

Battling with the baton: (Dis)connecting today and tomorrow's leaders in African Pentecostalism

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Leadership praxis, development and succession can become a bloody battlefield in Africa, mainly because of economic, cultural, theological and political factors. Just like some secular leaders who fail to serve their mandate paradoxically fight for further conquest and retention of power at all costs, certain spiritual leaders miscarry Christian leadership, struggle to deliver their missionary service and tragically battle to stay in power, instead of passing the baton. Church leadership ought to be successional, transformational and intergenerational enough to disciple and develop leaders to sustain and promote other-centred *missio Dei* and *missio Ecclesiae*. Yet, the majority of Pentecostal church founders and leaders are neo-patrimonial, authoritarian and serving themselves at the expense of God's mission. That way, they deface the missionary identity of the Church. Engaging with available literature and observing multifarious leadership trends in Africa, this article unravels problematic Christian leadership development and succession in view of Jesus Christ's servant leadership model. It disconnects self-centred incumbents and connects the few who are Christ-like with tomorrow's leaders.

Contribution: This article advances Christian leadership development and succession in view of Jesus Christ's intergenerational servant leadership model.

Keywords: Christian leadership; Pentecostalism; development; succession; *missio Dei*; *missio Ecclesiae*.

Introduction

Leadership practice, development and succession often become bloody battlefields in African secular and spiritual contexts. This is aptly depicted by scholars such as Matshobane (2020:124–130), Makamure (2017:28–35) and Orjinmo (2021:n.p.). A brief survey of politics suggests that many African politicians who had failed to serve their mandate paradoxically fought for conquest and the retention of power. Examples include the late Robert Mugabe, whose administration ruined Zimbabwe for 37 years (Keane 2017:n.p.), incumbent Ugandan Yoweri Museveni, who has ruled Uganda for 38 years and whose son is planning to contest and replace him in 2026 (Al Jazeera 2023), Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo who has ruled Equatorial Guinea for 44 years now, Paul Biya, who has run Cameroon 41 years, Denis Sassou Nguesso, who has been leading the Republic of Congo for 38 years and Isaias Afwerki who has ruled Eritrea for 30 years (Agence France-Presse 2022:n.p.). Similarly, numerous Pentecostal leaders have become problematic 'unchallengeable big men' (McCauley 2013:2). These men miscarry leadership and struggle to deliver their missionary service but battle to stay in power without passing the baton.

Successful church leadership ought to advance other-centred *missio Ecclesiae* and develop leaders for succession and the sustainability of the church. Some ecclesial leaders are commendably working selflessly and effectively, but Orogun (2023:5–7) describes what he calls founders and leaders' personalisation of denominations. Many Pentecostal heads are bent on enriching themselves and securing their positions at the expense of *missio Dei*, thereby defacing the identity of the Church. Thus, connecting those who are still missionary and disconnecting failing incumbent leaders with future leadership matters. Using the available literature, this paper observes leadership trends in Africa. It begins with a conceptualisation of African Pentecostalism, followed by a review of the battle of the baton and the (dis)connection between today and tomorrow's leaders in African Pentecostalism.

Understanding Christian leadership

Scholars such as Maxwell (1998), Jibreal (2021:280–281), Kolzow (2014:13) and Alharbi (2021:216) define good secular leadership as inspiring, influencing, mobilising and moving an organisation

and/or followers towards particular targets. Christian leadership, however, is a transformational ministry of serving people under Jesus Christ's mission to accomplish *missio Dei* with, in, for and through their lives and the world. What makes Christian leadership Christian is the leader's adherence to the characteristics of Christianity, mainly following the way and principles of Jesus Christ which are well documented in the Bible. I agree with Kessler (2010:539–544), Kessler (2012:40–46) and Kessler and Kretzschmar (2015:2) who conceptualise Christian leadership as being followed by others as one follows Jesus Christ.

Paul sets the tone when he says 'follow me as I follow Christ' (1 Corinthians 11:1). In the *book of John* 13:1–17, Jesus Christ presents his model of leadership as serving others when he washes his disciples' feet. Accordingly, in this article, Christian leadership refers to serving God's people using Jesus Christ's model. McIntosh (2013:88–123) explains that Christian leadership is characterised by calling, stewardship and servanthood, arguing that Christian leaders are called by God to steward his vision, mission and as a result, they should serve humanity reciprocally. This means that Christian leaders should not be self-centred and self-serving. As Obare (2022:n.p.) argues:

Christian leadership can only be deemed to be Christian if it is shaped by a Christian worldview ... based on one's leadership in a Christian worldview, and at the most basic, the application of *Imago Dei* and *Shalom* paradigms.

In the same view, Fatuse (n.d.) finds Christian leadership to be 'exercising true authority in Jesus Christ'. He explains that it is expertise, facility and capacity – insight into the things of God to mend, build up people and serve them in integrity and obedience to God. In agreement with Fatuse (n.d.:2–8), Christian leadership is embodied by consistent intimacy with Jesus Christ, submission to the Holy Spirit, servanthood, integrity, risk-taking, teamwork, discipleship and mentorship. That is why Thomas (2018:108) avows that Christian leadership must grow followers in holiness and promote the extension of God's kingdom in the world. Consequently, while secular leadership applies some biblical principles in governance, the practice of Christian leadership, as also argued by Dames (2017:1–2), must be transformational.

In this article, Christian leadership is understood to go beyond one's words, to deeds, arguably because the two must complement each other in serving and developing today's followers to become tomorrow's leaders. This concurs with Thomas' (2018) viewpoint that:

[T]he teaching of Jesus was never unrelated or abstract and was always concerned with instruction that was related to discipleship ... the indispensable mark of leadership being an intentional influence on others for the promotion of God's kingdom. (p. 109)

Christian leadership is not meant to advance one's interests, but God's kingdom. As stewards of *missio Dei* and God's people, Christian leaders are ultimately expected to disciple

and develop followers into leaders. Thus, Christian leaders must raise and eventually release others to lead. This cycle should repeat. Leadership development therefore becomes a sustained process as it continues from one generation to another.

Reviewing the battle of the baton

Leadership succession has been contentious in most African churches, from mainline to African Independent Churches (AICs) and Pentecostals. A study by Matshobane and Masango (2020) details a number of South African cases where leaders served for long periods, and died in office without having developed successors. As a result, their church seniors dragged each other to courts to settle their disputes. Matshobane and Masango (2020) identified that issues of financial security, loss of influence, mistrust of successors, a lack of succession plans, a lack of proper oversight structures and factions problematised leadership development and succession. In Zimbabwe, Nhumburudzi and Kurebwa (2018) studied the biggest classical Pentecostal denominations, the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and Zimbabwe Assemblies of God in Africa (ZAOGA) and found that most church leaders manipulate their systems and overstay without developing successors or passing the baton:

In ZAOGA, succession was a hidden issue from the general membership who were living in speculation. ...there was no clear succession in Zimbabwe's Pentecostalism. Leadership politics, hero worshipping, formulation of a theology around a leader and personal claims by leaders had socially constructed a reality in the Pentecostal churches that the founders and leaders were God-given ... Most Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe have collapsed after the death of the founder. This confirms the observation by Barry (2011) that many Pentecostal Churches are just one generation away from extinction because of lack of a succession plan. Pentecostal leaders in Zimbabwe should start considering stepping down and leaving leadership to a new generation so that they will die peacefully having seen the perpetual continuity of their visions through the next generation. (Nhumburudzi & Kurebwa 2018:50)

Similarly, Bagonza (2017:11) researched factors that affect leadership succession in Ugandan Pentecostal churches and noted that a number of African Pentecostal church leaders 'treat their churches like private property, exclusively co-owned and managed by spouses, close family members and friends'. According to him, such leaders personalise their position and establish themselves as supreme authorities for self-enrichment. His study discovered that:

Leadership succession is as pivotal to a church or Christian organization's ongoing ministry as a baton handover in a relay race. If it is done well, the leader moves on to another ministry, or retirement, pleased that the church is able to maintain momentum. If it is done poorly or too late and direction is lost, people leave the church; support dries up; staff leave; and the leader who could be enjoying in the glow of a job well done, is remembered instead for the lousy ending. (Bagonza 2017:11)

However, various challenges problematise leadership succession, such as a lack of training. For Bagonza (2017):

[W]hen leaders are not theologically well trained and qualified, they make mistakes, misuse their positions and mislead their churches. The founder-mentality is a huge hindrance to finding a successor in Pentecostal churches. (pp. 12–16)

In such instances, untrained leaders tend to misinterpret and misapply scripture. Thus, they eventually fall into autocratic leadership styles, personalise the church, neglect discipleship and fail to plan and prepare for succession.

Makamure (2017), in his research on the Zion Apostolic leadership succession in Zimbabwe, engaged with AICs and discovered that scores of these churches have authoritarian leadership that does not plan and develop successors. 'In most African Independent Churches, succession after the death of some leaders has often led to multiple secessions, hostilities and litigation' Makamure (2017:27). Looking at neo-Pentecostals, one can say that founders and leading church leaders function like secular chief executive officers (CEOs). As Matshobane (2020) says:

[T]hey never think of letting go, or handing over to the next generation. Like monarchs, some of them leave chaos by leaving everyone believing that they are the rightful successors ... (p. 141)

His further elaboration is so informative:

Most neo-Pentecostals are more likely to be either monarchs or generals in their succession styles. The monarch type of succession can be seen in the International Pentecostal Holiness church where the leader was a one – man leader till the time of his death where there were fights on who ought to take the reign. The general type of succession is seen in the case already quoted of the Crystal Cathedral where the father and founder of the work although he had already handed over the work to his son, he took it back after he witnessed a direction he did not approve of where his son was taking the church. (Matshobane 2020:142)

As such, family members, siblings and subordinates tend to fight over succession disputes. Those neo-Pentecostals who choose to leave successors, develop their spouses and siblings or close loyal associates to take over.

While reviewing Nigerian ecclesiology and leadership, Orjinmo (2021:n.p.) investigated the late famous Nigerian televangelist TB Joshua's Synagogue Church of all nations (SCOAN). He found that the denomination fell into schisms after TB Joshua died and his wife, Evelyn Joshua, who was not part of the leadership team, took over,

[U]nlike other wives of Nigeria's mega pastors, she mostly stayed in the background during their three-decade marriage. TB Joshua, known by SCOAN members as 'the prophet', worked with a group of close disciples he called the 'wise men' – one of whom was believed was being groomed to succeed him... But after his death, those loyal to Mrs. Joshua obtained a court order making her a member of the board and so smoothing the path for her to assume control. The church has since announced Mrs. Joshua as the new leader 'under the guidance of God,' enraging some factions of the church unhappy about the lack of transparency.

Battles about new leaders often rise whenever there is no succession plan. In Zimbabwe, countless:

[L]eaders overstay in power. This was adopted from the Shona traditional societies where the position of the chief was not to be contested and would only be removed by death ... (Enthuse n.d.)

In concurrence with Tagwirei (2023:6), when pastors overstay, they deny their congregations an exchange of ministerial gifts, and they become disgraceful. Although his studies were on a single denomination, Tagwirei (2023:7–11) uncovers problematic factors behind pastoral transitions, such as different theological conceptualisations, policy gaps, economic instability, insecurity, personal and family disruptions as some of the issues that affect Christian leadership successions.

(Dis)connecting today and tomorrow's leaders

Rethinking the reasons why the current prophetic voice of the church in South Africa is weaker than before, Kgatle's (2018) observation speaks volumes about why incumbent and upcoming leaders must be (dis)connected:

There is a Sepedi saying, Rutang bana ditaola le seye le tšona badimong, which literally means 'teach your children skills, do not pass with them to the ancestry.' Another important saying closer to the one quoted in the preceding section is an English idiom used in a relay race, 'passing the baton.' I am quoting these idioms here to indicate that the prophetic voice could have stayed strong had the likes of Alan Boesak, Smangaliso Mkhathswa, Makhenkesi Stofile, Mvume Dandala, Peter Marais, Frank Chikane, Dr Motsoko Pheko, Dr Siphon Mzimela, Stanley Mogoba and others trained the younger generation to take over from them. The prophets of old should have passed the baton to a more enthusiastic young generation that would do what they had done before. Furthermore, there is a need for a younger generation in the ranks of the SACC. The prophetic voice that needs to speak to the nation needs to be energetic and well informed about what is going on in the country. The well-educated prophetic voices of pre-1994 need to mentor a well-educated younger generation to take over. Maybe that is the reason the Economic Freedom Fighters leadership is able to speak on any matter in government; they are young, well-educated and well informed. The voices that need to speak in our time need to be influential like Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego, who were young and influential voices that spoke to the government of the day. (p. 4)

When incumbent leaders value succession and decide to deliberately plan for it, when they develop leaders and eventually pass the baton to upcoming generations, competencies are passed down and there is an effectiveness. If leaders choose to neglect to raise and release new leaders, they directly and indirectly breed their kind. Some upcoming generations may emulate their styles, or run coups, form their own groupings and carry on self-centred leadership to the coming generations. Thus, failing and overstaying leaders should be disconnected, and successfully outgoing

ones must be connected with upcoming generations by reviewing governance, politics, administration, leadership styles, discipleship and development as suggested below.

Reviewing Pentecostal Church governance

The majority of African classical and neo-Pentecostal churches mix episcopal and Presbyterian governance by having their oversight under the leadership of apostles and bishops, as well as representative committee or council members. Although those who have apostolic councils, national executive committees or representatives claim to be consultative, the voices of the founders or leaders remain supreme in major decisions. The biggest classical Pentecostals such as the ZAOGA use authoritarian and neo-patrimonial governance, which is well delineated by Biri (2020) as:

... the kind of authority that a father has on his children. In the lower hierarchy are not subordinate officials with defined powers and functions of their own, but retainers whose positions depend on a leader to whom they owe allegiance. The system is held together by loyalty or kinship ties rather than by a hierarchy of administrative grades and functions. Positions of power cannot be rotated, except under the sanction of Guti (founder and archbishop) himself. The distinction between private and church property can hardly be recognized ... (pp. 172–173)

Biri (2020) argues that ZAOGA and other similar churches that have similar structures and leadership styles, present leaders as chiefs or sometimes presidents. They:

[I]nvest a lot of authority on the founder bishop or pastor and is problematic for 'ordinary' adherents who are deprived of creative imagination, capacity for dialogue, critical spirit and an increase in appeals to obedience, submission, renunciation and humility. (pp. 172–173)

As such, they command unquestioned authority and monopolise power.

This relates to findings by Matshobane and Masango (2018:3) in their study of South African Pentecostal churches. Where polity to manage power struggles is available, it is rarely followed, except when leaders choose to (mis)use it for selfish reasons against each other. In other cases, polity is not well understood, thus, frequently misinterpreted. In such circumstances, leaders tend to overstay for personal benefit without developing other leaders. It is clear that Pentecostal churches must review their governance and send their upcoming leaders to theological schools for training, enlightenment and empowerment in order for them to develop contextually feasible politics and complementary administrative documentation such as constitution, policies and/or procedure manuals. This will enhance accountable, transparent and progressive administration, leadership development and succession.

Reviewing leadership styles and development

Leadership styles determine how leaders enact their decisions and approach their subordinates and subjects. Although all styles can be appropriate in different contexts, each leader has his or her own predominant of conducting himself or herself. Studies by scholars such as Nyakundi and Ayako (2020:309–311), Adebomi and Omotosho (2022:4–6) and Mwenje (2015:71–72) suggest that dictatorial, autocratic, charismatic, paternalistic, transactional, consultative, participative and transformational styles are very common in African Pentecostal ecclesiological leadership.

Dictators usually reserve all decision-making powers for themselves, use excessive force, forbid subordinates and subjects from questioning them. Autocrats hold all decisions, disregard others' views and crush dissenting voices. As such, dictatorial and autocratic leaders personalise their denominations, possess everything and ignore the values of others in their institutional sustainability. That way, such leaders neglect identifying, training and mentoring other leaders. They do not pass the leadership baton. They do not release and send out others to eventually replace them. Consultative leadership considers others' skills and ideas and engages and works with involved parties. Participative leaders develop, facilitate and serve with teamwork for collective engagement. In view of all this, it is recommendable to review one's leadership styles. Being autocratic and dictatorial has not been effective for the accomplishment of *missio Ecclesiae*.

While autocracy and dictatorship may be applied when serious need arises, such as in urgent need for executive decisions, or disciplinary measures, it seems that being autocratic and dictatorial serves selfish desires more than the mission of God and the Church. So, as Pentecostalism has massively grown and self-serving leaders have rooted themselves within it, they may not reform themselves out of power. Alternatively, para-Church organisations, theological colleges and related institutions can and should fill the gap of leadership development, succession and work on training, discipleship, development, exposure, enlightenment and empowerment of young leaders who will value and utilise more consultative and participative approaches (of course engaging with autocratic and dictatorial styles when necessary, i.e. in urgent need of executive and disciplinary authority). Unlike those self-centred leaders who work with their spouses, children, close relatives and friends, independent para-Church organisations and theological colleges can facilitate enlightening and empowering discipleship programmes to develop leaders who can serve the Church under Jesus Christ's model. As Jesus Christ served with 12 disciples, he deliberately developed, authorised, sent them out on missions (i.e. Mt 10:1–2; Lk 9:1–27) for exposure and eventually released them to advance *missio Dei*; instead of raising chaotic dynastic team that Muranganwa (n.d.) identified as advancing self-enrichment and security, new leaders can be developed to foster *missio Ecclesiae*.

Conclusion

This article examined the bloody battle of passing the baton in African Pentecostalism. It identified that economic insecurities, a lack of theological training and mentorship, as well as authoritarian polities, leadership styles and maladministration problematise leadership development and succession as insecure and ineffective leaders tend to prioritise serving themselves at the expense of *missio Dei* and *missio Ecclesiae*. While cleaning today's mess may be difficult as most problematic leaders are giants who may not submit to ecumenical or theological voices, the remnants of sound leaders, para-church organisations and theological colleges can save tomorrow's church from such self-serving leadership by doubling their efforts to develop young leaders. They should review the current state of affairs, revise and expose new leaders to transformational and other-centred governance, leadership development and succession in line with Jesus Christ's model, which advances the mission of God for the inclusive salvation of humankind.

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K.T. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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