during bereavement, and a friend who follows African traditional religion may remain part of one's social life despite differing beliefs.

Such interactions may create familiarity and cooperation. Yet their effects should not be presumed: contact can foster trust when relationships are respectful and cooperative, while unequal treatment can reinforce resentment. The general finding that intergroup contact is associated with lower prejudice is supported by a large meta-analysis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), although direct causal claims about compound-house interactions in Ghana remain insufficiently established by the evidence cited here.

Festivals Make Tolerance Visible

Christmas and Easter are Christian festivals, while Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha are Islamic celebrations. In Ghana, however, their social significance frequently extends beyond the communities that officially observe them.

People exchange greetings across religious boundaries, colleagues share food during celebrations, and public officials sometimes participate in events associated with other faiths. Although not everyone participates in every celebration and disagreements remain possible, religious differences are often negotiated socially rather than treated as existential threats.

Tolerance does not require people to abandon their beliefs or agree on religious questions. It requires them to respect others' right to hold different convictions.

Religious Leaders as Bridge Builders

Religious leaders have contributed to maintaining peaceful coexistence. The National Peace Council's governing structure includes representatives of major Christian bodies, different Muslim traditions and practitioners of African traditional religion, reflecting recognition of religious diversity as a reality to be managed peacefully (National Peace Council, 2011).

The Council has also cooperated with the Christian Council of Ghana, the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Office of the National Chief Imam. Ahead of Ghana's 2024 general elections, these organisations warned against exploiting religion for political purposes and emphasised the country's tradition of peaceful coexistence amid religious, political and ethnic diversity (National Peace Council, 2023). Such cooperation is particularly important during elections, when political actors may attempt to mobilise voters through religious identities.

The National Chief Imam, Sheikh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu, has become a prominent symbol of interfaith dialogue through his engagement with Christian leaders and other religious communities. His example illustrates how respected religious figures can influence public attitudes. When leaders from different faiths meet, visit one another and advocate peace, they demonstrate that religious commitment does not require hostility towards others.

Ghana in the Wider African Context

Ghana's experience becomes clearer when considered against the wider African context. Although sub-Saharan Africa is religiously diverse, the region has experienced increasing religiously connected armed conflicts in recent decades.

Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert (2018) found that religious discrimination in sub-Saharan Africa was relatively low compared with other world regions, although it increased over time. Their research also identified a relationship between religious discrimination and armed conflict over religious issues. However, discrimination does not automatically produce religious war. Existing political, ethnic, economic and geographical tensions may already be present, with religion subsequently becoming an identity through which grievances are mobilised. Transnational extremist movements and weak state institutions can intensify these problems (Basedau & Schaefer-Kehnert, 2018).

This complexity is evident in countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Somalia, Sudan and the Central African Republic. Boko Haram's violence in Nigeria intersects with political, economic and security challenges. In Mali, jihadist movements operate amid state weakness, political instability and regional insecurity. Somalia's al-Shabaab insurgency is connected to prolonged political and security crises, while violence in the Central African Republic has sometimes taken on a pronounced Christian-Muslim character.

Religion can therefore become a fault line without necessarily being the original cause of conflict. Understanding this distinction prevents simplistic explanations of violence in religiously diverse societies.

Some Deliberate Effort Has Gone Into Ghana's Religious Tolerance

Ghana has not escaped religious tension. Disputes over fasting, prayer, dress and other practices in mission schools demonstrate that coexistence requires continuous negotiation. The Upper West Region study by Marfo et al. (2018) documented reported conflict triggers in three senior high schools, while international religious-freedom reporting has also recorded allegations of hijab restrictions and compulsory participation in Christian worship in some publicly funded mission schools (U.S. Department of State,

2017). These findings should be understood as evidence of documented cases and perceptions, not as proof that all schools engage in such practices.

The difference lies partly in the availability of institutions and practices that facilitate dialogue rather than violence. The National Peace Council's statutory mandate includes promoting tolerance, diversity, dialogue, negotiation and reconciliation, as well as facilitating peaceful conflict resolution (Republic of Ghana, 2011). Religious organisations, schools, families and ordinary citizens also contribute to sustaining these relationships.

Interfaith and interethnic marriages further complicate rigid social boundaries. Christian-Muslim marriages and families combining different ethnic and religious traditions expose children to multiple influences within the same extended family. When relatives practise different religions, it becomes harder to maintain a strict division between “us” and “them”. Overlapping identities can strengthen social bonds across religious communities.

Avoiding Complacency

Ghana must not assume that religious peace is permanent. Other countries demonstrate how quickly peaceful relationships can deteriorate when political leaders, extremist movements or other actors weaponise religious identity.

Disputes in mission schools illustrate the continuing challenge of balancing institutional religious traditions with students' constitutional rights. The development of guidelines and implementation efforts demonstrates that tolerance requires active maintenance (National Peace Council, 2025; National Peace Council, 2026a). Peace is not a permanent possession but a social achievement that must continually be renewed.

The significance of the Ghanaian Times story lies not merely in the pupil's religion but in the fact that a Christian could attend a Muslim-associated institution, compete academically with Muslim students and emerge as the best-performing pupil. It is an illustrative case, not sufficient evidence on its own to establish the prevalence or durability of religious tolerance. Peacebuilding also takes place in classrooms, compound houses, workplaces, families, funerals, weddings and religious celebrations, but claims about how these settings shape attitudes over time require systematic evidence.

Ghana is not free from discrimination, prejudice or tension. Afrobarometer findings indicate both substantial stated acceptance of neighbours from other religions and a meaningful minority reporting religiously based unfair treatment (Osse Essima, 2021). In addition, tolerance toward people of different religions reportedly declined by five percentage points in Ghana between the 2014/2015 and 2019/2021 survey rounds, according to Afrobarometer’s cross-country analysis (Afrobarometer, 2022). This repeated-survey comparison suggests attitudes are not fixed; however, it does not track

the same individuals and cannot establish how particular school or community experiences caused the change.

Its relative success appears to reflect several interacting factors: constitutional protection of religious freedom, political restrictions on religiously organised parties, schools that bring children of different faiths together, communal traditions, interfaith and interethnic families, religious leaders who promote dialogue, and institutions such as the National Peace Council that intervene when tensions arise. These factors are plausible contributors rather than conclusively isolated causes. The survey and school-based evidence reviewed here point to a more qualified conclusion: tolerance is widespread, but its maintenance depends on addressing unequal treatment, improving religious literacy and ensuring that interfaith contact is inclusive.

Ghana has not achieved relative religious peace because its people have ceased to be religious. Rather, its achievement lies in learning, to a considerable extent, how to practise religion without treating others as enemies.

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