# The Challenge of Leadership Conflict in the Church

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*Abstract: Leadership conflict is a pervasive issue affecting churches worldwide, with far-reaching consequences on members, mission, and witness. This paper examines the underlying causes of leadership conflict in the church, including power struggles, lack of succession planning, leadership incompetence, love of money, personality clashes, sin issues, and doctrinal differences. Poor communication, lack of prayer, and unrealistic expectations are also explored. This paper provides a nuanced understanding of the complex issues surrounding leadership conflict. By examining the root causes, church leaders and members can gain insights into preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts in a biblical manner. To address these challenges, this paper recommends four strategies. Churches should establish clear succession plans, foster a culture of prayer and accountability, promote effective communication and conflict resolution, and prioritize leadership development, training, and mentoring. By implementing these strategies, churches can prevent and manage leadership conflicts, promoting unity, love, and effectiveness. This paper contributes to the development of healthy, conflict-free churches that fulfill their divine mandate.*

## Introduction

Leadership conflict has been a perennial issue throughout human history. The biblical narrative of Satan's rebellion against God (Isaiah 14:12-14) exemplifies the power struggle inherent in leadership. Human nature's desire for control often underlies conflicts. Even Jesus' disciples disputed over leadership (Luke 9:46-48), illustrating the aspiration for elevated status and authority (Afolabi, 2021). Church leadership conflicts often manifest as discordant visions among staff members regarding strategic planning, program implementation, and ministry execution (Adetunji, 2010).

Additionally, conflicts can arise when congregants express discontent with the conduct or proposed initiatives of church leaders, or when leaders criticize the membership. A more insidious form of leadership conflict involves the ruthless pursuit of power, wherein individuals seek to occupy leadership positions by any means necessary, disregarding established norms, protocols, or standards (Awojobi, 2011). This phenomenon is often characterized by a "win-at-all-costs" mentality, which can lead to conflict with the majority. Furthermore, leadership conflicts can also arise from power struggles between individuals vying for positions of authority or seeking to usurp authority from legitimate leaders.

The Nigerian church landscape has been plagued by power struggles, factionalism, and authoritarianism. Underlying factors include doctrinal divergences, leadership deficits, and competing interpretations of prophetic gifts (Peter et al., 2011). Some church founders have been accused of duplicity and erroneous biblical teachings, leading to spurious prophecies and revelations. Intra-church conflict arises from discordant visions among leaders and congregational dissatisfaction (Adetunji, 2010). Leadership conflict is often an unyielding pursuit of power, disregarding norms and standards (Afolabi, 2021).

## Statement of the Problem

Church conflicts pose a significant threat to the realization of a church's vision and mission. According to Son (2019), unresolved conflicts can have devastating consequences, including diminished morale and vitality. The inevitability of conflict necessitates a proactive approach to identifying its sources and mitigating its impact on the church's objectives (Hinton, 2021).

Conflicts can arise from various quarters, including the congregation, leadership, and even seemingly trivial issues. Thakore (2013) posits that conflict is an inherent aspect of human interaction and teamwork. Effective leadership is crucial in navigating these conflicts and fulfilling the church's mission. A cohesive leadership team, comprising senior pastors and support staff, is essential for achieving this goal. This project aims to investigate and evaluate conflicts within church leadership, specifically between senior and secondary leaders, which can have debilitating effects on the church's unity and effectiveness (Hinton, 2021).

The objective of this paper is to discuss the challenge of leadership conflict in the church. This paper will further examine the causes of leadership conflict in the church.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing secondary data to explore the challenge of leadership conflict in the church. The secondary data was sourced from existing literature, including academic journals, books, and conference proceedings. The data collection process involved a comprehensive review of relevant documents, including research articles, book chapters, and reports. The documents were selected based on their relevance to the research topic. The analysis of the secondary data was conducted using content analysis and documentary evidence. The content analysis involved a systematic and objective examination

of the documents to identify patterns, themes, and meanings related to leadership conflict in the church. The documentary evidence involved an in-depth examination of specific documents, such as case studies and research reports, to gain a deeper understanding of the challenge of leadership conflict. The findings were presented in a narrative format, highlighting the key themes, patterns, and meanings that emerged from the analysis.

## Conceptual Review
### Leadership Conflict
Leadership is the process of guiding and influencing others to achieve specific goals and objectives. It involves inspiring and motivating individuals to work together towards a shared vision. According to various definitions, leadership encompasses:

- Influencing others to act towards achieving shared goals (Utomi, 2004)
- Persuading others to help achieve a common objective (Nigro & Nigro, 1977)
- Influencing people to willingly and enthusiastically work towards group goals (Weirich & Krontz, 2017)
- Inspiring and guiding others beyond mere management, which involves mobilizing resources to achieve a defined end (Ekekwe, 2011)

Overall, leadership is about empowering and motivating others to achieve a shared purpose.

### Church Leadership
Effective church leadership is essential for guiding Christian communities, involving guidance, direction, and management (Maxwell, 1993). Church leaders must make informed decisions, set a clear vision, and provide spiritual guidance (Kouzes & Posner, 212). The Bible stresses that church leaders should possess qualities like integrity, humility, and strong faith (1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9). They should also teach, preach, and provide pastoral care (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Various leadership models exist, including episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational models (Barna 14), each with distinct characteristics. Church leaders face challenges like conflicts, financial struggles, and declining membership (Hoge and Roozen 123), requiring adaptability, innovation, and commitment to their calling (Kotter, 2001). In effect, church leadership demands individuals with strong spiritual gifts, skills, and character traits to provide vision, guidance, and pastoral care while navigating church life's challenges.

### Christian Leadership
Christian leadership embodies the principles and example set by Jesus Christ, emphasizing obedience, submission, respect, humility, and servanthood. As Wyns Peter defines it, Christian leadership is a collaborative, Spirit-led process where individuals work together to achieve a shared goal, characterized by serving others through leading and leading others through serving (Wyns, 2022). A principle serves as a guiding standard that helps individuals achieve their objectives. To be effective, a Christian leader must adhere to and demonstrate the core principles of Christianity, setting a positive example for church members to follow and learn from.

The following are the principles of Christian leadership include: Love (John 4:16), Stewardship (1Corinthians 4:1), Knowledge and Wisdom (Proverbs 9:10, 2 Chronicles 1:11–12), Integrity (Proverbs 28:6, 2 Timothy 2:15), Following the God's will (Mathew 26:39 & 42), Self – control (2 Timothy 1:7, 2 Peter 1:5–8), Humility (Isaiah 53:7), Self – sacrifice (Romans 12:1), Spiritual gifts (Ephesians 5:22- 23), Faithfulness (Proverbs 28:20, 1 Corinthians 4:2), Fasting and Prayer (Mathew 4:2-3, Mathew 6:9 -13), and the word of God (Jeremiah 1:11-12, Amos 3:7).

## Empirical Review
### Causes of Leadership Conflict in the Church in Nigeria
### Power Conflict for Leadership
In contemporary churches, power struggles for leadership have become a pressing concern. A significant challenge arises when influential individuals with personal ministries wield significant power, often rivaling that of the legitimate church leadership (Hittaner, 2009). These individuals, having garnered support from church members who have benefited from their generosity, can become uncontrollable forces within the church. Their influence can lead to conflicts and even secession when church authorities attempt to rein in their power.

The establishment of internal ministries within churches can also create an atmosphere of church politics, where leaders must navigate complex relationships with church authorities to maintain their positions (Peter et al., 2011). This can lead to a lack of centralized administration and undermine the church's overall governance.

The misuse of power and authority is a primary driver of leadership conflicts within churches. Power, a crucial element in leadership and governance, can lead to conflicts between leaders and followers (Albertn, 2013). According to Folger, Poole, and Stutman (1977), power has the capacity to influence behavior and attitudes, making it a key factor in conflict escalation (Bass, 1985). Within

churches, four primary types of power exist: spiritual, influential, financial, and intellectual. Those who possess spiritual power, such as clergy and prayer warriors, often hold significant sway over the church's direction and are accorded special treatment.

## Lack of Proper Succession Plan
The absence of a well-defined succession plan for church leadership can create an environment of tension and conflict. To mitigate this risk, churches should establish clear guidelines outlining the qualifications and criteria for leadership succession in their constitution and by-laws. Adherence to these guidelines by all church members is crucial to ensure a smooth transition. The Celestial Church of Christ faced significant challenges following the death of its founder, Oshoffa, due to the lack of a clear succession plan (Onyekwere & Onoja, n.d.). A similar conflict arose in the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) after the passing of Joseph Ayo Babalola, its first General Evangelist (Hittaner, 2009).

## Lack of Prayer and Relationship with God
Church unity is deeply rooted in prayer and a personal relationship with God. Before seeking solutions to disunity, one must first pray consistently for church unity. Effective leaders prioritize prayer, recognizing that true unity stems from a shared connection with Christ, rather than reliance on individual leaders (Wesley, 2023). In the Nigerian church context, neglecting one's prayer life and relationship with God can render leaders susceptible to fleshly influences and division (Oyediran, 2015).

When leaders fail to cultivate intimacy with God, they risk becoming self-reliant, proud, and unwilling to listen to others (Kolawole, 2019). Afolabi (2023) emphasizes that a leader's spiritual life serves as the foundation for their leadership, and neglecting prayer and intimacy with God can lead to spiritual bankruptcy and conflict. This can create tension and conflict within the church, as leaders prioritize personal interests over the church's well-being. Moreover, a lack of prayer and relationship with God can lead to poor decision-making, as leaders fail to seek God's wisdom (Adebayo, 2017). This can result in conflict and division among church members.

## Leadership Incompetence
Ineffective leadership is a pervasive issue plaguing the Nigerian church, precipitating conflicts and power struggles. When unqualified individuals assume leadership roles, it can lead to widespread apathy, confusion, and misdirection (Hittaner, 2009). According to Adebanyo (2017), leadership incompetence refers to the inability of leaders to effectively manage and guide the church, resulting in conflicts.

In the Nigerian church context, leadership incompetence can manifest through various forms, including inadequate communication, poor decision-making, and a lack of clear vision (Kolawolle, 2005). Ineffective communication, for instance, can foster an environment of mistrust, misunderstandings, and conflict (Oyediran, 2020). Similarly, hasty decision-making without proper consultation or consideration of consequences can lead to resentment and opposition (Adebanyo, 2017). Furthermore, a lack of clear vision can stagnate the church's growth, creating uncertainty and conflict among members (Kolawolle, 2019).

## The Love of Money
The pursuit of wealth can create tension and conflict within the church. When leaders prioritize personal gain, they may adopt double standards, leading to crisis and conflict (Onyekwere & Onoja, n.d.). This has contributed to the commercialization of the church, with some leaders engaging in unethical practices such as embezzlement, money laundering, and materialism (Princewell, 2017).

The exploitation of church members has become rampant, with some churches promoting investments in companies affiliated with their leaders (Olawole, 2005). The church has been reduced to a means of accumulating wealth, with the true purpose of evangelization and soul-winning being neglected (Matthew 28:19). The proliferation of fake miracles and the sale of spiritual commodities have further eroded the church's integrity (Abogunrim, 2009; Adewolo, 2006; Tonye, 2005).

## Personality Clash
Personality differences can be a significant source of leadership conflict within the church. The diverse temperaments of church members, including sanguine, melancholy, choleric, and phlegmatic, can create an environment where dominant personalities clash (Awojobi, 54). When individuals with strong leadership tendencies, such as sanguine and choleric personalities, vie for control, friction and conflict can arise (Awojobi, 2011).

According to Awojobi, many church conflicts stem from personality differences rather than theological or doctrinal disagreements. These conflicts often result from power struggles, which can be fueled by personal biases and unmet expectations (Huhenlocker, 1986). As William (1998) notes, people tend to form strong opinions about how others should behave, leading to acceptance or rejection based on these expectations.

**Sin Issues**

Unaddressed sin within the church can foster disunity and conflict. Issues like gossip, pride, and fear can arise from a lack of depth in one's faith and relationship with Christ. These problems require swift and careful attention, with prayer preceding action (Wesley, 2023). In the Nigerian church, sin can manifest as pride, greed, and selfish ambition, leading to conflict and division (Oyediran, 2020). Leaders who engage in sinful behavior can create tension and conflict, as their actions may be perceived as hypocritical and ungodly (Adebayo, 2017).

Pride, in particular, can contribute to leadership conflict when leaders become arrogant and resistant to correction (Kolawole, 2019). Similarly, greed and selfish ambition can lead to conflict when leaders prioritize their own interests over the church's well-being (Afolabi, 2021). Eventually, unaddressed sin can cause significant harm to the church, emphasizing the need for leaders to address these issues promptly and prayerfully.

**Doctrinal Differences**

Doctrinal disagreements are a primary driver of leadership conflict within the church. Differences in biblical interpretation can lead to friction and conflict among key leaders, as seen in the Christ Apostolic Church's stance on divine healing and the pursuit of secular education (Ademola, 2020). Similarly, the Faith Tabernacle Movement experienced internal conflict in 1929 due to doctrinal differences. This phenomenon has contributed significantly to the proliferation of churches in Nigeria.

In the Nigerian church, differences in understanding and interpretation of biblical doctrines can lead to leadership conflict (Adebayo, 2017). Disagreements over salvation, baptism, and church governance can create tension and conflict among leaders (Kolawole, 2019). The debate over the role of the Holy Spirit is a significant contributor to leadership conflict, with some leaders emphasizing spiritual gifts and experiences, while others prioritize scriptural authority (Oyediran, 2020). Additionally, differences in understanding of church government and leadership structure can lead to conflict, as some leaders advocate for democratic participation, while others prefer authoritarian leadership (Afolabi, 2021). Ultimately, doctrinal differences can undermine the unity and effectiveness of the church.

**Lack of Communication**

This problem runs rampant within churches. Internal communication is something that is overlooked because it seems like it can be fixed with coffee and a conversation. As a church grows there isn't enough coffee or conversation, or time to continue running a church by word of mouth. 1 Corinthians 1:10 says to "be perfectly united in mind and thought", in order for that to happen you must know what the other person is thinking. It is no wonder in James that we are told to confess our sins to one another. If we are able to grow our connection within the church and be willing to lay our sins in front of each other, then we should not have a problem communicating.

So, talk about it. Ensure your relational communication is honest and clear, and then on the side of church functionality, make communication easy. Make it easy? How? By creating clear processes for communication in the church you will succeed in: Saving yourself time, create clear expectations, and have clearly documented communication. All of these will result in increased unity within your church. If your internal communication is not unified, then your external communication will not be unified (Wesley 2023).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, leadership conflict in the church in Nigeria is a multifaceted issue, driven by various factors. These include power struggles, lack of proper succession planning, leadership incompetence, the love of money, personality clashes, sin issues, and doctrinal differences. Additionally, poor communication within the church can exacerbate these issues, leading to disunity and conflict. To address these challenges, church leaders must prioritize prayer, introspection, and a commitment to biblical principles. By doing so, they can foster a culture of unity, transparency, and accountability, ultimately strengthening the church's witness and effectiveness in Nigeria.

**Recommendations**

On the basis of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are presented:

Here are four key recommendations to address leadership conflict in the church in Nigeria:

i. **Establish Clear Succession Plans**: Churches should develop and implement clear guidelines for leadership succession to prevent power struggles and conflicts.

ii. **Foster a Culture of Prayer and Accountability**: Church leaders should prioritize prayer, introspection, and accountability to address sin issues, leadership incompetence, and the love of money.

iii. **Promote Effective Communication and Conflict Resolution**: Churches should establish clear communication processes and conflict resolution mechanisms to address personality clashes, doctrinal differences, and other issues.

iv.    **Develop Leadership Competence and Integrity**: Churches should prioritize leadership development, training, and mentoring to ensure that leaders possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and character to lead effectively and navigate conflicts in a biblical manner.

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