



THE NEW NORMAL: EFFECTS OF PASTORAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES ON CHURCH MEMBERSHIP RETENTION IN AKURE CENTRAL BAPTIST ASSOCIATION, ONDO STATE.

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Abstract

This study examined the Effects of Pastoral Leadership Practices on Church Membership Retention in Akure Central Baptist Association, Ondo State in the wake of the new normal. The purpose of this research is to determine why new members keep joining Baptist churches regularly and are not being retained and how these new members and older members can be retained through pastoral leadership practices post COVID-19 pandemic. The analytical technique used in analyzing the data collected for the study was the simple percentage and frequency count method. The study's findings reveal that quite a good percentage of Akure Central Baptist Association's members observe that pastoral leadership practices like Welfare, visitation, and leadership expertise, among others, affect church membership retention. Findings revealed that 81 and 19 respondents representing 81% and 19%, agree and disagree, respectively, that leadership incompetence is one of the problems of church membership retention. While 65 and 35 respondents representing 65% and 35% disagreed that more Seminary education will lead to Church membership retention, 95 and 5 respondents representing 95% and 5% agreed and disagreed that Welfare and visitation are core to church membership retention. 85 (85%) and 15 (15%) agreed and disagreed that a new member's class is perfect for church membership retention. In the light of the results above, the researcher gave leader and the Church must be purpose-driven for maximum productivity in pastoral leadership of ICT,



turning attendees into members through new members' classes, developing them to become mature members and ministers among others.

Keywords: Pastoral Leadership Practices, Church Membership, Retention, Baptist Association, Akure

Introduction

Leadership is influence, according to John Maxwell (Maxwell, 2015: accessed June 6, 2019). Oluropo Dairo, in "A Study in Leadership", 2014, asserts that every organization is only as good as its leader. According to Warren (1994), leadership is the ability to get followers, and you work backwards from that point of reference to figure out how to lead. Leadership is one of the most crucial ingredients that determine the effectiveness of an organization. Because this is true in Institutions, business environments, volunteer, and religious organizations, the administration is studied worldwide. One of the most comprehensive leadership studies reviewed Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of leadership in over 1,000-page volume. Despite its massive nature, the work fails to name all the articles on leadership before 1990 (Rainer, T. (2012, July 24).

Pastoral leadership in Christ's Church is a crucial factor. Several churches flourish, or flounder based on the type of religious leadership provided and practiced. Peter Wagner, one of the leading authors on church growth, contends that pastoral leadership is a key to church growth. Wagner opines that lay persons give credit to pastors when their churches thrive or blame Pastors when their Church is not doing well. Given the importance of pastoral leadership, one may then ask, what ingredients can enable one to be an effective ecclesiastical leader?

In his thoughts, Myles asserts that Pastors are leaders within a congregation (Myles, 2008:44). Meanwhile, there are other leaders in the Church. However, Pastors must provide leadership in the assembly. Their leadership involves vision and initiative. They see the picture of the Ministry, communicate the dreams, gain consensus and commitment to common objectives, take the initiative, set the pace in ministry action, and multiply their influence by transforming attendees or followers into leaders. This practically proclaims the gospel to believers and unbelievers employing preaching and worship as well as evangelism and nurture. The Pastor diligently cares for the church members and other persons in the community through pastoral counseling and visitation as well as family ministries and grief support and consistently leads the Church in achieving its missions.



All the work of a pastor is essential: planning and management are connected to preaching, evangelism, and pastoral care. The result of shepherding is not done for the benefit of the sheep alone. The Lord has chosen the Church to spread the message of salvation to the entire world. The Pastor must feed, organize, and lead a well-trained group of people to fulfill God's will. The main administrator of the local congregation is, however, the Pastor. He is responsible for the overall actions and results in the Church's work. He needs skills in planning, overseeing, and evaluating the Church's position. Equally, the Pastor should have the ability and the authority to make decisions and to decide upon the best course of action. From the community of faith's social perspective, proclaiming is practiced one-to-one. Likewise, caring is often one-on-one or one-to-a-few. Pastoral leadership engages working in a challenging blending of a public and private setting. Participative processes are fundamental to effective religious leadership. Leadership in a congregational setting such as Baptist can be used as a lens to examine caring, managing, and proclaiming. A prime opportunity for leaders is preaching. In this role, pastors can articulate the congregation's vision, model the congregation's atmosphere and mood, and demonstrate their trustworthiness and credibility or illustrate from a caring angle. Support structures and problem-solving procedures show how leadership is concretely demonstrated in development.

Leadership in a congregational setting is relational and interactive in its focus (Adetunji, 2010:3). Since the leader is not the only member of the congregation, followers, preferences, and the full range of ministry demands and circumstances are to be considered. Leadership is not done in isolation. Leadership and followership relate to one another; leaders and situations interact. Without solid pastoral leadership in the local Church, the ministries and people will suffer. Attention to religious leadership practices in local churches is, therefore, pertinent especially in the wake of the new normal. With the advent of the outbreak of COVID-19, there is no doubt that social media has had effects on the propagation of the Gospel. It has equally gained wider acceptability and usability and it is also becoming probably the most important communication tools among people before and during and surely after the lockdown on the Universe. To effectively lead as a Baptist minister among the Baptists, a minimal knowledge of the various platforms for effective leadership practice is now required than ever.

The importance of pastoral leadership cannot be overemphasized due to the following reasons:

First, the Church's problem is the Pastor because it is he whom God has entrusted to lead the Sheep. The Pastor is responsible for fulfilling



that calling. Adeniji opines that everyone may not be born to lead, but leadership skills can be learnt, developed, enhanced and articulated. Therefore, Pastor's responsibility involves learning and being trained in leadership. The Church is filled with all kinds of problems, such as conflicts among people or co-workers, but some could be avoided and better handled if the pastoral leadership has the skills to handle them correctly.

Secondly, the concept in the managerial world today has dramatically impacted many businesses. The Church is not a business; nevertheless, it deals with people, programs, and projects like any other organization. Knowledge and skills in handling people, abilities to envision the future, methods of setting long-range goals, and ways of communication are just as necessary in the Church as they are in the business world. Integrating valuable materials from the managerial world into the Ministry of the Church will be incredibly beneficial.

Thirdly, as some churches are developing and expanding numerically and in terms of infrastructure, pastors may be tempted to be as successful as their colleagues. This could make a Pastor go out of their bounds to satisfy their ambition, leading to failure. Therefore, pastoral leaders must develop their character along with their ministerial skills.

However, this researcher's interest is not just pastoral leadership but the Effects of Pastoral Leadership Practices on Church Membership Retention in Akure Central Baptist Association, Ondo State in the wake of the new normal. Quality church membership in any church is key to the growth and development of a church. Just as insufficient money in circulation leads to hardship, so does a decline in church membership, whose members constantly move to another denomination or ministry. Where church membership dwindles, both the pastor and membership experience stress in achieving success in Ministry.

In the olden days, Christians were given multiple assignments to preach, teach and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world's end (Jeremiah, January 3, 2016). That is the "The Great Commission" (Carver, 2015; Matthew 28:19-20, Life Application Study Bible, 2009). Jesus Christ instructs His disciples before His ascension back to heaven: "Therefore, go, make disciple of all nations Teach the new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you, and know that ..." (Matthew 28:19-20; N.I.V. Bible, 2005).

In fulfilment of the Commission, the Church is given a mission to tell people about the culmination of salvation and teach God's word to both the believers (saved) and the unbelievers (unsaved). Making disciples is not easy. It involves funds and human resources. Despite



the difficulty in making disciples, Baptists in Akure Central Association have continued to plant churches, gaining members to these churches, conducting the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper from time to time to gain more members into the churches.

However, this researcher has noted that several people join the Baptist church weekly, but the churches are never complete. It is also said that those who enter the Baptist churches do it briefly before they locate another denomination if not abandon faith in Akure Central Baptist Association of Ondo State. The loss of members makes it challenging to disciple or teach them as commanded by Jesus. Wherever these "untrained" and "undisciplined" individuals turned to, most times, they turned out to be thorns in the flesh of ministers and churches they eventually joined. These, among other reasons, have always been a concern to this researcher and motivation for this work.

Justification for Church Membership Retention

Several reasons justify church membership retention: it improves the Church's ability to know and lead more people to Christ that will end in eternal life. It helps new and old members stay in the Church, become deeply committed disciples, and remain long enough to teach Christ's commandment. Pastoral care interventions or practices for membership retention would ensure better use of the Church's resources.

According to Johnson, the effects of Pastoral Leadership Practices on Retention show that God orders Pastors to serve people beyond finances, entertainment, or numbers (Johnson, 2015: 45). In doing so, Johnson (2015) opined that pastoral church leaders and lay leaders focus on the members' spiritual wellness and reaching out to the unsaved. Pastors and Church leaders primarily teach their church members to influence society (Jackson, 2009:23).

Jesus's ascension into the heavens, and the establishment of the Christian Church over two thousand years ago have made the Christian Church have a receptive influence on society worldwide (McBride & Giem, 2006:67). Many scholars have studied relationships and interactions among family, marriage, religion, community, and man's social problems and concluded that Christianity plays a role in society (D'Souza, 2007; Fagan, 1996:89; McBride & Giem, 2006:89). It, therefore, shows the need for membership growth and nurturing. From a universal perspective, the impact of the Christian Church on society is seen through its involvement in world relief, aid, humanitarianism, and economic development. Christian organizations, such as World Vision, Maranatha, and Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), have provided worldwide relief and aid in the two forms of



medical services, HIV/AIDS counseling and medical care, community development, water purification, orphanage services, economic assistance, shelter, food, educational opportunities, first responders during disasters and catastrophic crisis to suffering people around the world countless times (Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), 2005; Evans E., 1979; McBride B., & Giem, L. G., 2006; World Vision, 2006).

Pastoral Leadership Practice of Closing the Back Door for Church Membership Retention

Many factors are involved in closing the back door to a church. Generally speaking, there are two doors to any Church. The front and the back door, respectively. Visitors and members who come in through the front door are the Pastor's duty to man the back door. Ensure it is well closed. It will help to retain membership in the Local Church. Foremost in closing the back door to a church is for the modern Pastor, who has his parishioners, and new members at heart to learn the modern means of communication. Communication is the bedrock of pastoral practice that is engaging among the members and the entire world with a view to achieving its moral, relational and doctrinal goals and objectives through social media. Social media is a term used to describe a variety of web-based platforms, applications and technologies that enable people to socially interact with one another online. Some examples of Social Media Websites (SMW) and applications include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, Digg, Blogs, 2go, YouTube, Whatsapp and other sites that have content based on user participation and User-Generated Content (UGC) (Jamie, 2021, an internet source). Among other factors, a pastoral leadership practice of closing the back door for church membership retention should put in place New members' class. And invest quality time in visitation (Anie, 2013: 13). Pastoral care intervention (Oyedele, 2017:4-20) engages members in biblical teaching (Ayandokun, 2020) and promotes unity and love among members (Babarinde, 2016:9).

A visitation committee should be constituted in any Local Church and be empowered to run the Ministry as unto God. Oyinlola, in his book, *Practical Approach to Church Administration*, asserted that "the people/members of the Nigerian Baptist Convention are frail in visitation" (Oyinlola, 2006: 36). If this assertion is true, the Baptist denomination should not continue to be weak in this regard. This researcher believes that for effective visitation, all groups in the Church like the MMU (Men Missionary Union), W.M.U. (Women Missionary Union), R.A. (Royal Ambassadors), Lydia, Youth Fellowship, Drama, and Choristers, among others, should have their visitation team aside from the Church's Visitation Committee.



Pastors through the visitation team should devise a means of visiting any visitor twice that same week of the visit. The primary assignment is to greet visitors on behalf of the Pastor and the Church and pray with them. The Pastor should also call that same week. Deacons being the third order of the Christian ministry (Adegbite, 2015:108), in the Baptist Church, it is the second leadership office next to the Pastor's office to carry out particular duties. The Deacons' Fellowship and other leaders of the Church can also go around in the name of the Pastor and the Church to visit new members. In recent years many of those most familiar with efficient church methods urge that at least one deacon for every twenty-five members should be chosen for effective visitation ministry. (Hobbs, 1962:223). Babarinde posited that any deacon or person assigned to visit such a prospective member must be well informed about the Church's history, polity, policies, administration, doctrine, and welfare for members. Visitation team members must make necessary reports and recommendations available to the Pastor (Babarinde, 2009:43).

Stressing the importance of visitation, welfare, and care among church members, Abimbola posited, "Your church members will forgive you for almost anything except failing to visit..." (Abimbola, 2019:78). Entertainment for first-timers who attends church is not bad. It is highly encouraged. Churches can develop brochures as part of packages for visitors. It will further introduce the Church to visitors and their friends. Joshua Blunt posited that when Church creates a visitor bag, it could provide four results:

- 1) a favourable arrangement for one-to-one follow-up,
- 2) an attractive delivery means for the stack of brochures and essential information for each Visitor, and
- 3) entrée for church name and logo into their many spheres of influence.
- 4) creating first-time impressions

Contents of the visitor's bag can include literature about the Church's various ministries, the congregation's mission and values, brochures, tracts, etc.

A plan for a follow-up is expected to be put on the ground after visitation and care are given. If the Church's Website is advertised to visitors, have a unique address bar on the home page to an area just for easy access. Identify other milestones after which they will receive more and varied contacts. New members should be called out and prayed for by the Pastor quarterly. New members could be handed over to an old member whose residence is close to the Visitor. Visitors and senior members with the same profession could be paired for ministry. House fellowship leaders (where applicable) should also be given the data of visitors near their fellowship centers for onward



follow-up. Adekunle, a strong proponent of Cell Church in Nigeria, believes that a house is a conducive place for discipleship. What a house fellowship leader can do in Church membership retention cannot be quantified if done correctly (Adekunle, 2011:56).

New members' classes should be encouraged in Baptist churches. Capacity building is significant at this point. Akinsola said, "God assesses a church based on the quality of the people in the church (LWBC Pastors' Retreat Manual, 2014). Empathic listening is encouraged. Covey opined that "seek first to understand" involves a profound shift in paradigm (Covey, 2004:167). The man typically seeks first to be understood, but most people do not listen to understand but with the intent to reply. They are either speaking or preparing to speak". Humans are decision-making beings. Pastors are expected to approach the New Members' class by listening empathically. Also, in this class, the apparent purpose of the Church will be taught. Rick Warren posited that a clear purpose does not only define what we do; it explains what we do not do (Rick Warren, 1995:46).

In the same vein, pastoral leadership should be strong enough to train the existing Church members the need to know how to accommodate and receive new members. For example, making it easy for visitors to take their seats, avoiding side talks during services (negative or positive), ensuring you are well-composed and alert to every activity in the Church without any sign of fatigue or sleeping near a first-timer in the Church. Old members not in Church should be noted and called or visited promptly. Existing Church members should be proud of their Church and ready to market their Church. They should not be lazy. Departmental leaders should watch over their members and report adequately when due if there be any issue with a member.

Also, pastoral leadership should be strong enough to train Ushers, Choristers, and the Pastoral team on weekly effective ministrations to relate well with visitors. Dependence on the Holy Spirit and the Ministry of Prayer to retain church membership cannot be overemphasized. A Yoruba statement credited Rev Dr Lanre Olorunniyi concerning a member being proud of their Church, "Aguntan lo n bi aguntan, kii se Oluso'aguntan (which means Sheep begets Sheep, not a shepherd). This assertion suggests that training church members are one of the pastoral leadership practices where members are made to realize that it is members' primary duty to promote the image of the Church better than the Pastor to the outside world. The pastoral leadership practice expected is the enabling environment for members to display friendliness despite the fear of social distancing created during the COVID-19 pandemic.



It is straightforward for a growing church to appear healthy while leaving bruised and battered people in its wake. The reason is not far-fetched; subtract a 20 percent back-door rate from a 40 per cent visitor connection rate, and you are left with a 20 per cent growth rate, which appears healthy. This is tragic. By observing growing churches, it has been noted that many of these churches have had the same attendance for years, but the faces are constantly changing. Where did they all go? One would think they have relocated to another church that "met their needs." Unfortunately, many have not just left a church but have rejected Christianity altogether.

As a point of clarification, talking about the back door is about people who made initial assimilation and connection into one of the main areas of emphasis of the Church and made the Church a part of their routine. And suddenly turn around and go out the same way they came in, through the front door. Effective pastoral leadership that helps to retain church membership is discipleship. In Ephesians 4:11, fivefold functions are listed as essential to discipleship. The obstacles that limit the full expression of the Church included the apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, and shepherding and teaching obstacles. Each block held a principle for releasing disciples into their divine design. These principles included identifying, envisioning, empowering, equipping, and releasing disciples. The unified expression of these functions is essential to remove 21st-century disciples into their divine design. (Austin, 2014:436-440). Initial visitor connection requires a proactive process and has different dynamics. There are many reasons people stop coming to a church, but the most significant ones are the lack of friendliness and close relationships cum lack of meaningful worship service. This situation opens the door to a perception among unconnected people that the leaders are apathetic toward their status.

In His Opinion, Benjamin Burks posited that closing the back door to churches;

1. Measure what is measurable. While worship attendance is hard to capture, small adult group classes are relatively simple. Children's activities are the simplest because security issues require churches to keep accurate records. The attendance register is quickly done here. A pastor may get push back from some of these established groups, but if given some context, the Pastor will get their support. In context, they must understand that the issue is more significant than the group.
2. Pastoral leadership practices catch people on their way out of the back door are hailed. Pastors should be able to recognize by close observation when a member is about to leave. Intervention can be done at this stage to smoothen the situation. Allowing the person to



go, get home and settles into their home to contact such person back will be pretty tricky. Catching people on the way out will prevent their departure.

3. Pastor is expected to know who is expected to attend. To understand who was not in attendance, the Pastor has to know who was supposed to be in attendance. While this sounds simple, it is often counter to the way churches have kept their records for years. The implication for a Pastor is to do some work to keep class rosters clean enough to know the difference. For example, a list of 100 members who missed the past three classes is too extensive for the Pastor to contact effectively. In reality, there might only be five members on that list of 100 attending in the past few months. These five members represent the five families on their way out the back door! A piece of information the Pastor desperately needs to know, and it is so often buried in the attendance reports of the Church.

4. Another essential pastoral leadership practice is to use the right people to reach out to persons on the verge of leaving the Church. In a group setting, sometimes the problem is a "disconnect" between the group and the person going. In this case, the group leader is not in a position to help. It is here that the Church Pastor needs to bring humility to the table to mend differences. Sometimes there may be "personality conflicts" where a pastor needs to help people find a place where they fit better. Often, a pastor needs to act as an intermediary to rectify a dispute that has taken place. Endeavour to offer a graceful way back in or an elegant way to join a different group. It might make all the difference if assured that it is OK to try a new group. It is, therefore, recommended that God know they needed to gain something from that group leader, and once the situation is rectified, they are moved to the group. Wisdom and discernment are critical in these decisions.

5. Build retention mechanisms and processes – Feedback is needed from leaders of the groups. You have established policies on how and when to follow up on your missing members. Other ways to make contact with members might include letters, additional phone calls, e-mails, texts, Twitter, Facebook chats, notes or any other method of communication through the internet that would be effective. These contacts need to be personal. Sincerity, openness and authenticity are of utmost importance no matter the form of communication used. As you show their love and sincerity, they will feel they are essential to you.

6. Involve them in more opportunities – A new members' class that meets on Sundays in your Church is critical. Familiarity is vital in building faithful attendees. I have heard of other groups who meet at some



point during the week or once a month. It is these unique opportunities that build relationships that last.

7. Building solid relationships should be a significant emphasis of the Church – It is essential to get your members involved as they develop. These might be outreach groups, serving opportunities, leadership roles, spiritual steps, other church activities and classes. It is vital to get them involved in reaching others. Give them a "cause". Help them get a vision for areas in which they can serve. The Pastor and the group leader should determine where a member may thrive in other areas of the Church. The most crucial element is an acknowledgment that it is critically important to guard the back door of the Church. In that wise, Aremu advocates that churches should discourage the idea of fellowship as a Sunday affair. The Church should take urgent steps to disciple new believers and, by extension, new members (Aremu, 2011:72).

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Table 1:The Gender of respondents in some selected Churches in Akure Central Baptist Association of the Ondo State Baptist Conference.

Gender/Churches	Church A	Church B	Church C	Church D	Church E	Total	Percentage
Male	12	11	14	10	7	54	54%
Female	8	9	6	10	13	46	46%
Total	20	20	20	20	20	100	100%

Table 1 above shows that male respondents who took part in the research were more than their female counterparts in terms of population in some selected Churches in Akure Central Baptist Association because 54% of the respondents are male while 46% are female.

Table 2: Classification of the Respondents Based on the number of Different Pastors they have served within some selected Churches in Akure Central Baptist Association of the Ondo State Baptist Conference

Churches/No	Chur	Chur	Chur	Chur	Chur	Tot	Percent
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Number of Pastors	ch A	ch B	ch C	ch D	ch E	total	percentage
One Pastor	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Two Pastors	10	14	11	9	12	56	56%
Three Pastors	5	3	4	6	3	21	21%
Four Pastors	3	2	1	2	3	11	11%
Five & Above	2	1	4	3	2	12	12%
Total	20	20	20	20	20	100	100%

Table 2 above suggests that 56% of the members had served under two different Pastors, 21% under three Pastors, 11% under four Pastors, and 12% had served under more than five Pastors. Therefore, we can conclude that the opinions of the respondents can be trusted as far as Pastoral Leadership and Membership Retention is concerned since they had served under a minimum of two different Pastors.

Table 3: Research Question 1: What are the causes of leadership problem in the Church?

S/N	QUESTION ITEMS	YES	NO	TOTAL	% YES	% NO	% TOTAL
1.	Do you agree that leadership incompetence is one of the causes of leadership problems in the Church affecting church membership retention?	81	19	100	81%	19%	100%
2.	It is true that more seminary education is one of the causes of leadership problems in the Church?	35	65	100	35%	65%	100%
3.	Do you agree that welfare and visitation is one of the causes of church membership retention?	95	5	100	95%	5%	100%

4.	Do you agree that new members' class is one of the causes of church membership retention?	85	15	100	85%	15%	100%
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From table 3 above, 81% of the respondents said yes to question item 1 while 19% said no, 35% of the respondents said yes to question item 2 while 65% said no, 95% of the respondents said yes to question item 3 while 5% said no, 85% of the respondents said yes to question item 4 while 15% said no, Hence, we can conclude that some of the factors for church membership retention include: Leadership competence, basic hospitality, and help, visitation and new members class.

Conclusion

Learning these essential pastoral leadership practices that support attracting and retaining church members cannot be overemphasized. If churches intend to support individuals, families, and the community, it is imperative for the pastors to understand the factors that support church membership and retention. This study will help pastors build successful strategies for their congregations that have been demonstrated and implemented in growing churches. In essence, this study has the intention to be a model that can be replicated by other churches worldwide.

Recommendations

In the light of the above findings, the effects of pastoral leadership practices can either mar or make church membership retention. Therefore, this writer suggests that both the pastorate and the Church of any denomination in any part of the World be purpose-driven for maximum productivity in pastoral leadership practices like visitation, Welfare, dynamic worship, learn the skills of ICT for the purpose of communication, turning attendees into members through new members' classes, developing them to become mature members and ministers, among others. The mechanisms to implement pastoral leadership practices to address the previously mentioned factors like visitation, Welfare, biblical teaching, and sound leadership, among others, should also be designed to attract and retain church members to expand God's Kingdom. New members' class is highly recommended for pastoral leadership practices not only in the Baptist churches but in any denomination in the entire universe in the advent of the new normal.



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