



Pentecostal leadership disputes in Zimbabwe: A pastoral challenge

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Dates:

Received: 28 May 2024

Accepted: 16 July 2024

Published: 29 Aug. 2024

How to cite this article:

Mundhluri, Z. & Masango,
M.J., 2024, 'Pentecostal
leadership disputes in
Zimbabwe: A pastoral
challenge', *HTS Theologiese
Studies/Theological Studies*
80(1), a9940. [https://doi.
org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9940](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9940)

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Conflicts in the Pentecostal church leadership have been growing since time immemorial. However, leadership disputes have become traumatic and tragic in Zimbabwe to the extent that junior pastors are committing suicide and killing each other because of these conflicts. The article uses the practical theological framework to explore the complex intersections of conflict within the Pentecostal church, analysing the various factors and dynamics contributing to these conflicts. This work examines and addresses the ramifications of a leadership conflict within the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM). The junior pastors, who have been impacted by the leadership dispute, have endured trauma stemming from the ongoing conflict among the church's prominent leaders, which is the central focus of this study. To better understand the lived experience of trauma among these pastors, a qualitative research design was employed. Through purposeful sampling and face-to-face interviews, participants were given the opportunity to share their narratives of leadership trauma. The result is that junior pastors are internalising the trauma, which is affecting them spiritually, emotionally and physically in ministry. This article proposes a healing methodology utilising the Gerkin and Positive Deconstruction approach.

Contribution: This study leverages a practical theological framework to examine the challenges of providing pastoral care for junior ministers who were impacted by leadership disputes within AFM thereby contributing to Pentecostal approaches to care.

Keywords: pastors; trauma; internalisation; wounded; AFM; senior leaders; leadership; conflict.

Introduction

Disputes over leadership have long been a matter of concern for scholars, as evidenced by the works of Maxwell (1993), Adetunji (2010), Awojobi (2001), Chivasa (2018), Chivasa (2022), and Chikwanha (2022). However, this study delves into a unique leadership dispute within the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM). This dispute, unlike others, has resulted in schisms between two warring factions, each led by a national leader. The conflict has caused a great deal of intimidation and fear among members of both factions, with one interviewer's faction being targeted in particular. Meanwhile, in Zimbabwe's capital city, another rival faction led by the church chairperson is vying with his deputy chairperson for dominance within the organisation (Chivasa 2022). Both pastors are members of AFM with many branches. The aim of this article includes pastoral care for the junior pastors and also to review and address leadership conflicts in the AFM.

The present article focuses on the often-overlooked impact of a leadership conflict in AFM on its junior pastors. The African proverb 'When two elephants fight, the grass suffers' aptly describes the context of this leadership conflict in the church between top leaders who are two senior National Executive Leaders. In this setting, the 'elephant' metaphorically represents the chairperson and their deputy, who hold significant power and influence, while the 'grass' points to the lower leaders, who are junior pastors compelled to align themselves with one of the two rival factions (Forward 2001). The ongoing dispute has adversely affected these junior pastors, who are perceived as victims requiring healing. By adopting a narrative approach, the researcher seeks to comprehend the trauma experienced by these pastors in the wake of the conflict. The leadership conflicts are the reason of this study, which explores leadership disputes involving junior pastors in order to establish a framework for delivering pastoral support to those affected. Accordingly, the research objective was to investigate and address issues of leadership conflict within the AFM context.

Theoretical frameworks

Pastoral care has long been a crucial aspect of the church's ministry, serving as a means to support and guide individuals through the challenges of life. The practical theological framework will be used to address the issue affecting the junior pastors. Two influential theoretical models in this

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field are Gerkin's Shepherding Model and Pollard's Positive Deconstruction, which provide distinctive perspectives on the praxis of pastoral care within a practical theological framework. Gerkin's Shepherding Model, as described in the systems pastoral care approach, emphasises the importance of the pastor functioning as an 'enabler' who crafts a social system that operates preventively at multiple levels (Pattison 1972). This model suggests that the pastor should not solely provide direct care, but rather facilitate the development of a church community that can serve as a 'center of moral enquiry, a centre for personal learning and growth, for human sustenance and nourishment and for human reparation' (Pattison 1972).

In contrast, Pollard's Positive Deconstruction model, as discussed in the context of Henri Nouwen's pastoral care approach, highlights the importance of moving beyond psychology and focusing on the spiritual dimension of the individual (Dreyer 2003). This model emphasises the pastor's role in helping the suffering person to recognise their spiritual identity, as opposed to solely addressing their psychological needs (Dreyer 2003). The practical implications of these two models can be seen in their potential to shape the delivery of pastoral care services (Derrickson & Derrickson 1994). By adopting a systems-based approach, as described in Gerkin's Shepherding Model, pastoral care departments can restructure their services to better address the needs of the broader community, rather than solely focusing on individual care. Similarly, the Positive Deconstruction model's emphasis on the spiritual aspects of pastoral care can inform the development of more holistic and integrative approaches to supporting individuals in crisis or experiencing grief and trauma (Anthony 2019). In conclusion, the Gerkin's Model and Pollard's Deconstruction offered complementary perspectives on the practice of pastoral care within a practical theological framework. By considering the strengths of both models, pastoral care providers can develop more comprehensive and effective strategies to support individuals and communities in their spiritual and emotional well-being.

Understanding Christian leadership

Understanding Christian leadership is a critical aspect of effective ministry and church governance. Christian leadership is rooted in the biblical principles of servant leadership, as exemplified by Jesus Christ (Roberts 2015). This style of leadership emphasises humility, compassion, and a focus on the needs of others, rather than personal ambition (Ortiz-Gómez et al. 2022). At the heart of Christian leadership is the concept of developing and empowering others to grow in their faith and become effective leaders themselves (Quashie & Aidoo 2020). This involves mentoring, teaching and modelling the character and behaviour that reflect the values of the Christian faith. Effective Christian leaders must possess a strong foundation in Scripture and a deep commitment to their own spiritual growth (Quashie & Aidoo 2020). They must also be able to navigate the complexities of organisational management and interpersonal dynamics, while maintaining a clear vision and sense of

purpose (Roberts 2015). One key aspect of Christian leadership is the ability to foster a sense of community and connectivity among followers (Ortiz-Gómez et al. 2022). Christian leaders must be willing to serve, sacrifice and put the needs of others before their own (Roberts 2015). Ultimately, the goal of Christian leadership is to glorify God and advance the Kingdom of God (Quashie & Aidoo 2020). This requires a delicate balance of spiritual and practical leadership, as well as pointing out the unique challenges and opportunities that are faced by the pastors.

Leadership development is necessary to raise effective leaders from one generation to another, but AFM systems seem to be failing to assist junior pastors. The leadership practices within the AFM church do not align with scholarly perspectives. These conflicts have significantly impacted the junior pastors emotionally and spiritually. Therefore, it is crucial to thoroughly examine and address the leadership conflicts in the AFM.

Reviewing leadership conflicts in Apostolic Faith Mission

Leadership conflict has been contentious in the AFM and a long-standing issue that has significantly impacted the religious landscape of the country. The once united church has now split into two rival factions, each claiming legitimacy and ownership of church property. The church now has two opposing presidents – one group identifying as the 'Real AFM' and the other as the 'Reformed AFM', with both camps declaring being the real owner of the church. These disputes are still being decided in the courts. The case of an AFM pastor who was kidnapped by a rival faction and threatened with death if he failed to surrender church property highlights the complex trauma that junior pastors are experiencing (Sakurai 2018). From these cases, it can be concluded that the church is inclined towards an adversarial position causing the majority of junior pastors to be traumatised and wounded.

The ongoing president, who had held the position for 12 years, prepared a successor to step in, but the process of selecting a successor has been marred by conflicts and a lack of consensus within the church leadership (Chivasa 2022). The incumbent president's decision to handpick a successor has been met with resistance from the Deputy President, leading to a power struggle that has further exacerbated tensions within the organisation (Chivasa 2022). This situation is emblematic of the broader challenges facing faith-based organisations in Zimbabwe, where adversarial positions and a reliance on legal recourse have become commonplace in resolving conflicts (Chivasa 2022).

In the case of the AFM, the incumbent president's attempt to consolidate power through the handpicked successor has arguably undermined the church's internal cohesion and the legitimacy of its leadership (Chivasa 2022). The church constitution states that the president is elected by the national conference (Chivasa 2022) and this unilateral decision by the incumbent has further heightened the conflict (Mhandara,

Manyeruke & Hofisi 2013). This selection of the president created tension and division within the church, as the deputy president and others rejected the legitimacy of the handpicked successor as per the church constitution (Chivasa 2022).

The AFM constitution is a significant document that outlines the governance structure and dispute resolution mechanisms within the church (Chivasa 2022). The constitution is particularly relevant in the context of the ongoing leadership conflict within the church, where two rival factions, the 'Original' and the 'Reformist' are engaged in a protracted legal battle over the legitimacy of their respective leadership claims and the ownership of church property (Chivasa 2022). The constitutional provisions governing the church's leadership structure and the process for resolving such conflicts are crucial in understanding the dynamics of this dispute. According to the constitution, the church is led by a president who is elected by the General Council, the highest decision-making body of the church (Chivasa 2022). The constitution also outlines the procedures for addressing internal disputes, including the role of the judiciary in resolving conflicts that cannot be settled through the church's internal dispute resolution mechanisms (Chivasa 2022). However, the current leadership conflict appears to have exceeded the scope of the church's constitutional framework, with the rival factions resorting to the courts of law to assert their claims, as the constitution's provisions have proven insufficient in resolving the dispute (Chivasa 2022).

To gain deeper insights into the trauma experienced by these pastors, a qualitative research methodology was employed. Purposive sampling and one-on-one interviews facilitated the participating pastors' ability to share their personal narratives regarding leadership-related trauma. Twelve junior pastors from the AFM local assemblies in the area called South District (SD) of Midlands province, were selected. The interviews with these 12 individuals revealed that the leadership conflict within the AFM in Zimbabwe had a substantial negative impact on them. They reported experiencing feelings of fear, trauma, and a diminished trust in church leadership. The junior pastors concurred that the experience left them psychologically impacted and no longer feeling secure within the church context.

One interviewer said:

'As a minister this dispute affected me so much in that many souls were injured and lost as a result. Many people were negatively affected and now view ministers of the gospel as jokers. As leaders we are no longer taken seriously because we have proved to be selfish and unable to solve disputes amicably. Congregants look forward to leaders for guidance but we have failed in that regard dismally.' (Participant 1, male, junior pastor, 2 years in ministry)

This statement was supported by the other 11 junior pastors interviewed by the researcher. The other interviewer said:

'The conflict it created in me notion that true maturity in things of God is not authentic in today's ministers of the gospel of

Jesus Christ. Instead, we are hungry for power not God. I was traumatised as I was caught in between senior leadership and congregants. There was serious communication between the two sides as people made decisions silently without consulting us junior pastors. It had now become a political. I lost friends in the process as some of my friends in Christ took sides different from mine.' (Participant 2, female, junior pastor, 4 years in ministry)

Another interviewer said:

'I was traumatised, feared for my life and also could not cope with pressure from church members that I had to keep this trauma inside than to speak out. It was hard even to go to church and preach with the stress I had over this issue. It has made me treat every leader with suspicion. I have started to pray for discernment more. I don't know who to trust and not trust anymore. The line between those with pure hearts and those who do not have become very blurry. It was bad, I struggled to even pray and because was thinking what does the future hold for me. Trauma and stress were all over me and my family. We had no help for anyone. This dispute was not necessary and painted a bad picture for the whole church.' (Participant 3, male, junior pastor, 1 year in ministry)

The junior pastors felt caught in the middle between the top leaders and the congregation, as decisions made by the senior leadership negatively impacted the junior pastors' ability to minister effectively. This leadership conflict had a significant traumatic impact on the junior pastors, as their experiences endangered their sense of safety and security within the church context, even without physical harm, according to Musisi's definition of trauma (Musisi 2004:80).

The conflicts within the AFM have had devastating consequences for the church's junior pastors, subjecting them to hardship and adversity. These divisions have led to a bitter power struggle, with junior pastors turning to the courts to protect their interests, further intensifying the conflict (Chivasa 2022). The challenges faced by these junior pastors have contributed to alarming rates of attrition, with factors like disillusionment and burnout driving many out of the ministry (Elkington 2013). To mitigate the tragic effects, the AFM church needs to deal with the causes of the conflicts, implement effective conflict resolution strategies and provide comprehensive support for its pastors.

The impact of this leadership conflict on the mental and emotional well-being of AFM junior pastors cannot be overstated. When religious leaders experience protracted conflict and instability in their own institutions, it can lead to a profound sense of trauma and distress (Chivasa 2022). The breakdown of unity and the lack of clear leadership can leave junior pastors feeling isolated, unsupported and questioning their purpose and calling (Sakurai 2018). Moreover, the high-stakes nature of the conflict, with issues of property ownership and institutional legitimacy at stake, can create a climate of fear and suspicion among the junior pastors (Chivasa 2022). This, in turn, can lead to junior pastors internalising the pain and stress, rather than seeking the necessary support and resources to cope effectively.

The repercussions of this internalised trauma can be far-reaching (Elkington 2013). Pastors may find themselves struggling with burnout, depression and even committing suicide. This exodus of experienced and dedicated spiritual leaders can have a devastating impact on the church's ability to serve its congregants and fulfil its mission.

Towards addressing church leadership conflicts

After interviewing the junior pastors and engaging with the literature, there is a need to address this leadership conflict in the AFM. To address this crisis, it is crucial for the AFM to prioritise the well-being of its pastoral staff. This may involve implementing conflict resolution strategies, providing mental health support and fostering a culture of trust, transparency and mutual understanding (Chivasa 2022). By addressing the underlying trauma and empowering its pastors, the AFM can begin to heal the divisions within its ranks and emerge as a stronger, more resilient institution. The traditional view within Christendom has been to approach conflict with a sense of passivism, interpreting biblical admonitions as a call to avoid conflict altogether as a virtue (Ennis 2008). However, this stance fails to recognise the fundamental truth that conflict, when handled appropriately, can serve as a catalyst for growth, renewal and greater unity. In fact, the acknowledgement and proper resolution of conflicts within Christian institutes of higher learning have led to a split and uniqueness shift, suggesting that a more proactive and constructive approach to conflict management is necessary. One promising avenue for addressing church leadership conflicts is the utilisation of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) techniques. Dispute within a church is often rooted in differing opinions, perspectives and ways of viewing issues, which can lead to clashes among leaders. The use of alternative conflict resolution methods, such as negotiation and arbitration, can provide a structured and collaborative framework for resolving these conflicts, allowing church leaders to find common ground, address underlying issues and reach mutually satisfactory solutions (Afolabi 2019).

By embracing a more nuanced and productive approach to conflict management, church leaders can not only mitigate the detrimental effects of leadership conflicts but also leverage them as opportunities for growth, reconciliation and the strengthening of the church's mission and witness.

Developing conflict resolution strategies

Conflict is unavoidable in any organisation, and the AFM and other similar churches are no exception. However, the key is to recognise the fact that conflict can be a positive force for growth and development if managed effectively. The AFM, for instance, needs to establish an internal conflict management system to address intra-church conflicts. This will demonstrate to the church that conflict itself is not inherently negative, but rather a challenge that can be leveraged to improve the church leadership. One strategy

that can be particularly effective for faith-based organisations is the use of ADR techniques. While scholars like Katz and Kovack (2016) have proposed various ways of managing church conflicts, ADR has been underutilised despite its potential. This approach emphasises collaborative problem-solving and can help mitigate the divisiveness that often arises from more adversarial processes. By empowering pastors to work together to find mutually agreeable solutions, ADR can strengthen community ties and align the church's activities with its core spiritual mission. Similarly, establishing clear codes of conduct and grievance procedures, as the AFM has done, can help pre-empt and de-escalate conflicts before they become entrenched. Outlining expected behaviours and providing formal channels for addressing concerns gives members a constructive outlet and reinforces the church's commitment to fairness and accountability. Ultimately, the key is to recognise the fact that conflict is a natural part of any human organisation, including faith communities. The goal should be to develop conflict management strategies that turn disagreements into opportunities for growth, both for the individuals involved and the congregation as a whole (Chivasa 2022).

Developing pastoral care for the junior pastors

The study employed a narrative therapy approach to address the healing needs of junior pastors affected by leadership conflicts within the AFM. This approach, developed by Pollard, involves a 'positive deconstruction' process where individuals critically examine and reconstruct their beliefs and worldviews (Pollard 1997:63). Pollard's model, which draws insights from his experience of rebuilding a car, can be applied in a therapeutic context to assist the wounded and also traumatised junior pastors resulting from the leadership conflicts. The study suggests that this involves listening to the pastors' stories, encouraging them to focus on healing, and analysing their worldviews to identify both the elements of truth and the negative beliefs stemming from their experiences. The purpose is to guide the pastors towards new possibilities and alternative outcomes.

According to Gerkin, pastoral care encompasses the pastor's obligation to give care and support to both people and members (Gerkin 1997:11). This paper proposes the uses of shepherding on the neglected junior pastors who are traumatised by leadership conflicts that are affecting their ministry and emotional well-being (Marambi 2022). Pastors should be taught the skills of disengaging from traumatic environments without abandoning the congregation. Ultimately, the well-being of AFM pastors must be a top priority if the church is to weather this storm and fulfil its spiritual mission. Only by addressing the deep-seated trauma and pain experienced by its leaders can the AFM hope to unite, heal and move forward as a stronger, more resilient institution.

Developing narrative therapy

This study proposes the use of implementing narrative therapy to assist the pastors who are wounded by

leadership conflicts. Narrative therapy emphasises the importance of people's stories in shaping their lived experiences and identities. By engaging in this therapeutic process, AFM junior pastors can begin to reframe their trauma narratives, reclaim their sense of agency, and find pathways towards healing and resilience (Magezi 2007). Narrative therapy's emphasis on community, collaboration and the co-creation of meaning can be particularly resonant in the context of a church like the AFM, where the pastoral role is deeply embedded within a larger religious community.

Furthermore, this study recommends incorporating an ethic of care within the pastoral care framework to better address the emotional and spiritual needs of these traumatised leaders. As argued in Anthony (2019), a care model called Christian ethics can provide a spiritual framework for caregivers to extend compassion, empathy and practical support to pastors facing trauma. By adopting this approach, AFM junior pastors can be equipped with the necessary skills and resources to tend to their own emotional well-being while also supporting their congregants. In conclusion, the leadership conflict within the AFM has had a profound impact on the mental and emotional well-being of its junior pastors.

Conclusion

The article unpacked leadership conflicts that are causing tragic trauma, especially to junior pastors in the AFM. The study's findings indicate that junior pastors have internalised the trauma and been wounded by the leadership conflicts. To address this, the AFM church should establish its own tribunal to resolve conflict matters. As evidenced by the narratives of the junior pastors, leadership disputes pose a significant challenge to the church's stability, which presents a pastoral concern that requires attention. The research concludes that the AFM did not consider the trauma junior pastors experienced because of leadership disputes. As a result, pastoral caregivers could not support wounded junior pastors, hindering their healing process. All participants shared their pain and suffering from the top leaders' fighting while disregarding the junior pastors' wounds. The study found that junior pastors were emotionally traumatised and hurt by leadership disputes. The paper proposed strategies and methods to assist junior pastors in finding healing. The article suggests that junior pastors should be encouraged to narrate their trauma rather than to internalise the trauma. This methodology should help victims of leadership disputes heal and care for their congregations in a better way.

Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on the author's thesis entitled 'Pentecostal leadership disputes in Zimbabwe: A pastoral challenge' towards the degree of Master of Theology in Practical Theology at University of Pretoria, South Africa, with Maake J. Masango as supervisor,

received March 2023, available here: https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/95598/Mundhluri_Pentecostal_2023.pdf?sequence=3.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Z.M. and M.J.M. contributed equally to this article.

Ethical considerations

The author got an ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria's postgraduate committee and upheld research ethics in the entire studying process by adhering to principles of informed consent, accuracy and fairness, protection of privacy and confidentiality. Ethical clearance number: T032/23.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Z.M., upon reasonable request.

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