



Challenge of Leadership Succession in Independent Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria: A Case Study of Revival Fire Ministries Incorporated, Minna, Niger State

Abstract

The explosive expansion of Independent Pentecostal Churches (IPCs) in Nigeria has contributed significantly to the growth and propagation of the gospel in the nation. However, these ministries face crisis of sustainability due to the challenges of leadership succession. Unlike classical Pentecostal denominations that operate with defined, constitutional policies, independent ministries are heavily built on the personal charisma, authority, and control of their founders. The core problem stems from founder-centric leadership models, where the church is treated as a personal legacy or asset rather than a public institution. In this study, effort was made to examine the challenges of leadership succession in Independent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria with a case study of Revival Fire Ministries Inc., Minna, Niger State. The paper also highlighted the hindrances to leadership succession in Independent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. The method of study adopted for this work is descriptive survey. Findings from the study revealed that one of the major challenges facing Independent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria is lack of structured, codified succession plans as well as the unexpected death or retirement of a founder which often results in bitter disputes, church fragmentation, and even civil litigation. The study concluded that to ensure trans-generational survival, independent Pentecostal churches must transit from founder-centric leadership models to legal-rational or policy-driven structures. It is strongly recommended that Independent Pentecostal Churches should have leadership succession plans by legally separating family wealth from corporate church assets.

Keywords: Leadership, Challenges, Succession, Pentecostal, Independent, Churches.

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Introduction

The Pentecostal movement in Nigeria has, since its remarkable emergence in the 1970s, produced an extraordinary proliferation of independent churches, ministries, and

faith-based organizations. From the sprawling mega churches of Lagos and Abuja to the modest but spiritually vibrant assemblies of smaller cities like Minna, independent Pentecostal Christianity has become one of the most

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socially visible and numerically significant forces in Nigerian public and religious life (Ojo, 2006; Ukah, 2008). The movement's dynamism is inseparable from the charismatic power of its founding personalities, who are men and women of extraordinary vision, spiritual energy, and personal authority who gathered communities of faith around their gifting and conviction.

Yet this very strength contains within it a profound institutional vulnerability. Because so many of these churches were founded by, and have grown organically around, a single charismatic individual, their long-term viability is inextricably linked to a question they have been, in many cases, reluctant or structurally unable to address: what happens when the founder is no longer at the helm of affairs? The challenge of leadership succession—the planned, principled, and sustainable transfer of pastoral and organisational authority from one generation of leadership to the next has emerged as perhaps the defining institutional challenge for Nigerian Independent Pentecostalism in the twenty-first century (Adeboye, 2018; Okafor, 2017).

The historical record in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa offers sobering evidence of what happens when this challenge is not adequately addressed. Churches have split along factional lines. Legal battles over property and registered names have occupied the

courts for years. Congregations have haemorrhaged members. Accumulated institutional wealth has been dissipated through family disputes. The spiritual witness of communities built over decades of sacrifices has been undermined by succession crises that, in many cases, were entirely foreseeable and preventable (Obinna, 2012; Falola & Heaton, 2008). The tragedy is compounded by the observation that the Bible itself contains remarkably rich and diverse models of leadership succession, from Moses to Joshua, Elijah to Elisha, Paul to Timothy that, if faithfully appropriated, could provide both the theological rationale and the practical template for smooth transitions (Adeyemo, 2006).

This background therefore leads to the need of investigating into the challenges of leadership succession in Independent Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria (A Case Study of Revival Fire Ministries Inc., Minna, Niger State). By providing a rigorous, contextualised, and practically oriented analysis, this study aims to contribute meaningfully to the scholarly and ecclesiological conversation on how Nigerian Pentecostalism can secure its institutional future without sacrificing the spiritual vitality and missional conviction that have defined it.

Concept of Leadership Succession

Leadership succession refers to the planned, deliberate, and sustainable

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process by which authority, responsibility, and institutional identity are transferred from an existing leader or leadership to a designated successor or new leadership configuration. Leadership succession has been extensively theorised in the fields of corporate management, political science, and organisational studies, but has received comparatively limited rigorous attention in the study of African religious institutions (Rothwell, 2010; Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2011).

As a concept, succession planning has evolved from a narrow concern with emergency executive replacement to a comprehensive strategic process encompassing the identification, development, and deployment of high-potential leadership talent across all organisational levels. Rothwell (2010) defines succession planning as a deliberate and systematic effort by an organisation to ensure leadership continuity in key positions, retain and develop intellectual and knowledge capital for the future, and encourage individual advancement. This definition highlights three key dimensions of succession: continuity, development, and advancement all of which are directly applicable to the religious organisational context.

In the context of independent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, leadership succession may be understood more specifically as the process by which the pastoral, administrative, doctrinal,

and relational authority of a founding or incumbent leader is transferred to a successor in a manner that preserves the spiritual integrity, institutional continuity, and communal cohesion of the church (Okafor, 2017; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013; Obinna, 2012). This definition encompasses several distinct elements that deserve separate examination.

First, pastoral succession involves the transfer of the primary spiritual oversight function preaching, teaching, pastoral care, sacramental administration, and prophetic leadership from the founding pastor to a designated successor. This dimension of succession is the most publicly visible and the most emotionally charged, because the founding pastor's preaching and pastoral presence are typically the most salient features of the church's identity in the experience of the congregation (Okafor, 2017; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013).

Second, administrative succession involves the transfer of institutional management responsibilities financial oversight, staff management, programme administration, property management, and external relations to the successor or to a restructured leadership team. In many independent Pentecostal churches, the founding pastor has combined pastoral and administrative functions in a single role; succession therefore requires a disaggregation of these functions that may itself be a significant organisational challenge (Eze, 2016; Ukah, 2008).

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Third, doctrinal succession involves the transmission of the theological vision, doctrinal commitments, and spiritual values that define the community's identity to the successor. This dimension is particularly sensitive in the Pentecostal context, where the founding pastor's personal theological vision has often become the defining identity of the institution. The risk of doctrinal succession of the successor introducing theological innovations that alienate sections of the founding congregation is a significant source of anxiety in many independent churches (Obinna, 2012; Ogbu, 2010).

Fourth, relational succession involves the transfer of the network of social, pastoral, and institutional relationships that the founding pastor has built over years of ministry with individual members, with partner ministries, with civic institutions, and with the broader Christian community. This dimension of succession is often the most invisible and the most difficult to manage, because relational networks are personal rather than institutional; they cannot be transferred by decree or documented in a handover report (Adeboye, 2018; Ojo, 2006).

It is important to distinguish between planned succession—which involves a deliberate, proactive, and transparent process of leadership transfer initiated while the incumbent leader is still active and capable and emergency

succession which is triggered by the sudden death, incapacitation, or forced departure of a leader. Research across organisational contexts consistently demonstrates that planned succession produces significantly better outcomes, in terms of institutional continuity, staff morale, financial stability, and mission effectiveness, than emergency succession (Rothwell, 2010; Charan et al., 2011). Yet the evidence from Nigerian independent Pentecostal churches suggests that planned succession remains the exception rather than the rule, with most churches operating without any formal succession framework (Obinna, 2012; Okafor, 2017).

The concept of dynastic succession the transfer of pastoral authority to a founding pastor's biological children or spouse has emerged as a controversial but widespread phenomenon in Nigerian Pentecostalism. Proponents argue that dynastic succession honours the founder's legacy and preserves institutional continuity; critics point out that it replicates culturally constructed patterns of hereditary authority that have no direct biblical precedent in the model of servant leadership and may subordinate the spiritual gifting of the successor to considerations of family loyalty (Ukah, 2008; Nwosu, 2018). The biblical model suggests a different paradigm: one premised on demonstrated gifting, communal discernment, and transparent accountability.

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History of Revival Fire Ministries Inc., Minna, Niger State

i. Founding and Early Development

Revival fire ministries inc. was established on 20th September, 1990, by the late Rev Dr Bitrus Kato. Dr. Kato was the presiding Bishop of Revival fire ministries inc., a servant of God called with a prophetic and apostolic commission for world evangelism and missions.

In an early morning and encounter in 1978, the Lord said to him, "Son I want you to take my healing and deliverance message to the nations of Africa and I will confirm my words with signs and wonders"(Revival Fire Ministries Inc. Brochure, 2005). He began to prepare himself by training extensively in some theological schools. He held both Diploma and degree certificates in various disciplines that include theology, leadership training and pastoral ministry between 1978 and 1990. He was awarded a doctorate degree in missions from the Ferrum University, Virginia, U.S.A. He was commissioned to reviving the world with the message of love. It is noteworthy to state that Bishop Kato actually actually began his forage into the gospel ministry at the age of 12. He was the pastor of a protestant church in the army barracks at that tender age under the Baptist mission (Revival Fire Ministries Inc. Brochure, 2005).

The Vision of Revival Fire Ministries:

The Revival fire ministriesI Inc. is burdened with an apostolic and prophetic commission for world evangelism and missions to the nations

The Mission of Revival Fire Ministries:

To reach 50 million souls for the Lord Jesus Christ with the gospel of peace, hope and love.

The purpose of Revival Fire Ministries:

To reach world with Jesus' message of love, healing l, deliverance and salvation; discipling them to Christ-like maturity, training them to partake in the endtime harvest through the demonstration of God's power in order to bring glory and honour to God.

Growth, Expansion, and Institutional Development

Through the 2000s and into 2008, RFM experienced sustained growth in membership, ministry scope, and institutional complexity. New branches were established in several communities within Niger State, extending the ministry's geographical reach while also introducing new governance challenges: how were branch pastors appointed, supervised, and held accountable? What was the relationship between branch finances and the central ministry account? How were doctrinal and ministerial

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standards maintained across geographically dispersed congregations?

that any succession process would need to navigate.

These questions were, in most cases, addressed through the personal authority of the founding General Overseer, who maintained close personal oversight of branch pastors and exercised final authority over all significant institutional decisions. This highly centralised governance model served the ministry well during its growth phase, when the General Overseer's personal energy, relational networks, and institutional knowledge were genuinely irreplaceable assets. Over time, however, as the ministry grew larger and more complex, the limitations of this highly personalised model became increasingly apparent.

During this period, RFM developed several new ministry departments youth ministry, women's ministry, children's church, praise and worship, media and communications, and social welfare each led by a department head appointed by the General Overseer.

The ministry also established a school a private Christian educational institution which significantly expanded its institutional footprint and its role in the community of Minna. These institutional expansions, while reflective of the ministry's growing social impact and financial capacity, also significantly increased the organisational complexity

Governance Structure and Succession Context

As at 2008, before the demise the General Overseer, Revival Fire Ministries Inc. operates under a governance structure that is characteristic of many Nigerian independent Pentecostal churches at a similar stage of institutional development. At the apex of the structure sits the General Overseer, who retains final authority over all significant institutional decisions spiritual, financial, administrative, and relational. Below the General Overseer is a small executive team comprising the senior associate pastor, the director of administration, and the heads of the major ministry departments.

A board of trustees exists and has been registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission as part of the ministry's incorporation documentation. There is no documented succession plan. The ministry's key assets including land, buildings, vehicles, and financial accounts are in various states of registration, with some held institutionally and others held personally by the General Overseer. There is no documented pastoral compensation or retirement policy. Branch pastors are appointed and accountable directly to the General Overseer.

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The gap between the General Overseer's expressed commitment to succession and the institutional reality of the ministry's unpreparedness for transition is the defining challenge that this study seeks to address.

However, as the ministry grew over the years, the lack of structured, policy-driven transition frameworks began to present operational challenges. The very model that had driven its early growth highly centralized, founder-centric authority became a source of vulnerability. Following growth and impact, the founder was later consecrated as a Bishop by a college of Bishops presided over by Bishop Francis Wale Oke.

On health grounds, the founder, Bishop Dr. Bitrus Kato, passed unto glory after a protracted illness, without a clear documented and binding leadership succession plan, in August 2008, at an Abuja hospital in Nigeria. The transition to a new leadership was marred by many factors. After much tossing back and forth, Rev Mrs Betty Kato, the wife of the late Bishop, was commissioned as the new General Overseer of the church by a college of Bishops led by Bishop Francis Wale Oke, in September 2008 (Revival Fire Ministries Inc. Brochure, 2005)

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Following the successful ground-breaking evangelistic efforts of Revival Fire Ministries Inc. in Minna, and the expansion of the church across the length and breadth of Niger State and beyond, the impact of the church grew from glory to glory.

Around April/May, 2008, the health condition of the General Overseer deteriorated. He became hospitalized in a private hospital at Abuja. The medical personnels did their best, but eventually the Bishop went to be with the Lord in August 2008. It is worthy of note that within this challenging times before the demise of the bishop, some pastors who served with the ministry exited the system and absconded without any official release or sendforth from the church. Just one serving pastor remained loyal and faithful to the bishop, ministry and the work.

The pastor who stayed back took over the administration of the church from the headquarters to the branches, planned the burial activities alongside the bereaved family and the college of Bishops headed by Bishop Francis Wale Oke. The burial of the bishop was successfully executed by the grace of God.

After the successful burial, the issue of the successor came to the front burner. Several interests and sentiments

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were expressed and in the course of the interface between the college of bishops, the wife of the late bishop and other stakeholders, there was no known formal leadership succession document of the ministry presented to guide the activities. Therefore, after much consideration of all the interests expressed, Bishop Francis Wale Oke, commissioned the wife of the late bishop as the new General Overseer of the ministry. These processes didn't happen without various threats.

Clearly, without a successful transition from charismatic authority to legal-rational structures (such as clear, written policies and collegiate boards), the founder's exit creates an organizational crisis. Hence, the following factors have been advanced for the challenges of leadership succession in Revival Fire Ministry, Minna, Niger State:

1. Absence of Formal Succession Structures

The findings of this study revealed that one of the major hindrances to leadership succession in Revival Fire Ministry (RFM) Minna, Niger State was the absence of formal succession structure which could have formed the legal and moral basis of the process of succession. This presupposes that the church lacked structured and codified succession plans before the demise of the founder (Bishop Dr. Bitrus Kato). This structural instability, combined with the lack of a prepared and mentored successor,

resulted to rapid decline, and some losses. In a personal communication with Pastor Josiah (2026), he maintained that the issue of lack of formal succession structure is a common phenomenon in most Independent Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria. According to him, lack of documented plan, often creates frictions, factions and wasted energy in the church instead of fruitful work.

A research by Okafor (2017) surveying independent Pentecostal churches in north-central Nigeria showed that fewer than fifteen percent had any documented succession plan, fewer than ten percent had a formal leadership development programme, and fewer than five percent had a governance constitution that specified succession processes. These figures reflect not ignorance of best practice but a structural feature of the independent Pentecostal church model itself. The absence of formal structures manifests in several specific ways such as lack of a church constitution specifying governance arrangements and succession procedures

Thus, one can say without fear of contradiction that Independent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria typically emerge without formal denominational accountability, without legally binding governance structures, and without the institutional memory that older, more established religious bodies possess. Their founding is driven by pastoral vision and spiritual energy, not by governance planning. The result is an

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institutional architecture that is, by design, centred on the founder and, by omission, structurally unprepared for that founder's departure (Eze, 2016; Obinna, 2012).

ii. Dynastic succession

Another major hindrance to a successful and productive leadership succession in Revival Fire Ministries Inc. Minna, Niger State, was the issue of dynastic succession. Omenyo, 2006, posits that many independent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria have gravitated towards what scholars term 'dynastic succession' - the deliberate transfer of pastoral authority to a founder's biological children or spouse.

In a personal conversation with Elder Dunamis (2026), he affirmed that many independent Pentecostal church leaders now handle church as family business. This resonates with Mwenje, 2016, who posits that many independent Pentecostal pastors lead an autocratic and founder-centred leadership styles, a pattern that creates structural conditions favourable to dynastic transition once formal succession planning is absent.

iii. Ethnicity/Tribal bigotry

A very pertinent hindrance to a successful leadership succession in RFM was the issue of tribal sentiments. There was a clear debate and consideration that the successor must be a northerner. This practice, while not without biblical analogy (consider the Levitical priesthood), is more accurately traced to

socio-cultural influences- particularly the Yoruba and Hausa concepts of hereditary chieftaincy than to a coherent biblical theology.

In a research, Tushima (2016) posits that many modern practices in Independent Pentecostal churches privilege loyalty to the founder's bloodline/kinsmen over the doctrinal and character-based criteria evident in the New Testament. The result is an ecclesiological confusion in which the spiritual legitimacy of the 'baton' is subordinated to bloodline and tribal politics.

Conclusion

This paper has undertaken an examination of the challenges of leadership succession in independent Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, with Revival Fire Ministries Inc. in Minna, Niger State, as its primary case study. The analysis has demonstrated that succession planning in this context is not a single, discrete institutional challenge that can be resolved by a single intervention; it is a multidimensional institutional challenge that requires coordinated responses across theological, organisational, legal, financial, cultural, and relational domains.

However, it is worthy to note that leadership succession is not an optional institutional luxury for Revival Fire Ministries Inc. or for any independent Pentecostal church in Nigeria; it is a

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spiritual and ethical imperative. The founder's responsibility to the community he has built, to the God who called him, and to the generations who will inherit the institution is not discharged at the moment of his calling; it extends through the entirety of his ministry, including its final chapter. Planning for succession is not an act of faithlessness; it is an act of stewardship, of love, and of theological integrity.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are posited:

- i. Revival Fire Ministries and other Independent Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria should invest in leadership development. Potential successors should be identified early and mentored. They should receive both theological training and training in church administration through preaching series and leadership retreat. This process should be drawn from the rich succession narratives of the Old and New Testaments—the Mosaic-Josuaic succession, the Elijah-Elisha relationship, and the Pauline investment in Timothy and Titus.
- ii. A formal compensation and retirement policy should be designed by Revival Fire Ministries Inc to provide the General Overseer with genuine financial security in retirement,

removing the economic anxiety that is a significant driver of succession procrastination.

- iii. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria should develop and disseminate a national best practice guide on leadership succession in independent Pentecostal churches, drawing on international models and Nigerian case studies, that provides founding pastors and governance boards with a practical roadmap for developing and implementing effective succession plans.

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