Pastoral Leadership Succession and Sustainable Growth: The Newlife Baptist Church, Port Harcourt Experience (1985-2020)

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Abstract

In recent times, there has been a growing concern about certain trending issues within the Christian community in Nigeria. Report on crisis arising from leadership succession in churches is often suppressed, meanwhile, the impact is crystal clear. The purpose and objective of this paper bothered on examining pastoral leadership succession in Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt in light of the Nigerian Baptist Convention procedure for calling a pastor. The approach was descriptive since the research is qualitative and historical in nature. Data was gathered through combination of interview and survey of existing document. The findings revealed that this church demonstrated capacity in the handling of pastoral leadership succession, navigating through the challenges associated with it. This was achieved by relying on the principle of autonomy of the local church and the Nigerian Baptist Convention policy on calling a pastor. However, pocket of church politics characterized the recent succession process, thereby leaving some members dissatisfied

with the outcome. Thus, it is recommended that organizations should put mechanism in place to ensure strict adherence to laid down procedure for leadership succession.

Key words: Leadership, Succession, Transition, Baptist, Sustainable Growth.

Introduction

Leadership succession which is essentially ensuring leadership continuity has one theme that keeps recurring in discourse. As new leadership emerges in organizations and society at various times one is constantly reminded of its relevance. Meanwhile, it is important to underscore from the onset that leadership succession is inevitable and it involves a process that is not seamless in many occasions. There is no gainsaying that pastors, like all other leaders, eventually leave office or step down from the position they have hitherto occupied. When such a scenario occurs it may cause an eruption of clash of interests amongst individuals within and outside a church spectrum who have been nursing ambition to inherit that office or position. Sometimes, there are other interest groups within the church who would not mind to have one of their own take over the reins of leadership, and if hijacking the process will bring about the actualization of that aim, then why not. This situation crystalizes the fact that there are palpable challenges confronting religious organizations during leadership succession.

Biblical foundation for leadership succession further gives significant insight, setting the stage for a robust discussion. Be it the case of Aaron and his sons concerning the office of high priest, Moses and Joshua, prophet Elijah and prophet Elisha, King Saul and King David, or Jesus Christ and Simon Peter, leadership succession is well established in the Bible. In addition, apostolic succession is a perspective worthy of consideration. Hence, to have in-depth understanding of leadership succession from this aspect, attention has to be drawn to the Apostolic and post-Apostolic era of church history. Meanwhile, the Nigerian Baptist Convention which is the umbrella body for the Baptist church denomination in Nigeria has laid down procedure for calling a pastor in a church where there is vacancy in pastoral leadership. In the spirit and wisdom of this provision in the

policy guideline, it is expected that leadership succession in Baptist churches will go smoothly. Unfortunately, this is not always the case as there are occasions that are sandwiched with controversy and acrimony.

This paper zeroed in on Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt which is an affiliate of Rehoboth Baptist Association, Rivers Baptist Conference, and the Nigerian Baptist Convention respectively. The phenomenal growth of this church which is mainly observed in the proliferation of churches in Rivers State, neighboring states and other parts of Nigeria is indeed fascinating. Though, there are diverse areas of interest in examining the evolution of this church, but keen attention is on pastoral leadership succession due to certain dynamics. In the period of about four decades of existence, this church has witnessed change of pastoral leadership on several occasions. Thus, the thrust of this paper lies in the process, procedure, and outcome of the leadership succession exercises as observed in this church.

Leadership Succession: Two Schools of Thought

Leadership succession is basically a transitional process whereby a leader leaves a position in an organization and another takes over. It is a process that culminates in the exchange of leadership baton, signifying the transfer of authority, power, and responsibility from one person to another. In the thoughts of Sharma et al. (2001), the climax of leadership succession is observed in the event of handing over leadership responsibilities and executive power to another. Wheeler (2008) buttresses this in his extensively researched dissertation, asserting that leadership succession is a situation in which a person steps down from a prime position of influence and authority and is succeeded by another individual. He also gave a variety of reasons why leaders exit organizations such as: age, illness, retirement, resignation for a more advantageous position, promotion, death, demotion or dismissal.

In a church context, pastoral leadership succession goes beyond getting a pastor to head a local congregation at the exit of the former pastor. Only cheap thinking leads to the notion that pastoral leadership succession is just another hand over event involving two pastors. Mead's (2005) grasp on this subject reflected when he stressed that it is a process that begins from when the departure of the incumbent

pastor is announced till after the new pastor has been installed. Hollinger (2013) holds the view that the process is critical for the long-term viability of the church. Hence, the significance of pastoral leadership succession is spotted in the transfer of spiritual authority and ecclesiastical responsibility from an outgoing pastor to an incoming pastor in a solemn assembly. The rationale is anchored on the fact that either way a church will need a new pastor when the current serving pastor leaves office. Unlike the business world whereby the owner of the firm can sometimes unilaterally handpick or appoint his son or anyone to be his successor, the situation is very different with a local church, particularly in the Baptist denomination.

Generally, there are two major schools of thought on the subject of leadership succession: leadership replacement and leadership recruitment. The former consists of those with a mind-set that once there is vacancy a committee needs to be set up to get a replacement or successor for the out-going leader. This applies to churches that usually wait for leadership vacuum before swinging into action to get a replacement. Sanou (2021) observes that both secular and faith-based organizations often fail to plan leadership succession and this remains a great challenge. Conversely, the latter often sees leadership succession as a process of recruiting leaders through gradual development and mentorship to ensure that there is continuity based on the available pool of leaders or leadership pipeline. Ali and Mehreen (2019) underpin this noting that serious-minded organizations invest in continuous leadership talent development and proactive succession planning as a strategy in combating emerging challenges.

a. The Replacement School of Thought

This school of thought is often driven by replacement mentality. It involves an effort focused solely on identifying successors for top positions in an organization. The definition provided by 't Hart and Uhr (2011) indicates that they belong to the replacement school of thought, where leadership succession is all about replacing a leader that has left or is about to leave office. In their opinion, leadership succession is the voluntary or involuntary replacement of the highest ranking person. Of course, the view of 't Hart and Uhr reduces leadership succession to filling a position or office at the expiration of the tenure or exit of the previous occupant. Meanwhile, Gandossy and Verma (cited in Gothard & Michael, 2013)

advocate for a fundamental shift from a traditional replacement mentality toward a more comprehensive succession management approach.

There are a lot of persons who hold the view that leadership succession is more or less an event. For example, when it is described as a potentially disruptive inevitable event or process that every organization faces (Giambatista, Rowe, & Riaz, 2005), it is suggestive of a replacement school of thought. Though, it can be admitted that leadership succession is an inevitable event or process, but it is arguable that it is 'potentially disruptive' for every organization. It is a process that is quite smooth and seamlessly successful for many organizations, particularly those that have succession plan in place. However, Shen and Cannella (2003) seriously warned that when organizations fail to make plans to ensure smooth transition, the organization pays dearly for it.

Going by Bieschke's (2006) study many organizations are unprepared for this exercise since 94% often do not have any succession plan. This situation usually makes the process of leadership succession to be very challenging and chaotic. If there must be smooth transition in preparing the organization for the change of leadership, then it is important to come up with the right strategy of handing over the leadership mantle to the successor (Brian et al., 2008). Note that the main point emphasized here is change of leadership. Remarkably, when the focus is mainly on change of leadership every effort tends to gear towards that direction. This reduces the concept of leadership succession to leadership replacement.

b. The Recruitment School of Thought

This other school of thought prefers to consider leadership succession from the perspective of recruitment and development of future leaders over a period of time. It is an intentional, systematic, continuous and painstaking process in which individuals with leadership potentials are identified and groomed for the future of the organization. Unlike the idea of leadership replacement, here succession is more of creating the future of the organization (Bieschke, 2006; Chand & Bonner, 2008). By implication, succession process has to be a long-term concept and not necessarily working on organizational immediate requirements (Scharmer, 2007). This requires identifying potential leaders with the aim of grooming them to fill leadership position in the nearest future. In other words, leadership succession

becomes an organized process whereby a potential successor is identified and prepared to assume new role. Thus, this concept gives room for seamless leadership continuity based on a long-term investment strategy.

In their book, *Sustainable Leadership*, Andy and Fink (2006) suggest that succession plan should be included as part of the key organizational tasks to ensure that high potential leaders are readily available and sufficiently prepared for future leadership. McDonagh, Prybil, and Totten (2013) believe that this process includes an ongoing, dynamic strategy to identify, develop, and put in place capable leaders to meet organizational demands. This brings about the concept of mentorship that leads to leadership reproduction. The idea of mentorship in this context paints a picture of teaching one the art of leadership by way of intentional acts or examples. This suggests that the relationship between the mentor and the mentee(s) is more or less one of a bond of clear objectives.

The perspectives discussed thus far crystalize the concept of leadership succession as basically a replacement or recruitment of leaders to fill vacant positions. While the former approaches it from the perspective of short-term and immediate, the latter from the perspective of long-term and futuristic. One is reactive in approach and the other is proactive. The two schools of thought are applicable in leadership succession process, but the one that appears to be practiced more in many churches is that of replacement; that is, filling a vacant position or office. Therefore, the conceptual framework going forward is that leadership succession involves a process whereby an individual inherits a title, office, authority, or position from another person with the attendant benefits and responsibilities, especially in steering an organization unto the future.

Biblical Foundation for Leadership Succession

The concept of leadership succession is firmly rooted in the Holy Bible. First, the case of Moses and Joshua is a classic example. The former acknowledged that at some point he would have to leave the scene, therefore, he requested for a successor (Numbers 27: 12-17). Regardless of the fact that Joshua was a natural choice to succeed him, Moses took nothing for granted. Giving reasons for the choice of Joshua, Goswell (2013) explains that Joshua will complete the task of Moses in bringing the people into the land and distributing the land as an

inheritance among the tribes. No doubt, Moses was the instrument God used to begin the mission of liberating the Israelites, but Joshua was chosen to succeed him and complete the process by bringing them into Canaan, the Promised Land. This is one of the most seamless leadership succession processes ever.

Perhaps, the most intriguing instance of leadership succession in the Bible is the case of the first king of Israel (Saul) and his successor (David). Church (2003) examines the emergence of David as the successor of Saul and observes that God sent Samuel to anoint a replacement for the latter from among the sons of Jesse because he failed to meet His standards for kingship. Though, the concept of succession from Saul's perspective was ardently hereditary and he earnestly wished for his son to succeed him someday. Thus, not comfortable with the rising profile of David, Saul made several attempts on the life of David to subvert the plan of God to have him as his successor (1 Samuel 18: 8-11; 19: 1-2, 10-11; 20: 30-32). Thus, despite the fact that Jonathan was being viewed by his father as the natural heir apparent to the throne, God proved otherwise that He had a different choice, indicating that Christians ought to rely on God for choice of a successor (Lynchburg, 2012).

Further, we find another classic example of succession between the prophets Elijah and Elisha which began in 1 Kings 19 through to 2 Kings 2 when the succession process was consummated. In his study on Elisha and Elijah succession story, Rothwell (2005) observes that succession planning, as opposed to replacement planning, always looks to the future and the future needs of a responsibility instead of attempting to replace a person based on present needs. The LORD looked beyond Elijah's present situation and envisaged future reality which made Him to choose Elisha to succeed him. Epp-Tiessen (2006) notes that the response of God to Elijah's frustration kick-started the succession process and provided for ongoing prophetic leadership so that Elijah will realize that not everything depends on him.

Leadership succession was probably one of the major reasons why Jesus appointed the 12 apostles (Mark 3: 13-14; Luke 6: 12-16). He knew that a time shall come when He will have to leave the stage; hence He chose those who would carry on His mission after He is gone. Meanwhile, the special attention that Jesus gave

to Peter indicates that He had been grooming him for possible leadership succession. A classic example was His post-resurrection activities where Jesus met a group of His disciples at the sea of Tiberias (John 21: 1-2, 15-17). Here it is obvious that the conversation between Jesus and Peter suggests that the latter was being projected for succession by the former. It became vivid on the Pentecost Day (the day scholars consider as inauguration of the church) when Peter spoke on behalf of the entire disciples to explain the phenomenon that was occurring (Acts 2: 14ff).

Perspective on Apostolic Succession

Leadership succession during the first century church was done through two main processes namely: appointment and election as the case may be. In fact, the apostles attained the office of apostleship by appointment (Mark 3: 13 – 14). Now, observe that the choice of Matthias as a replacement for Judas Iscariot was done through the casting of lots (the balloting system at the time), implying a process of election (Acts 1: 23 – 26). However, the absence of the apostles and apostles' delegates became very obvious, necessitating the rise of the authority of the Bishop (Boer, 2003). When church government structure changed in the second century, the office of the bishop was elevated to that of a monarchy. This would be further upgraded in the third century in a bid to legitimize and strengthen the authority of bishops in every catholic church. More so, the office of the pope emerged as the influence of the bishop of Rome increased astronomically, giving birth to the concept of unbroken apostolic succession of bishops from Peter.

It is noteworthy first of all that the relevance of this section is indispensable because apostolic succession is the earliest form of leadership succession that the church experienced after the era of the Apostles. Roman Catholic tradition has it that the authority and leadership of the church was handed over to Apostle Peter, who happens to be the first pope. After him, there is uninterrupted transmission of spiritual authority from the Apostles through successive popes and bishops. So, series of bishops inherited that prestigious ecclesiastical office. This agrees with the view of Cross and Livingstone (2005) who referred to apostolic succession as the belief that the ministry of the Christian church is derived from the Apostles by a continuous succession, usually associated with a claim that the succession is through a series of bishops.

Based on this background it is important to consider the procedure of the emergence of the pope or what is referred to as papal succession. Usually, the pope is chosen or elected by a college of senior clergymen known as Cardinals, who are resident in and around Rome. In the process of time, precisely in 1059, the eligible electorate was restricted to the cardinals of the Roman Church. Though, that was changed in 1179 as the votes of all cardinal electors became equal. Further changes would be made by Pope Paul VI in 1970, setting the age limit of eligible cardinal elector at 80 years (Walsh, 2011). Thus, the cardinal electors are essentially responsible for the emergence of the pope; they ensure the smooth succession and ascension to the papal office.

In 1274, the Second Council of Lyon also made some regulation concerning the election of the pope, mandating the cardinal electors to meet within ten days of the demise of the pope and remain in seclusion (in a conclave) until a new pope has been elected. Such regulation would be modified in the sixteenth century to allow for variation in the time between the death of the pope and the meeting of the cardinal electors. Furthermore, the process of electing a pope involves the selection of three sets of cardinals who are chosen by lot to collect the votes of cardinal electors who are indisposed health-wise, count votes cast, and review the count of the votes respectively. The number of ballots is expected to correspond with the number of electors else the whole ballots are burned, giving room for new votes. If it does, then each ballot will be read aloud as the new pope is elected by a two-thirds majority.

The Procedure for Pastoral Leadership Succession in a Local Baptist Church

To have in-depth understanding of the procedure for pastoral leadership succession in a local Baptist church there is need to take into cognizance a major distinctive of the Baptist denomination namely: autonomy of the local church. Apparently, Baptist as a denomination is distinct amongst Christian groups due to certain beliefs and practices. One of the most prominent Baptist distinctive is autonomy of the local church which is based on the ability of self-governance, self-sustenance, and self-propagation. As Brackney (2009) rightly observed, Baptists clearly articulate the freedom of a local congregation to determine its own affairs. This implies that the principle of autonomy of the local church gives no room for external interference. Imasogie (in Osuigwe, 2019) maintained that there are two

sets of autonomy: theological and administrative or structural autonomy. The explanation given is that while the former is essential and intrinsic, the latter is functional and allows for mutual inter-dependence of the churches.

Moreover, autonomy of the local church and congregational polity have been identified as a major reason why leadership succession amongst Baptists is unique. Unlike what is obtainable in other church denominations, there is no central posting of pastors in the Baptist denomination. Rather, local congregations exercise their autonomy and extend call to pastors when there is vacancy in pastoral leadership. This implies that local churches also have the prerogative to withdraw the services of pastors, just as pastors have the right to either accept or reject a call to serve in a church and also withdraw same based on conviction. Thus, this situation has created room for abuse of the call system and has contributed to the challenges often encountered during leadership succession in local Baptist Churches. Sadly, the abuse of autonomy is said to have the propensity towards anarchy and lawlessness (Osuigwe, p. 49).

Further, there is policy provision made by the Nigerian Baptist Convention (the umbrella body) on how Baptist congregations should go about calling pastors when there is vacancy or during pastoral leadership succession. This is meant to guide and regulate the conduct of churches and curb anomalies. Below is the prescribed procedure for calling a pastor to replace an outgoing pastor in a local Baptist church. The policy of the Convention states that the calling of a pastor by a church will involve, therefore, consideration of such questions as these:

> Has prayer for guidance been sincerely made? Is the church willing to be led by the Holy Spirit in its choice? Has prayerful selection been made of a dependable search committee to represent the congregation in their search for the right person? Has this committee first considered the qualifications of the person best suited for the needs of the church? Has the church renounced all selfish motives? Is she determined to have under consideration only a person at a time? Has she had personal contact with him, preferably in his place of service? Is she ready now to open correspondence with him, perhaps inviting him to the church for

> conference and acquaintance with the people, yet avoiding all appearance of making him a "candidate"? Unless hindrances develop, would she be willing to recommend his call by the church? If yes, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the church should go ahead to call him. Has she done underground search to know his/her antecedents? (*Beliefs*, 2015, pp. 18-19).

The above policy implies that the Convention does not interfere with the process of pastoral leadership succession in local Baptist churches. All it does is to ensure a smooth process, hence, the policy guidelines. Moreover, the policy is characterized by several factors that may inform and influence the emergence of a successor in a local Baptist church. This includes: concerted prayer; the guidance of the Holy Spirit; the pastor search committee; the mother church; the predecessor; and the qualifications of the candidate.

Pastoral Leadership Succession in Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt

Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt (NBCRPH) had turnover of pastoral leadership in the 80s and 90s. This implies that the church has gone through several leadership transitions. A respondent reported that the church was without pastoral leadership on two consecutive occasions due to the fact that the previous pastors withdrew their services when no leadership succession process was in place. On occasions when NBCRPH was without pastor the church appointed a lay leader in the interim. After a while, the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, Oyo State would be visited and a trained pastor invited and engaged to assume the leadership of the church.

Moreover, at the time that NBCRPH was well established things were approached differently. In this instance, the church had no need to invite a pastor form seminary, rather a search committee was set up to search for, shortlist, and interact with pastors. The committee was allowed to interact with as many pastors as possible, but to recommend only two who met the criteria to the church-in-conference for ratification. As expected, the committee was given terms of reference to guide them in the process and whatever the outcome was, they reported to the church council which in turn recommended to the general house

during the church-in-conference for ratification. Note, the latter is the highest decision making body in every Baptist church.

Unlike previous times the most recent pastoral leadership succession in Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt (NBCRPH) had special features that made the process to be somewhat complex. It was observed that the transition occurred when the church has become well established due to its exponential growth, necessitating a multi-staff ministry with pastors serving alongside the church/lead pastor. Regarding mission expansion, it was when over fifty daughter churches had been planted and several others adopted. Also, it was a time that the membership of the church had grown with a difference of over four hundred percent. Note that the essence of the details here is to give proper perspective to the uniqueness of this particular leadership succession process.

Furthermore, data indicated that when Rev. Dr. T. O. A. Adeleke informed NBCRPH that he had received a call to pastor another church, the Nigerian Baptist Convention laid down procedure for calling a pastor was followed. The church set up a search committee and Deacon Genime Apapa was made the chairman. The committee was given terms of reference for interaction with candidates and missions was a major criterion. The chairman admitted in an interview that in course of the process some persons attempted to lobby him, including pastors within NBCRPH (though he did not mention name). He also narrated that he faced temptation to influence the choice of the successor in favour of certain interest group in the church. He added that there were forces even amongst members of the committee who wanted to push for their preferred candidate. However, he and some committee members were prayerfully resolute to get a pastor that God has chosen.

In addition, the chairman of the committee acknowledged that the least academic requirement was a master's degree. He also said that during the process their consideration went beyond tribalism because they wanted the best choice to emerge without ethnic prejudice. Though, another member of the committee expressed otherwise, stressing that certain comments during their meetings showed bias and favoritism towards a candidate. However, regardless of their effort to avoid all forms of bias the search committee was criticized and that led to

some persons feeling dissatisfied with the outcome. Nevertheless, the expressed his conviction that the choice of Rev. Dr. A. P. Adeola was the will of God for the church at the moment and that he has no regret. When asked if there was acrimony of any sort during and after the process, he dismissed it stressing that people reserve the right to express their displeasure. He also added that in situations like this there is bound to be dissenting voices and that is normal.

Challenges Associated with Pastoral Leadership Succession

The vacuum in pastoral leadership in Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt (NBCRPH) on several occasions is a very conspicuous challenge. In 1993 and 1995, the church was left without pastoral leadership due to the circumstances culminating in the previous pastors withdrawing their services. While on one occasion the situation lasted for months, on the other occasion the space of time was over three years. During both periods the church had to opt for a lay leader in the interim. Usually, 'pastorless' churches have their peculiar challenges including poor commitment to church activities and special projects; members become lukewarm with lackadaisical attitude. However, the recent change of pastoral leadership in NBCRPH did not create a vacuum. On this occasion, the outgoing pastor led the church to get a successor before he eventually left.

The search for a suitable pastor is also a challenge associated with pastoral leadership succession in local Baptist churches. Getting a replacement for an outgoing pastor especially in well-established Baptist churches is never an easy task as a result of the intrigues involved. The first two occasions when NBCRPH was in search for a trained pastor they had cause to send someone to the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, Oyo State to get one. However, regarding the most recent incident the church did not go searching for a successor at the seminary because the current status of the church and criteria set automatically ruled out that option. Moreover, various interested groups within and outside the church makes the process even more challenging. Thus, of the three occasions that the church went through change of pastoral leadership, the process was considered intriguing, eventful, and more challenging in the recent case.

Again, the practice of requesting for recommendations is common in the management of leadership succession in Baptist churches and it sometimes poses a challenge. In this scenario the challenge lies mainly in the manner in which individuals make recommendations, which oftentimes is born out of personal sentiments. It was observed that on the three occasions that Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt (NBCRPH) witnessed change of pastoral leadership the church was opened to recommendations from several persons. Notable figures recommended pastors they considered to be suitable for the church, but most times these recommendations were turned down. The committee set up to midwife the succession process sometimes becomes confused because of the barrage of recommendations.

The issue of church politics in the form of lobbying is another challenge associated with pastoral leadership succession. This featured in the narrative of the recent change of pastoral leadership in Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt. Observation shows that in previous occasions prior to when the church experienced exponential growth, lobbying was not an issue. In fact, the setting at the time did not encourage such political activity as respondent recalled. Though, things have changed in recent times as the latest change of pastoral leadership in the aforementioned church was characterized by pockets of church politics. This scenario is very common in many Baptist churches as the issue of church politics gets heightened during pastoral leadership succession.

Finally, on this section, the issue of dissatisfaction is often a major challenge associated with pastoral leadership succession in Baptist churches. In every keen contest there is likely to be dissatisfaction with the outcome in some quarters as observed lately in Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt. The recent change of pastoral leadership in the above named church was said to have generated unprecedented criticism directed at the committee set up to midwife the process. The chairman of the committee admitted that they were openly criticized, though he took comfort in his conviction that the process was void of any form of bias. He stressed that the committee was very honest and sincere in the discharge of its responsibility. However, criticism happened to be one way by which some of the church members decided to express their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the process.

Sustaining the Growth of Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt

The change that occurs in course of pastoral leadership succession has potential to set the church on a new trajectory of growth when rightly approached. This is what was observed of Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt (NBCRPH) that ushered in exponential growth between 1998 and 2008 (Adeleke, 2013). The growth is also attributable to certain commitments including: aggressive evangelism, sound biblical preaching and teaching, compulsory discipleship, spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer, rich music, visitation and robust welfare program. This aligns with the "Nine Marks of a Healthy Church" that Dever (2004) proposed as essentials for church growth. However, the membership strength somewhat dropped around 2010 and 2013 when the church engaged in the system of rotational acting pastor due to the absence of the church pastor who travelled abroad to study. Nevertheless, the fluctuation observed in the numerical strength of the church is said to have become relatively stable since the installation of a new pastoral leadership in 2017.

Further, the narrative of NBCRPH in terms of infrastructure is without doubt impressive. The church has indeed been blessed with infrastructural development from inception. It began with the four plots of land that was acquired barely three years of existence with support from the mother church (Adeleke, 2011). Though, there was no additional infrastructure after the first change of pastoral leadership, as the church had been plagued with internal conflict. Adeleke (2013) noted that Newlife Baptist Church Rumueme, Port Harcourt (NBCRPH) was blessed with solid infrastructures during his pastorate, referring to the five thousand seating capacity worship hall built between 2001 and 2005, a two-storey structure around 2006 and 2010 which serves as school building and children church, a property containing three sets of two-bedroom flats, a two-storey building with six sets of three-bedroom flats which now serves as pastorium for the associate pastors, and a six rooms duplex which accommodates the church pastor. Recently, there is another structure that sprang up within the church premises which provides additional facility for the school being run by the church. This alone is an indication that the infrastructural development of the church is being sustained.

As regard mission expansion, record shows that mission work began in NBCRPH sometime in April of 1997 with the planting of Divine Grace Baptist Church, Woji.

After the second change of pastoral leadership the church fully launched out and started proliferating churches within and outside Rivers State. In 2001, a total number of five churches were planted, but that momentum dropped as only two churches were planted in 2004. The number skyrocketed in the following year when twelve churches were planted in one year, including one that was adopted for the purpose of nurturing. Meanwhile, between 2006 and 2008 eighteen churches were added to the existing number plus one that was adopted, thus bringing the total number to forty (Gospel Herald, 2015). This corroborates the summation of scholars that the sustainability of the church is what drives growth through its ability to multiply or reproduce itself (Hayward, 2005; Medcalfe & Sharp, 2012).

The momentum slowed down between 2010 and 2013 as only five churches were planted during this period compared to previous years (Gospel Herald, p. 3). A bit of improvement was recorded in the following year as six churches were planted and two adopted, but after the recent change of pastoral leadership in 2017 the mission activities of NBCRPH further declined as only a couple of churches have been planted and few revitalized. A respondent gave reasons for the sharp drop in mission expansion, pointing to lack of funding especially as occasioned by the poor economic situation in Nigeria. Despite this gloomy picture a glimmer of hope shone forth with the revitalization of some churches, particularly the church at Eket, Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria.

Conclusion

It is obvious that pastoral leadership succession has become a very hot topic in recent times. Two among every three Baptist churches are often destabilized during pastoral leadership succession. This was the motivation in examining pastoral leadership succession and sustainable growth in Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt. The paper considered two schools of thought as regards the concept of leadership succession: replacement and recruitment. Also, biblical foundation and apostolic succession were aspects that furnished this work with great insight. It was observed that the Nigerian Baptist Convention policy on calling a pastor is the standard and procedure for pastoral leadership succession in every local Baptist church. The paper showed that Newlife Baptist Church, Rumueme, Port Harcourt demonstrated capacity in managing pastoral leadership

succession particularly during the recent occurrence. Though, there were manifestations of church politics which made some of her members to be dissatisfied. Meanwhile, the momentum of growth the church has recorded has been sustained over time. It is hereby recommended that organizations should put mechanism in place to ensure strict adherence to laid down procedure for leadership succession.

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