

Relearning Pentecostal church leadership conflict management from the Acts of the Apostles



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Leadership conflict has remained an ongoing challenge in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism, often resulting in divisions, burnout and the fragmentation of congregations. The Acts of the Apostles present valuable lessons of Spirit-led and community-based conflict resolution strategies that are applicable to today's Pentecostal church in Zimbabwe. This study draws from four episodes of leadership tensions in Acts (Ac 6:1–7; 13:1–3; 15:1–35; 15:36–41), employs qualitative exegesis and literature review. Findings include Spirit-led discernment, communal consultation, strategic delegation, mission-focused decision-making and graceful separation. In view of that, this article concludes that strategising spiritual discernment with inclusive and contextually feasible conflict management can resolve ecclesial leadership tensions in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism.

Contribution: This article fosters church leadership conflict management by integrating apostolic lessons with contemporary leadership in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism.

Keywords: church; leadership; conflict; resolution; apostolic; strategies; Pentecostalism.

Introduction

Leadership conflict within the classical Pentecostal church is a recurring and deeply impactful phenomenon, with far-reaching implications for congregational stability, pastoral well-being and public witness (Leas & Kittlaus 1973; Van Yperen 2002). Classical Pentecostal denominations in Southern Africa, including the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), and Forward in Faith Ministries, trace their theological heritage to the early 20th-century Azusa Street Revival and the Holiness movements, sharing emphases on Spirit baptism, sign-gifts and experiential worship (Anderson 2013; Burgess 2006). Across these institutions, leadership structures have evolved over time, and several have faced recurring governance tensions, including contested pastoral appointments, electoral disputes and disagreements on organisational control, prompting the development of formalised disciplinary and conflict resolution processes in the early 2000s (Biri 2018; Chivasa 2017; Maxwell 2006). These developments make Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism a useful case for examining how classical Pentecostal theology and congregational governance interact in producing and resolving leadership conflict using the Book of Acts.

Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism is often characterised by centralised leadership models, personality-driven authoritarian structures and limited mechanisms for theological reflection or communal mediation (Chivasa 2017, 2018; Maxwell 2006). This not only threatens church unity but also undermines the credibility and mission of the church in society. While many churches have turned to corporate or managerial strategies to navigate internal tensions, such approaches tend to neglect the spiritual, relational and theological dynamics unique to ecclesial settings (Osmer 2008). The Book of Acts, in contrast, presents a Spirit-led, communally engaged and mission-focused model of leadership that offers both historical insight and practical relevance. The apostolic strategies found in Acts provide an underexplored framework for addressing leadership conflict through spiritual discernment, shared governance and relational wisdom. The study aims to explore leadership conflict management models within Acts of the Apostles and to examine how these models can inform contemporary practices in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism. The primary research question is: How does a qualitative exegetical reading of the Acts of the Apostles provide principles for leadership conflict management applicable to Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches?

This study employs a qualitative theological approach informed by hermeneutical analysis and supported by relevant scholarship. The Book of Acts serves as the primary biblical corpus from

which leadership conflict episodes are examined and interpreted in conversation with contemporary classical Pentecostal leadership dynamics in Zimbabwe.

Research methods and design

This study employs a qualitative, exegetical and literature-based research design to investigate leadership conflict management in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism through the lens of the Acts of the Apostles. It is considered that leadership conflict has remained an ongoing challenge in Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches, caused divisions, pastoral burnout and the fragmentation of congregations (Magezi & Banda 2017:3). Thus, conflict management lessons that are discernible from Acts of the Apostles offer Spirit-led and community-based conflict resolution strategies that can be utilised today.

The research design is textual and exegetical, using qualitative interpretation of selected biblical passages alongside relevant scholarly literature. Four conflict-related episodes in Acts are examined: Acts 6:1–7; Acts 13:1–3; Acts 15:1–35; and Acts 15:36–41. Exegetical analysis employs historical-critical, narrative, and theological methods to unpack leadership dynamics and conflict resolution in these passages (Keener 2012:144–146). A theological synthesis is then developed to identify themes such as Spirit-led discernment, communal consultation, strategic delegation, mission-focused decision-making and graceful separation (Marshall 2007:101). The literature review further engages secondary sources on Acts and Pentecostal leadership conflict to enrich interpretations and ensure scholarly dialogue (Anderson 2013:59). Finally, contextual application relates these biblical insights to Zimbabwean Pentecostal settings, highlighting practical strategies for addressing leadership tensions.

Methodological procedures include selection of the four passages narrating leadership conflicts; historical-critical analysis to explore socio-historical contexts (Green 2006:17); narrative analysis to assess plot development, characters and Spirit-guided resolutions (Parsons 2008:12); and canonical-theological analysis to integrate insights into the wider biblical witness on unity, mission and reconciliation (Barrett 2004:88). Findings from Acts are then placed into interpretive dialogue with contemporary leadership tensions in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism.

Theoretical framework: Literature review

While drawing lessons from the Book of Acts, this article reviews literature to tap some lessons that can enhance church leadership conflict management. It is borne in mind that leadership conflict within the church is neither new nor unusual. From the earliest moments of the Christian movement, disagreements arose concerning administration, doctrine and mission. The Book of Acts, often regarded as the theological and narrative bridge between the Gospels and

the Epistles documents various conflict situations that shaped the identity and structure of the early church (Gaventa 2003; Schnabel 2012). Contemporary church contexts just like in the aforementioned Acts church reveal a similar pattern of conflict among leaders. This remains one of the most persistent challenges, often undermining congregational health, witness and unity (Vanhoozer & Strachan 2015).

In a bid to reach higher levels of conflict resolution, some scholars advocate for professional conflict management models drawn from corporate leadership paradigms (Northouse 2018), while others caution that these frameworks may overlook the theological and communal nature of church life (Osmer 2008). Thus, the early church's response to conflict, as recorded in Acts serves as a valuable resource for reclaiming spiritually grounded and mission-oriented conflict resolution practices; therefore, relearning apostolic strategies becomes crucial. In the Zimbabwean context, the church has been hard-pressed by leadership conflicts since time immemorial. The following section reviews Zimbabwean views and experiences of ecclesiastical leadership conflict, and management.

Reviewing conflict and conflict management in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism

Within Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism churches, leadership conflict often becomes intensified because of centralised authority, personality-driven structures and limited theological formation (Kalu 2008; Omenyo 2006). Such settings frequently lack shared governance or accountability mechanisms, leading to relational breakdowns, schisms or spiritual manipulation. Scholars like Bowers (2009) and Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) have noted the need for contextual ecclesiology that addresses both cultural and theological dimensions of leadership. Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal church contexts therefore demand strategies that are both biblically faithful and practically adaptable. Reappropriating apostolic models from Acts may offer viable alternatives to the hierarchical and often autocratic tendencies in many ecclesial structures across the continent.

Leadership conflict has become an enduring and recurring challenge in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism, shaping its history and ecclesial landscape. Since the early twentieth century, the movement has been characterised by vibrant growth, charismatic leadership and strong missionary zeal; yet these same strengths have frequently produced vulnerability to tensions surrounding power, governance and succession. In denominations such as the AFM, ZAOGA and Forward in Faith Ministries, disputes over leadership legitimacy and organisational direction have repeatedly led to schisms, court interventions and the fragmentation of congregations (Biri 2018:73; Maxwell 2006:57). These conflicts often reveal the tension between the charismatic authority of founding leaders and the institutional need for constitutional frameworks, with leaders and members struggling to balance

Spirit-driven spontaneity with structures of accountability (Anderson 2020:81).

Several types of conflict have been documented in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism. Succession disputes are among the most common, particularly following the incapacitation or death of founding figures, where competing claims of spiritual anointing and constitutional entitlement frequently clash. Governance-related disputes also arise when leaders are accused of centralising power, marginalising dissenting voices or manipulating church constitutions for personal advantage (Chivasa 2017:8). Financial mismanagement and accusations of corruption further complicate matters, eroding trust between pastors and congregants. In some cases, doctrinal disagreements such as those concerning prosperity theology, healing and the role of women have also generated divisions. Each of these dimensions underscores how leadership conflict is not simply an organisational challenge but a deeply spiritual and theological issue that threatens both unity and witness.

In terms of conflict management, Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches have attempted a variety of approaches, ranging from constitutional reforms and the use of disciplinary committees to recourse to secular courts and state arbitration. At times, leaders and congregants turn to spiritual solutions such as prayer vigils, fasting and prophetic pronouncements to resolve disputes (Magezi & Banda 2017:4). While these strategies reflect both organisational and spiritual dimensions of Pentecostal ecclesiology, they have often failed to prevent factionalism. Legal solutions tend to entrench divisions rather than foster reconciliation, while purely spiritual responses risk oversimplifying complex issues of governance and accountability. The creation of splinter churches has therefore become a recurring outcome, contributing to denominational proliferation but weakening the credibility of the church's public witness (Chivasa 2017:10).

Scholars highlight that these challenges persist partly because conflict resolution practices have not been grounded in comprehensive theological reflection. While Pentecostal leaders emphasise the Spirit's guidance in decision-making, there is often a lack of structures that enable inclusive consultation, transparent processes and mission-focused discernment. The absence of such frameworks results in a polarisation between Spirit-led authority and democratic governance, leaving little room for creative synthesis (Anderson 2020:83). Consequently, Zimbabwean Pentecostalism remains vulnerable to cycles of leadership conflict that consume resources, demoralise members, and detract from the church's evangelistic mission.

Against this backdrop, there is a growing call for a retrieval of biblical and contextual resources that can inspire more sustainable approaches to conflict management. The Acts of the Apostles provides rich models of Spirit-led and community-based conflict resolution, where discernment, consultation, delegation and mission-oriented decisions are

integrated to preserve both unity and missional focus (Keener 2012:144–146). By critically engaging with these narratives, Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches can learn how to combine theological depth with practical structures of accountability, thereby strategising more inclusive and Spirit-sensitive pathways for managing leadership tensions. This review therefore establishes the need for exegetical engagement with Acts as a vital step towards reimagining conflict management within Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism.

Overviewing the early church conflict and Apostolic conflict management

Leadership conflict has long been a persistent challenge in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism, often arising from succession disputes, governance struggles, financial mismanagement and personal rivalries. Since its early twentieth-century emergence, Zimbabwean Pentecostalism has grown rapidly under charismatic leaders whose authority is tied to perceived spiritual gifting rather than institutional processes (Anderson 2013:177; Maxwell 2006:57). While this leadership style has promoted revival and evangelistic growth, it has also exposed churches to recurring tensions during leadership transitions or contested decisions. In denominations such as the AFM and ZAOGA, leadership disputes frequently escalate into legal battles, church splits and congregational fragmentation (Biri 2018:73).

Existing conflict management approaches include constitutional reforms, mediation, prayer and informal negotiation. While these measures reflect the spiritual and organisational ethos of Pentecostalism, they often prove insufficient, leading to recurring divisions and the creation of splinter ministries (Anderson 2020:81; Chivasa 2017:8). These challenges underscore the need for a framework that combines theological reflection with practical strategies. The Acts of the Apostles provides rich examples of how early church conflicts were addressed in ways that preserved both unity and mission.

Spirit-led discernment

Acts demonstrates that Spirit-led discernment was central to leadership conflict management. In Acts 13:1–3, the Holy Spirit directs the church at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul for missionary work. The Greek verb *ἄφορισατε* [*aphorise*], translated as 'set apart', emphasises consecration for divine purpose (Danker 2000). This episode shows that leadership decisions were rooted in communal worship and prayer, highlighting the importance of spiritual discernment before implementing organisational decisions. For Zimbabwean Pentecostal leaders, integrating Spirit-led discernment means grounding appointments, conflict resolution and strategic planning in prayer, collective recognition of spiritual gifting, and theological reflection rather than personal ambition.

Communal consultation

The early church valued communal consultation as a mechanism for resolving disputes. Acts 6:1–7 recounts the conflict between Hellenistic and Hebraic Jewish believers over food distribution for widows. The apostles addressed the tension by consulting the community and appointing seven men full of the Spirit and wisdom [πλήρεις πνεύματος καὶ σοφίας; *plēreis pneumatos kai sophias*] (Danker 2000). This participatory approach promoted transparency, accountability and shared ownership of decisions. Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches can emulate this model by creating inclusive structures that engage congregants and sub-leaders in problem-solving and decision-making, preventing factionalism and enhancing legitimacy.

Strategic delegation

Delegation emerges in Acts as a key strategy for managing conflict. In Acts 6:1–7, the apostles delegate operational responsibilities to capable individuals, enabling them to focus on prayer and teaching. This strategic allocation of duties prevented leadership burnout and ensured effective ministry. Similarly, Acts 13:1–3 illustrates how communal discernment, combined with delegation, empowered leaders to carry out mission-focused tasks. For contemporary Zimbabwean Pentecostal contexts, strategic delegation ensures clarity of roles, reduces tensions and fosters shared responsibility in leadership.

Mission-focused decision-making

Decision-making in the early church was oriented towards mission rather than personal preference. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1–35 addresses the doctrinal dispute regarding circumcision and Gentile inclusion. The council's deliberations, guided by the Spirit, emphasised the collective mission of the church, with Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James modelling shared leadership and theological dialogue [ζήτησις; *zētēsis*] (Danker 2000). Their final decision, communicated through a letter stating ἔδοξε γὰρ τῷ Πνεύματι τῷ Ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν [it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us], demonstrates collaboration with the Spirit and prioritisation of communal goals over individual interests. Zimbabwean Pentecostal leaders can adopt this mission-focused lens to align decisions with the church's broader spiritual and missional objectives, reducing personal or political conflicts.

Graceful separation

Acts also models graceful separation as a means of conflict management. In Acts 15:36–41, Paul and Barnabas disagree over John Mark, leading to a separation that, rather than fracturing the mission, resulted in the multiplication of ministry teams. The term παροξυσμός [*paroxysmos*] conveys a sharp contention, yet the resolution preserves relationships and mission continuity (Danker 2000). This example highlights that amicable separation, when necessary, can be constructive rather than destructive. Zimbabwean Pentecostal

leaders facing irreconcilable disputes can apply this principle to avoid prolonged factionalism while maintaining respect, collaboration and missional focus.

These five principles, that is, Spirit-led discernment, communal consultation, strategic delegation, mission-focused decision-making and graceful separation collectively provide a pneumatological and communal framework for conflict management. Acts demonstrates that leadership tensions can become opportunities for spiritual growth, collaborative governance and mission advancement. For Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism, relearning these apostolic strategies offers a pathway to sustainable, theologically grounded conflict resolution that aligns with practical theology and contemporary church realities.

Recommendations and application to contemporary church leadership

The findings of this study indicate that the early church's approaches to conflict, as evidenced in the Book of Acts, provide enduring lessons for contemporary Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal leadership. While it would be neither practical nor faithful to replicate apostolic structures wholesale, the principles embedded within them can be reappropriated in ways that are both theologically sound and contextually relevant. Five key applications emerge from this study.

Spirit-led leadership and conflict resolution teams

The early church emphasised prayer and spiritual discernment as foundational to resolving conflict (Acts 6 and 13). This underscores the importance of forming leadership teams that are not only administratively capable but also spiritually mature. Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches are encouraged to establish conflict resolution groups anchored in intercessory prayer and trained in both biblical principles and basic psychological mediation (Tagwirei 2024). Such teams shift the posture of the church from reactive to proactive, cultivating a culture in which conflict is anticipated and addressed through prayerful dialogue, communal wisdom and Spirit-led decision-making.

Reimagining leadership authority and decentralisation

The shared governance observed in Acts 15 demonstrates that effective leadership does not rely on centralised authority or personality-driven structures. Zimbabwean churches are encouraged to decentralise leadership by empowering elders, cell group leaders and ministry heads to handle localised issues. This model distributes responsibility, prevents the overburdening of a single figure and strengthens the overall body of leadership. Decentralisation is thus not a dilution of authority but a reinforcement of sustainability, accountability and collaborative governance (Bowers 2009; Resane 2014).

Structured theological dialogue

The apostles' engagement with doctrinal tension, particularly in Acts 15, highlights the necessity of intentional forums for theological discussion. Church leaders and congregants should address doctrinal disagreements within structured settings such as retreats, study groups or council meetings. Such spaces allow for communal discernment, consensus-building and prevention of personal opinions hardening into divisive ideologies. Structured dialogue also nurtures theological integrity, ensures alignment with the church's mission, and reduces the risk of conflict escalating into schism.

Merit-based leadership selection

The selection of leaders in Acts 6 and the commissioning in Acts 13 demonstrate that appointments were based on spiritual discernment, moral integrity and communal affirmation rather than charisma, financial contribution or popularity. Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches are encouraged to adopt merit-based criteria that prioritise spiritual maturity, ethical conduct and servant leadership qualities. This approach fosters trust, accountability and a leadership culture that discourages favouritism or envy, strengthening congregational cohesion.

Graceful separation and conflict as opportunity

The narrative of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36–41 exemplifies that conflict does not necessarily signify failure, nor must it result in permanent division. When separation is unavoidable, it should be handled transparently, respectfully and without character assassination. Zimbabwean churches can normalise leadership transitions and separations as part of organisational maturity, ensuring open communication, communal prayer and continued relational integrity. Recognising conflict as an opportunity for growth and mission expansion encourages a Spirit-led, resilient ecclesial culture.

Conclusion

Conflict within church leadership is an inescapable reality in any ecclesial context. However, while conflict may at times lead to organisational restructuring or relational distance, destructive division and dysfunction are not inevitable outcomes. A distinction is necessary between harmful division characterised by hostility, fragmentation, and damaged witness and graceful separation, where divergent convictions result in parting ways with mutual respect, theological integrity, and an ongoing commitment to Christian unity despite structural discontinuity. The apostolic witness in the Book of Acts demonstrates that Spirit-led, communally grounded and mission-focused strategies can transform conflict into a crucible for theological clarity, pastoral growth and renewed missional energy. Contemporary church leaders, particularly within Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism, are therefore urged to

relearn and reapply these apostolic strategies not as mere imitation, but as intentional reformation, allowing ancient practices to inform new ecclesial realities.

This study, employing a qualitative exegetical and literature-based approach, facilitates deep theological engagement with the Acts of the Apostles as a resource for leadership conflict management. By focusing on four pivotal episodes (Ac 6:1–7; 13:1–3; 15:1–35; 15:36–41), the research identifies five key principles: Spirit-led discernment, communal consultation, strategic delegation, mission-focused decision-making and graceful separation. Each principle demonstrates that conflicts can be approached constructively, fostering unity, accountability and mission alignment rather than entrenching divisions.

The findings suggest that Zimbabwean classical Pentecostal churches can benefit from strategically integrating these lessons into contemporary leadership practice. Church governance structures should be reviewed to promote decentralisation, shared responsibility and accountability across multiple leadership tiers. Seminaries and theological colleges have a critical role in embedding biblical conflict resolution into pastoral formation, equipping future leaders with theological, ethical and practical skills for managing disputes. Additionally, denominational bodies should develop policy frameworks that reflect reconciliation, mutual submission and Spirit-led governance to ensure that conflict management aligns with both the character and mission of the church.

Ultimately, a Spirit-led, communally oriented and mission-focused approach to leadership conflict does more than preserve institutional stability; it nurtures a church culture that embodies the transformative presence of the Holy Spirit, fostering theological integrity, relational health and faithful witness in Zimbabwean classical Pentecostalism.

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Zephania Mundhluri: Writing – original draft. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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