

Leadership Conflict in the Nigerian Church

Peter Olanrewaju Awojobi

INTRODUCTION

Leadership conflict has been an age long challenge to humanity. From biblical records it started between God and Satan (Isaiah 14:12-14). Satan wanted to topple God's administration in heaven. Thus, he rebelled against the leadership of God with some angels we referred to as demons. Leadership is consider as exercising control over someone or thing. Human beings generally love to exercise control over fellow man or resource. Behind conflict in most societies in the world is the desire to control. People aspire into leadership positions today because of a strong desire to control human and material resources.

In the time of Jesus his disciples had a conflict on who was to be the leader among them after Jesus must have left them (Luke 9:46-48). The mother of James and John came to plead with Jesus to allow her two sons to be at his right and left sides in his kingdom. This suggests a desire to be above other disciples.

Today in the Nigeria church leadership conflict is very common. No church tradition is immune to it. In most cases this manifest whenever there is going to be a change of leadership. There are cases of those who have complied the terms provided by the church constitution but are not willing to go. Also, there are those who want to be in the church leadership at all cost. They see leadership as do or die. They are ready to blackmail, kill or destroy those they consider as obstacles to achieving their goals. Thus elections into leadership positions today in the church are sometimes mar with manipulations, use of charms, verbal assaults and the like which eventually water down the spiritual lives of the members after elections. Thus leadership conflict has continued to have devastating effects on the total ministries of the church and the expansion of God's kingdom on earth.

The questions are: how will the church in Nigeria be able to fulfill her mission if she continues to experience conflict in the rank and file of her leadership? How should leadership conflict be tackled for the church to regain her integrity? Thus, this paper examines the causes and effects of leadership conflict in the Nigerian church with the view to proffer solutions to them.

Leadership Conflict in the Church

A conflict is a struggle or argument between two people.⁴⁵² It means “to fight or struggle in a vigorous determined way; it is also seen as a disorderly struggle”⁴⁵³ It is a situation where one person or a group disagrees with another vehemently on an issue. The scenario is such that one is not prepared to give in for the other. It is a situation of the survivor of the fittest. In most cases if an individual or group succeeds attempts are made to eliminate the other. It is a situation of the winner takes all.

Leadership conflict can be understood as a vigorous struggle or disorderly fight with a determination to occupying a leadership position or post by any means possible against the accepted norm or laid down rules / procedure or standard. In other words, it is a desire to become a leader by “fire by force” or “do or die.” This is always against the will of majority. Leadership conflict could be between two people who are vying for or claiming a particular position of leadership or one person doing everything possible to usurp authority from a legitimate occupant of an office or position.

Some in the church today have employed diabolical means for them to occupy a given office. Leadership conflict has pitched one denomination against another, one pastor against pastor, member against member, tribe against tribe, one social stratum against another, one region against another, children against parents and so on. There are litigations in some churches today by reason of leadership conflict.

⁴⁵² BBC English Dictionary Lagos: Africana Feb Publishers Ltd., 1992, 1262.

⁴⁵³ The New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, Encyclopedic Edition (New York: Trident Press International, 2004), 1356.

Besides, the church constitutes “the entire body of those who are saved by their relation to Christ,⁴⁵⁴ those belonging to the Lord. The church is not a building but a fellowship of the believers in Christ for the purpose of worship.⁴⁵⁵ The primary responsibility of church leaders is to care for and nurture the believers. Leaders are to use their wisdom and maturity to guide the congregation and individual members into growing ways of life so that when Jesus speaks, His body will be healthy and responsive.⁴⁵⁶

From the biblical perspective, leadership emanates from God. He seats as the final authority. He enthrones and dethrones leaders. He has divinely instituted to instill order in the universe He has created. The devil attempted to usurp power from God (Isa. 14:12-14). There was conflict between satan and man (Gen. 25:27). The rise and fall of kingdoms and empires⁴⁵⁷ are indications of conflict for power. The emergence of various Jewish sects was partly a demonstration of leadership conflict.⁴⁵⁸ Prior to the arrival of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ there were various forms of leadership in the New Testament. When Jesus came on board, the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Scribes considered him as someone who came to usurp their authority and as such opposed him.

The era of the church fathers was not free from the menace of leadership conflict as they were faced mainly with the challenge of doctrinal differences. This brought in polarization that pitched the west and the Eastern Church on different pedestal which eventually midwife the

⁴⁵⁴ Merrill F. Unger and R. K. Harrison, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Moody Press, 1988), 236.

⁴⁵⁵ Peter O. Awojobi, *Church Management (Ilorin: Kingdom Power Communications, 2011)*, 41.

⁴⁵⁶ James O. Adeyanju, *Between Malachi and Matthew: An Introduction to the History of the Intertestamental Period* (Ilorin: Amazing Grace Printmedia, 2009), 35-104.

⁴⁵⁷ Zangani B. Kafang, *An Introduction to the Inter-Test mental Period* (Kaduna: Baraka Press and Publishers, 2001), 111-123.

⁴⁵⁸ RobertG. Clouse, et al, *The Story of the Church* (England: Moody Press, 2002), 41.

reformation. There was acrimony between the church in the East and that of the west.⁴⁵⁹

In Nigeria church today, people fight for position of authority. They see it as do or die. It appears every Christian wants to lead and nobody wants to be a servant. Some Christians run down a leader because they want to be appointed in his/her place. According to Awojobi Peter conflict for power is one of the major factors responsible for conflict in the church today.⁴⁶⁰ Ponle Adetunji towed Awojobi's line when he declared thus:

Conflict is also a serious issue in the church, if not among the rank and file, then among the leaders and would-be leaders. Conflict, in form of clod war, is even worse among Christian leaders. Very sad to write but very true that many of us have failed our master and Lord along this line with unnecessary envies, black mailing and gossips, and many times, writing strongly worded letters against another Christian brother to destroy him but God through Jesus Christ not destroying such individual, lying against one another in the attempt to destroy another before the Chief Executive officer or president of a Christian institution. We see these happening every day.⁴⁶¹

Historically, most indigenous churches in Nigeria were embroiled in leadership conflict after the death of their founders. For instance, after the death of Pastor Bilewu Oshoffa, several law suits were filed by ministers in Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) who claimed to have received the blessing of the later leader to succeed him. There were allegations of using charms by rival claimants to suppress one another. This resulted in withdrawal of membership.⁴⁶² Similarly, in the Four Square Gospel Church in Nigeria, there was a serious legal battle for succession to the top position after the expiration of the tenure of Rev. Wilson Badejo as the General Overseer. There were litigations in courts over the issue.⁴⁶³ The church of God Mission

⁴⁵⁹ Peter O. Awojobi, *Church Management* (Ilorin: Kingdom Power Communication, 2011), 34.

⁴⁶⁰ Oluwaponmile Gideon Adetunji, *Leadership in Action* (Ibadan: Baptist Press Ltd., 2010), 121.

⁴⁶¹ Leadership Conflict www.scihub.org/jsms/PDF2011/4/AJS. accessed 05-02-2013.

⁴⁶² Ibid.

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

under Archbishop Benson Idahosa also experienced leadership conflict after his demise. In spite of many protests, his wife Margaret Idahosa was ordained as his successor. This made some bishops and pastors in the church to float their own ministries.⁴⁶⁴ This is because they were dissatisfied with the choice of his wife. They argued that the late leader did not name his wife as his successor before he died. Again in 2010, there was a lawsuit in the Federal High Court, Lagos on who was to succeed Pastor E. H. Olusheye as the head of Christ Apostolic Church worldwide. A faction led by Pastor Olusheye and another faction led by Pastor Akintola.⁴⁶⁵

In another development, as Christians worldwide were celebrating Christmas and given glory to God for bringing them to the end of 2012, worshippers, at the Christ Apostolic Church in a branch in Lagos were busy waging battle of supremacy and allegiance. The crisis in the church which has been ongoing for more than 20years, took a dangerous turn when two factions of the church clashed during a Sunday morning service. It was gathered that the Lagos based faction which was busy with church activities was suddenly brought to an end when the Ibadan based faction arrived and chased them away. The aggrieved faction

disconnected the electricity supply to the church after they were chased out leaving the Ibadan faction to conduct their service without electricity supply.⁴⁶⁶

Also, a Federal High Court, Lagos on Friday fixed January 22 for hearing in a case of leadership conflict involving Cherubim and Seraphim church in Nigeria. The suit was filed by Mr. Tunji Gomez on behalf of one Prince Adepoju Arogundade, an elder in the church in February 2009. Arogundade is seeking an order of court to reinstate the plaintiff as the rightful leader of the church.⁴⁶⁷ In Kaduna State Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) drag each other to court. It was the face-off between Ayo Oritsejafor, the Preside of CAN and Samuel Kujiyat, Chairman of the Kaduna State Chapter. The

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ C. A. C. Members in Church Leadership Conflict in www.conflict.org.com

⁴⁶⁶ Court Schedule Jan. 22 for Cherubim and Seraphim Church Leadership Conflict in www.leadership/nga/articles/44759. accessed on 3rd April, 2013.

⁴⁶⁷ Kaduna CAN Leadership Conflict Now in Court in www.topic.com/forum/world/nigeria/TCILR accessed on 3rd April, 2013.

crisis between the two leaders became so deep that they have to seek redress in the court of law.⁴⁶⁸

Causes of Leadership Conflict in the Church

There are many causes of leadership conflict in the church today. Some of them are enumerated below.

One of the main causes of Leadership conflict in the Church today is Doctrinal Differences. This has led to friction and serious conflict among the key leaders of the church. A good example is the Christ Apostolic Church that practice divine healing that made it irreligious for any member to study medicine, banking and law in the universities in those days. The white missionaries that were using anti-malaria medicine were seen as unbelievers. This led to schism in the church and her leadership in 1939. The Faith Tabernacle Movement also experienced the same in 1929.⁴⁶⁹ This is a strong factor for proliferation of churches in Nigeria today.

Racial discrimination in the community of faith has led to leadership conflict in the church. According to Ajayi, some American Missionaries that came in 1850s had traces of “ecclesiastical imperialism.”⁴⁷⁰ This made some of them claimed superiority over Nigerian counterparts and as such treated them as subordinates. This reflected in the church life such as songs, liturgy and theology. This ecclesiastical colonialism and imperialism led to leadership conflict in the First Baptist Church, Lagos and broke her.⁴⁷¹ Olowe claimed that there were several cases of victimization and humiliation of native priests in some bigger missions.⁴⁷²

Also, leadership incompetence is a major factor in leadership conflict in the contemporary church. This can manifest when a group of unfit are trying to

⁴⁶⁸ Alok Peter et al, “Critical Analyses of Church Politics and Crises within the Indigenous Christianity in Nigeria” *American Journal of Social Management Sciences* <http://scihub.org/AJSMS> accessed on March 1, 2013:367.

⁴⁶⁹ S. Ademola Ajayi, *Baptist Work in Nigeria 1850-2005. A Comprehensive History* (Ibadan: Book Wright Publishers, 2010), 70.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-76.

⁴⁷¹ Abi Olowe, *Great Revivals, Great Revivalist Joseph Ayo Babalola* (Texas, Houston: Omega Publishers, 2007), 62-63.

⁴⁷² Peter Awojobi, *Church Management*, p40

lead the unwilling to do the unnecessary in the church. Whenever incompetent persons are elected or selected into the leadership position in the church. There may be apathy. Such leadership will lack focus. The situation is recipe for confusion and leadership conflict.⁴⁷³

Lack of proper succession plan for church leadership can caused tension and conflict in the church. There is the need for every church to have comprehensive guideline on the qualifications and criteria of ascension to the leadership of the church in the constitution and by-laws. It is also important that every member of the church respect the constitution and the by-laws of the church on the choice of leadership. This posed a great challenge in the Celestial Church of Christ after the death of Oshoffa, the founder of the church.⁴⁷⁴ Similarly, conflict happened after the death of Joseph Ayo Babalola, the first General Evangelist of Christ Apostolic Church (CAC).⁴⁷⁵

The love of money can cause tension or conflict in the church. The selfish ambitions to be rich by all means on the part of leadership and also to gather riches sometimes encourage double standard in dealings. The manipulation that usually follow such actions on the part of leadership always end in crisis and conflict in the church.⁴⁷⁶

Power conflict for leadership is also a serious challenge in the contemporary church. There are contention for supremacy between parallel government and the recognized leadership by gifted individuals who have also enjoyed the support of membership of the church that have benefited from their largesse. Those individuals with personal ministries are influential both within and outside the church and this become uncontrollable to the legitimate leadership in the church. They become power brokers that must

⁴⁷³ Cele Leadership Conflict Worsens As Police Invite Factional Leaders
<http://www.nairaland.com/421697/cele-leadership-conflict-worsens-police>
accessed on March 6, 2013.

⁴⁷⁴ Alokun Peter et al, p. 368.

⁴⁷⁵ Joseph Onyekwere and Rose Onoja, "Leadership Tussel Rebels in the Church"
News Watch Magazine
<http://www.newswatchchngr.com/editorial/prime/special/10919131835.htm>
(accessed on March 4, 2013).

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 367.

be obeyed if the recognized leadership wanted to operate in the atmosphere of peace in the church.⁴⁷⁷

Besides, personality clash can generate leadership conflict in the church. The church is always filled with people of different temperament like sanguine, melancholy, choleric and phlegmatic.⁴⁷⁸ The sanguine and choleric have the tendency to dominate and control others in the church. Since both temperaments seek to lead in the same church, there is going to be friction which can result in leadership conflict because of the personality make up. According to Awojobi most of the tussles in our churches today are more of personality than theological or doctrinal. They always arise from struggle for power, which resulted from a basic dislike of one person for another member opposing the leadership when they are not the kind of persons they like or they are not acting according to their own expectations.⁴⁷⁹ No wonder Keith Huthenlocker opined that most of us have fairly strong opinions about how persons would speak and generally conduct themselves. We accept those who meet such expectations and are inclined to reject those who do not. We find ourselves with the latter.⁴⁸⁰

Furthermore, leadership style can stimulate conflict in the church. There is always a leadership style commonly acceptance in every denomination. The attempts of the leadership to deviate from the acceptable norm always lead to conflict in the church. The daily administration of the church programs may not be acceptable to some individuals and such is the cause of trouble and division in the local church. His lack of love, patience, wisdom, his lack of training or even lack of deep spirituality may be the root cause of church conflict."⁴⁸¹ The misconception of authority and Christian leadership roles generate conflict in the church. The Christian concept of leadership and authority are that of servant hood as taught and exemplified in the life of

⁴⁷⁷ Florence Hittaner, *Personality Plus: How to Understand Others by Understanding Yourself* (Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2009): 23-73.

⁴⁷⁸ Peter Awojobi, *Church Management*, p.54

⁴⁷⁹ Keith Huthenlocker, *Conflict and Caring* (Grand Rapid: Radio Bible Class, 1986), 6.

⁴⁸⁰ William, R. J. *Pastor and People* (Lagos: Nigerian Christian Ministries Publications, 1998), 12.

⁴⁸¹ Oluwaponmle Gideon Adetunji, *Leadership in Action: A Source Book in Church Administration for Students and Ministers* (Ibadan: Baptist Press, 2010), 131.

Jesus Christ. A true leader leads by example and does not demand obedient but earns it through his selfless service which inspires his followers to imitate him because of confidence they have in him.

There are cases of leadership conflict that are associated with poor communication or hoarding of information from the followers. Situations where leaders fail to communicate correct information to members, conflicts are inevitable. This is because everyone wants clear instruction about what they need to do. Good communication is the key to sound organizational practice and successful group relationships. Unfortunately, many Christian leaders do not give accurate and clear information to their followers. The leadership is to provide clear, accurate facts and figures so that their followers can effectively complete their spiritual tasks or ministries.⁴⁸²

Effects of Leadership Conflict in the Church

As mentioned earlier, leadership conflict is a struggle, fight or argument between or among leaders especially in order to get something. One of the effects of leadership conflict is that, the fellowship and communion of the church is broken down.⁴⁸³ Members become suspicious of each other.⁴⁸⁴ The church will eventually lost its spiritual power. Things may not move anymore. It will affect every aspect of the church life such as attendance at programme, collection of offerings, physical development, members become passive and the enthusiasm to do the work of God may be lost.⁴⁸⁵ The Holy spirit may eventually leave the church.⁴⁸⁶

Also, there would be retardation in the growth and expansion of the gospel efforts in the events of leadership conflict. Souls would not be won into the kingdom of God. This reduces the membership in the church which will affect the capacity to function effectively. The church may experience financial drift because the people who ought to contribute may have left in the time of tension and conflict. There may be some members who will sit

⁴⁸² Peter Awojobi Church Management P42.

⁴⁸³ Yusuf Biniyat Jnr Challenges Facing the Contemporary African Church (Kaduna: ZOE Graphic, 2012), 33

⁴⁸⁴ Peter Awojobi, Church Management p.36

⁴⁸⁵ Oluwaponmile Adetunji, Leadership in Action pp.130-131

⁴⁸⁶ Peter Awojobi, Church Management p. 67

on the fence and thus become silent and watch events as it unfolds without any meaningful contribution because of the prevailing situation in the church.⁴⁸⁷

Furthermore, open confrontation has been experienced in some churches during leadership conflict which led to physical combat, verbal assault, in the church and thus police were invited to broker peace.⁴⁸⁸ Some churches were closed for worship temporarily because of security reasons. This has resulted in disintegration of the church in some situation and the founding of new church from the membership of the old one.

Lack of focus is another effect of leadership conflict. Whenever there is tension or conflict church attention will change. Instead of preaching the gospel, the attention the church will now be on how to manage crisis. This will affect the life and ministry of the church. The time for missions and evangelism will be given to conflict management. According to Aworinde Sola, when there is conflict in the church, there will be unnecessary and careless spending. Misappropriation of funds will be the order of the day.⁴⁸⁹ No wonder Collins R. Cavy declared that: "A crises is more than an increase in tension or disruption of our schedules. Crises often turn our life in different directions and the way in which we respond can have a bearing on our future..."⁴⁹⁰ In other words, conflict has always affected the vision, mission, and goals of the church. The resources that are supposed to be used positively for the achievement of the laudable goals of the church are utilized to pursue the course of leadership conflict. The energy that ought to be used in the propagation of the gospel is used to attack one another in the attempt to gain superiority.

Concluding Remarks

⁴⁸⁷ Ayo Adeniyi, Management of Conflicts in Churches: A case study of Oyo West Baptist Association. An unpublished work.

⁴⁸⁸ Cele Leadership Conflict worsen As police invite Factional Leaders.

⁴⁸⁹ Aworinde Sola, The Church in Crisis (Ibadan: _____ press, 1993), 27

⁴⁹⁰ Carry R. Collins, How to be a people Helper (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers inc. 1993), 114.

Leadership is all about “understanding the players, bringing them together, and getting them work together as a team to reach their potential.⁴⁹¹ To restore peace and sanity among the church leadership, it is the responsibility of those at the top to create an environment where each member of the church participates in leadership. It is obvious that most of the leadership tussles ravaging the church today came as a result of leadership succession. To alleviate this, the church must put a reliable and solid succession arrangement in place.

The church needs to encourage sound Bible teachings for all church members. This will afford them the opportunity of knowing biblical position on issues. There should be adoption of policy on systematic discipleship training for all church members especially the leaders.⁴⁹² Introduction of training, seminars and conference activities into the church schedules will help to expose church membership to basic truth that will make them effective and good leaders. Special training can be organized for different department of the church to increase effectiveness in the service of God.

Also, there is the need for good communication between the leaders and the followers. A leader’s communication must be consistent, clear and courageous.⁴⁹³ He must also be a good listener. The contemporary church leaders need to use modern management principles, tools, and techniques in administration. The importance of information communication technology cannot be overemphasized for any church that wants to remain relevant in this age. Leadership must avail them the opportunity of the managerial software for efficient and effective communication.

Furthermore, it is important that both the leader and the church be purpose driven for maximum productivity in the gospel endeavor. This calls for laying solid foundation for a healthy church that has purpose which must be communicated to the membership for understanding and acceptance. The church organizes around her purposes and also applies them in daily living. The church must be built by turning attendees into members and also

⁴⁹¹ John C. Maxwell, *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork* (Lagos: Academic Press plc, 2001), 212.

⁴⁹² Elwell’s *Evangelical Dictionary* electronic edition.

⁴⁹³ John C. Maxwell, *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork* pp 208-209

developing them to become mature members and ministers.⁴⁹⁴ Sola Aworinde postulated that, cell church provides opportunity for discouraging and developing leaders in the context of church. There is opportunity to develop potential leaders under the mentoring of matured and trained pastors. They can be deployed to serve the Master under supervision without tension or conflict.⁴⁹⁵

To avoid or minimize leadership conflict, church leaders must see leadership as opportunity to serve. It is not a do-or-die affair. The Christian leader must not see himself as winner takes all, but must learn that the work of the ministry is a collective responsibility. Therefore the relationship between the top leader and other leaders should not be servant to master relationship, but one that must co-exist for the common good of the whole church.

⁴⁹⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*. (Kaduna: Evangel publication, 1995), pp.75-137; 309-393.

⁴⁹⁵ Sola Aworinde, *Church Growth through the G-12 Cell model* (Lagos: The Agape Publication Board, 2002), 45-46.