

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Factors Underlying Leadership Conflict at Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County, Siaya County, Kenya

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Abstract:

This study explores the factors underlying leadership conflict within the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County, Siaya County, Kenya. Leadership conflicts in this religious institution have been a persistent issue rooted in resource control, leadership claims, and personal disputes, notably involving self-proclaimed leaders. Resource conflicts, cited by 8% of respondents, often stem from disagreements over financial management and equitable distribution. Leadership claims, leading to factionalism and power struggles, are another critical factor, with 4% of respondents highlighting conflicts over papal authority. Historical analysis reveals that leadership conflict has been present since the church's inception, starting with a dispute between the founder, Baba Messiah Melkio Simeo Ondeto, and Gaudencia Aoko, who was excommunicated for attempting to assert herself as a leader. The study underscores the need for structured conflict resolution and peace-building initiatives, emphasizing the inclusion of women leaders and collaboration with expert organizations. Reconciliation, inspired by biblical principles, requires humility and open dialogue to address pride and self-interest among leaders. Forgiveness, crucial for healing and relationship restoration, is recommended to resolve ongoing conflicts. Implementing transparent resource management, fostering unity, and advocating for reconciliation can significantly mitigate leadership conflicts. This comprehensive approach aims to restore harmony within the church, ensuring it continues to serve as a sanctuary for its members. The findings provide a foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of leadership conflict and offer practical solutions for achieving lasting peace in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church.

Keywords: Leadership conflict, resource control, reconciliation, peace-building, Legio Maria church

1. Background to the Study

Leadership conflict has been a longstanding challenge to humanity. The Bible documents the earliest form of leadership conflict between God and Satan (Genesis 3:1-9), which brought a curse upon man, and the conflict among the disciples after Jesus' resurrection (Mark 16:4; Luke 24:2; John 20:1). Conflict is an inevitable event in congregations and can be either positive or negative towards their growth, depending on how it is managed by leaders. Leadership change is difficult in any organization, and in religious congregations, it is often more challenging due to the individual relationships involved and the spiritual aspect of the leader's position. This complexity makes it hard to distinguish the different impacts that leadership transitions contribute to, such as conflicts among congregations and loss of members (Dollhopf & Scheitle, 2013). Despite its prevalence, leadership conflict management in churches has seldom received the academic and scholarly attention given to corporate organizations.

Leadership conflicts undermine the essence of both the leadership and the Church, which are meant to be role models for other types of leadership in society. Therefore, resolving leadership conflicts in the Church is crucial for developing and growing a church as an organization (Afolabi, 2019). Evidence of this has been shown from a global, regional, and local context. The Protestant Church experienced increased divisions due to leadership conflicts, such as the detachment of the Anglican Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church in 1538. In Kenya, the Anglican Church started as the Church Mission Society (CMS) in 1884 and has led to other denominations like the Church of Christ in Africa (CCA) and the Episcopal Church in Kenya (Odhiambo, 2014).

2. Leadership Conflict at Legio Maria Mission Church

The Legio Maria of African Mission Church, widely known as Legio Maria Mission Church, is one of several thousand African Initiated Churches and represents the largest secession group from the Roman Catholic Church in modern African history. The church's membership grew from 20,000 in 1964 to 2 million in the 1990s (Kustenbauder,

2009). The Legio Maria Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County has been particularly embroiled in conflict. Following the death of its founder, Ondeto, and as per prior arrangements by Messias and Bikira Maria (who had selected Timotheo as her "second spiritual son" before her death in 1966), Timotheo Blasio Atila (1941-1998) became pope of the Legio Maria Mission Church. Ondeto's death led to numerous legal troubles and power struggles over the Church's leadership, with violent battles between Pope Raphael Adika, who had lost the supreme leadership, and supporters of the current Pope Romanus Ongombe at the Church headquarters in Got Kwer (Opande & Byron, 2020).

Before his death, Simeo Melkio Ondeto expressed fears of impending disagreement among members after 28 years of no conflicts. He provided a list of successors, which was initially accepted until leadership disagreements unfolded between the two 'popes'. The Church, popular in Western and Nyanza regions, has experienced violent conflicts between followers of each leader, and legal proceedings have failed to resolve these conflicts. This was evident in recurrent fights over three days, resulting in body injuries before police intervention in Migori (Opande & Byron, 2020).

The situation has become critical to the point where major resolutions and decisions could not be reached during meetings. Moreover, members of the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County have been complaining bitterly about the violation of their rights to pray in various churches due to conflicts. They have also lamented the division of their Church into two distinct rivals: violent actions against members and leaders and the excommunication of some members under controversial circumstances (Byron, 2020).

3. Statement of the Problem

The phenomenon of leadership conflicts within the religious landscape has attracted considerable scholarly attention, with numerous documented instances highlighting these conflicts within Pentecostal Churches (Thiga et al., 2021; Kapanga, 2018; Wanjiku, 2012; Pam et al., 2021; Njoroge & Mwangi, 2018). These cases have illuminated the multifaceted nature of conflicts stemming from a diverse array of triggers, including power struggles, resource mismanagement, personal aspirations, and divergent visionary trajectories among leaders. The Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County, Siaya County, Kenya, faces leadership conflicts that hinder its growth and effectiveness. This study seeks to analyze factors underlying leadership conflict in the Legio Maria of Africa Church and identify what contributes to these conflicts.

The effect of leadership conflict on the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church members, which causes them to move back and forth and affects the Church's development, has not been analyzed. If this conflict is not handled with seriousness, it could easily lead to wars and hatred within the Church. This study focuses on the fact that no prior empirical studies have been conducted exclusively in Ugenya Sub-County to establish the causes, challenges, and resolution of leadership conflict in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church. Despite the high incidence of leadership conflict in this church, which is problematic in Ugenya Sub-County, this study aims to address the factors underlying leadership conflict within this church, as the situation has been difficult to resolve among its leaders.

3.1. Research Question

- What is the impact of power dynamics on leadership conflict in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County?

3.2. Research Objective

- To analyze the impact of power dynamics on leadership conflict in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. Leadership Trait Theory

The study adopted the leadership trait theory (Stogdill, 1948), which posits that leaders possess a certain set of characteristics that make them effective and successful (Kenny & Zaccaro, 1983). According to this theory, leaders have traits that other people do not possess, underscoring the importance of identifying these key leadership traits. Effective pastoral leaders are identified as having excellent communication skills and being charismatic, transformative, inspirational, and motivating (Horan & Wright, 2018). According to trait theory, leaders have natural characteristics or qualities that are inborn. Its popularity in academia has been revitalized with the concept of charismatic leadership style (Lunenburg, 2012; Milosevic & Bass, 2014).

Supporters of trait theory have listed various characteristics perceived to develop successful leadership, including emotional stability, assertiveness, perseverance, intelligence, self-confidence, ambition, motivation, and creativity. However, Fleenor (2006) points out that these lists are not exhaustive and often omit significant attributes of leadership. The theory is significant for the study as leaders are required to possess certain traits and characteristics that enable them to handle emerging problems and issues in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County. There is a need to identify the traits of future leaders and provide capacity, empowerment, and platforms for these followers from the Church to become future leaders. Trait theory has been widely adopted in leadership research (Kagai, 2015; Jackson, 2017), while other studies (Lucky, 2021) have examined leadership conflicts in churches using the theory.

4.2. Strengths of Trait Leadership Theory

One of the main advantages of the Trait Theory of leadership is its simplicity and intuitiveness in identifying and assessing potential leaders. By examining the traits that successful leaders possess, individuals can evaluate themselves and others on how well they match these criteria and identify areas for improvement. According to Northouse (2013), Trait Theory adds to leadership knowledge in three valuable ways. Firstly, it builds on the premise that leaders are distinctive. Unlike other leadership theories, Trait Theory has a century of research to support its approach. Secondly, it provides benchmarks for identifying leaders. These strengths of trait theory highlight its value in the study of leadership conflict.

The trait theory of leadership is significant as one of the major theoretical areas in studying human personality, focusing on differences between individuals. It was one of the first systematic attempts to study and understand leadership. This approach believes that various traits form a personality and seeks to measure them. By understanding these traits, anyone aspiring to be a successful leader can work on improving them. Knowing that certain traits are important for effective leaders can aid in the selection of leaders. As Lewis H. Lapham notes, "Leadership in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County consists not in degrees of technique but traits of character; it requires moral rather than athletic or intellectual effort, and it imposes on both leaders of the Legio Maria of Africa Church in Ugenya Sub-County and followers alike the burdens of self-restraint." Therefore, we can expect that effective leaders in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church differ from non-effective leaders in significant ways.

4.3. Conflict Theory

Karl Marx (1818-1883) proposed Conflict Theory, stating that organizations or societies operate in a manner where each person and their respective group are in continuous competition to increase their benefits, leading to social changes such as revolutions or political changes. Conflict Theory is adapted to understand disagreements and tensions between proletariat versus bourgeoisie, social classes, and ideologies such as socialism versus capitalism (Kapanga, 2018). This theory suggests that conflict arises in society due to competition for scarce resources, with social order maintained by power and domination rather than conformity and consensus. Those with power and wealth aim to retain it by any means, often by suppressing the powerless and poor.

Conflict Theory attributes significant human progress, such as civil rights, democracy, and capitalism, to efforts to control the masses rather than purely aiming for social order (Amisshah, 2021). Marx highlighted that conflict and tension emerge when status, resources, and power are unequally distributed among groups in society, driving social change. Power is seen as control over material and wealth resources, politics, institutions, and individual social status compared to others based on gender, race, religion, culture, and sexuality.

Conflict Theory has been used to explain a wide range of societal issues, including poverty, wealth, revolutions, wars, domestic violence, discrimination, and leadership conflicts in church settings (Amisshah, 2021; Kapanga, 2018). It is applied here to explain the sources or factors contributing to leadership conflict in the Legio Maria Church, where leaders constantly compete for power and resources, resulting in disagreements and conflicts as they vie for hierarchy within the Church.

4.4. Empirical Review

4.4.1. Power Dynamics

4.4.1.1. In the U.S.

Walters (2021) explored the role of lack of succession strategies in African American Pentecostal Churches using a phenomenological qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews with church leaders, using purposive sampling methods, revealed themes such as power struggles and church culture. There were persistent power struggles among current leaders and reluctance to relinquish power. Additionally, the church's desire for independence from the national organizational structure contributed to the lack of succession planning.

4.4.1.2. In Israel

Mansour (2018) investigated intra-church conflict management in Baptist Churches in Palestine using qualitative methods, including participant observation and 54 in-depth interviews with pastors, laypeople, women, missionaries, and third-party members. The findings indicated that socio-cultural and theological factors were primary causes of conflict, with economic issues, female informal power, and church buildings being secondary factors. The study revealed a clash between democratic-modern younger generations and patriarchal-traditional pastor cultures. The informal power of women and economic factors also played significant roles in church conflicts.

4.4.1.3. In South Africa

Ndlovu (2009) investigated conflict in a branch of the African Gospel Church (AGC) using a critical systems approach and Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). The study revealed that conflicts were rooted in ecclesiastic teachings and doctrines, with youth feeling powerless and revolting against the church system. The church's traditionalist agendas, promoted by older leaders, clashed with the contemporary views of younger members. Although focused on age-related conflicts, the study's findings may not directly apply to leadership conflicts.

allegations of overthrowing the Pope, competing claims to the papacy, and disputes over resource management (4.1%) further emphasize the intricate nature of leadership conflicts.

Allegations of overthrowing the Pope may involve accusations of betrayal or attempts to seize power, adding a layer of complexity to the conflicts within the religious institution. Competing claims to the papacy can lead to schisms, challenging the unity and authority of the church's leadership. The conflict over self-proclaimed Popes (2.0%) introduces a unique dimension to the analysis. This conflict might be rooted in the reverence or dispute over specific individuals within the church community. Disputes over revered figures can evoke strong emotions and create divisions among the members, impacting the overall harmony of the religious community (Pfeffer & Fong, 2017).

In the specific context of Ugenya Sub-County, local cultural and societal factors may contribute to the dynamics of leadership conflicts within the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church. The community's historical context, economic conditions, and cultural norms can influence the perceptions and behaviors of its members, further shaping the nature of conflicts.

To address leadership conflicts within the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County, it is imperative to implement mechanisms that promote transparency, open communication, and conflict resolution. Establishing clear protocols for resource management, addressing leadership claims through transparent processes, and fostering unity around shared values and beliefs can contribute to a more harmonious religious community.

6. Conflict Resolution and Peace-building

To manage leadership conflict in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County, it is essential for leaders to organize courses and meetings focused on conflict resolution and peace-building. The inclusion of women leaders in these initiatives is crucial, given that most active leaders in the church are men. Collaborating with organizations that specialize in peace-building, negotiation, and conflict resolution can also be beneficial. These experts can mediate and help unite the splintered factions within the church. Leaders should strive to see each other not as adversaries but as brothers, focusing on the stability and unity of the church, which serves as a sanctuary for many in times of distress.

6.1. Reconciliation

In Matthew 18, Jesus outlines the principles of reconciliation, indicating that conflicts are inevitable in relationships, families, and communities. The key to resolving conflicts amicably within the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church lies in dialogue. Effective reconciliation involves counseling, discussing issues, and empathizing with others' perspectives.

Pride is identified as the primary obstacle to reconciliation in the church. Leaders often prioritize their own interests, becoming blind to conflicts until they become problematic. Embracing humility is essential for reconciliation, as it allows leaders to put others' needs above their own. Humility helps leaders communicate effectively, use their power responsibly, and make decisions that benefit the entire church community.

De Gruchy (2002) describes reconciliation as the reunification of God and humanity through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. This concept extends to human relationships, emphasizing moral transformation and active involvement in resolving conflicts. The Christian doctrine of reconciliation suggests that God does not abandon the broken world but engages with it to bring about healing and unity.

In the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church, leaders should embrace reconciliation among themselves to serve as better mediators within the church. Kandagor and Moindi (2019) found that Christians are encouraged to seek peace and engage in reconciliation meetings and intercessory prayers to address conflicts.

6.2. Forgiveness

Conflicts often cause pain and offence, making forgiveness a crucial step towards healing and restoring relationships. Augsburg (1992) notes that forgiveness is understood differently across cultures but it is universally challenging. Effective conflict management should result in forgiveness and reconciliation.

Members of the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church need to practice forgiveness to resolve conflicts and rebuild relationships. Holding grudges and severing ties only perpetuates discord. Shawchuck and Roger (1996) suggest creating a covenant as a commitment to live in trust and harmony, while Smedes (1984) outlines the stages of forgiveness: hurting, hating, healing, and beginning again. Leaders must set an example by addressing disagreements calmly and advocating for forgiveness. This approach will help resolve leadership conflicts and set a positive precedent for the church community.

7. Conclusion

The study explored the factors underlying leadership conflict in the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church in Ugenya Sub-County, Siaya County. It found that leadership conflict has been present since the church's inception, dating back to the time of its founder, Baba Messiah Melkio Simeo Ondeto. The initial conflict involved Baba Messiah and Gaudencia Aoko, who became prideful after being healed and given power and attempted to assert herself as a founder. She was excommunicated and started her own church, the Communion Church, and is not recognized as a founder of the Legio Maria of Africa Mission Church.

Effective conflict resolution, reconciliation, and forgiveness are vital for the church's unity and stability. By embracing humility, open dialogue, and collaboration with peace-building experts, the church can overcome its internal conflicts and continue to serve as a place of solace for its members.

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