

Strategic Leadership and Organizational Growth in Faith-Based Institutions: A Case Study Approach

By

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Abstract

Faith-based institutions (FBIs) in Nigeria play a pivotal role in spiritual, social, and economic development, yet their sustainability depends heavily on effective leadership. This study investigates the relationship between strategic leadership and organizational growth in FBIs, employing a rapid mixed-methods approach that combined surveys (n=60) and semi-structured interviews (n=5) with clergy, administrators, and church workers. Findings reveal that FBIs have experienced notable growth in membership, finances, and outreach, driven by strategic planning, visionary leadership, and community engagement. Over 55% of survey respondents affirmed that leaders successfully balance spiritual and administrative responsibilities, while interviews highlighted the integration of biblical principles with modern management practices as central to institutional progress.

Despite these successes, challenges persist, including weak succession planning, doctrinal rigidity, internal politics, and limited technological adaptation. Literature corroborates these findings, emphasizing that servant leadership, visionary planning, and structured succession are critical for organizational sustainability (Greenleaf, 1977; Dada et al., 2020; Njeri, Ngui, & Mathenge, 2019). However, the study also identifies several challenges that may hinder sustainable growth, including technological adaptation, internal politics, and misappropriation of resources, weak succession planning, doctrinal rigidity and insufficient leadership training. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest that while growth is evident, sustaining it will require addressing these challenges through deliberate reforms and leadership development.

The study concludes that strategic leadership rooted in Christian values but open to innovation is essential for FBIs to thrive in dynamic environments. Recommendations include investing in leadership training, strengthening succession frameworks, leveraging digital tools, and enhancing community engagement.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, faith-based institutions, organizational growth, Nigeria, succession planning, servant leadership, community engagement.

Introduction

Faith-based institutions (FBIs) play a vital role in shaping both spiritual and social landscapes across Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Their growth is not only measured in terms of membership and financial stability but also through spiritual impact and community outreach. Leadership has been widely acknowledged as a critical factor influencing the sustainability and expansion of these organizations. This study explores the relationship between strategic leadership and organizational growth in Nigerian FBIs, focusing on how leadership practices such as vision, innovation, delegation, and accountability contribute to both spiritual and structural outcomes.

Faith-based institutions (FBIs) play a significant role in shaping societies across Africa. They are not only centers of religious expression and spiritual nourishment but also key contributors to education, healthcare, social welfare, and economic empowerment. In countries like Nigeria, FBIs operate some of the most reputable schools and universities, run extensive healthcare facilities, and provide large-scale humanitarian interventions. Their reach often extends beyond denominational boundaries, influencing politics, culture, and national identity. This multifaceted impact makes them crucial players in the discourse on organizational growth and sustainability.

Yet, like other organizations, FBIs must navigate the challenges of survival, expansion, and relevance in an increasingly dynamic environment. Globalization, technological advancement, rising secularism, economic fluctuations, and internal governance issues all pose pressing challenges. Unlike secular organizations, FBIs carry a dual mandate: to remain faithful to their spiritual mission while simultaneously ensuring administrative efficiency, financial sustainability, and growth. The leadership of such institutions must therefore demonstrate both spiritual depth and strategic acumen.

Strategic leadership has emerged as a critical driver of organizational growth in both profit and non-profit sectors. Defined as the capacity of leaders to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, and empower others to create necessary change, strategic leadership moves beyond day-to-day administration to long-term visioning and positioning. In the corporate world, it is often associated with competitive advantage, market leadership, and sustainable performance. For FBIs, strategic leadership carries additional dimensions—it must uphold religious values, nurture spiritual communities, and deliver social impact while fostering organizational expansion. This balance requires leaders who can translate faith principles into management practices without losing either authenticity or efficiency.

Several FBIs in Nigeria and Africa provide compelling examples of strategic leadership in action. Their leaders have employed diverse strategies—ranging from hierarchical governance and structured succession plans to charismatic visionary leadership and

community-based collaboration. These approaches have resulted in remarkable growth stories: churches expanding across continents, mosques building large social networks, and institutions establishing universities, hospitals, and global outreach programs. However, not all FBIs succeed equally. Some struggle with leadership transitions, resource management, or maintaining integrity under pressure. Thus, studying how strategic leadership influences organizational growth in FBIs is both timely and significant.

The African context provides a particularly fertile ground for such an inquiry. Religion plays an outsized role in African societies, where both Christianity and Islam command massive followings. Nigeria, as Africa's most populous nation, stands out with its vibrant religious landscape. The growth of Pentecostalism, the enduring presence of Catholicism, and the rising organizational influence of Islamic societies all provide a unique opportunity to explore leadership models in faith-based contexts. At the same time, African FBIs operate in environments often marked by economic volatility, governance challenges, and shifting cultural expectations. Understanding how they sustain growth amidst such pressures offers lessons not only for other FBIs but also for wider organizational studies.

Literature Review

Strategic leadership has long been recognized as a driver of organizational growth across both profit and non-profit sectors. In faith-based institutions (FBIs), leadership effectiveness is uniquely tied to the integration of spiritual values with modern management practices.

Strategic Leadership and Organizational Growth

Strategic leadership is defined as the ability of leaders to anticipate, envision, and empower others to create necessary change (Andrews, 2023). In FBIs, this involves balancing spiritual mandates with administrative efficiency. Adegbite (2019) and Nwankwo (2021) argue that visionary planning and foresight enable religious organizations to remain relevant in dynamic environments. Jenssen (2020) further applies organizational life cycle theory to church development, showing that leadership decisions directly influence growth trajectories.

Servant Leadership and Faith Influence

Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership theory emphasizes humility, service, and accountability as foundations of organizational success. This resonates strongly in FBIs, where leaders often view themselves as stewards rather than executives. Oladipo

(2018) highlights that servant leadership in African contexts fosters trust, community engagement, and spiritual authenticity. Interviews in this study confirmed that Nigerian leaders integrate biblical teachings into leadership practices, reinforcing Greenleaf's model.

Succession Planning and Sustainability

Succession planning emerged as a critical challenge. Njeri, Ngui, and Mathenge (2019) found that weak succession frameworks undermine organizational performance in Catholic institutions in Kenya. Similarly, Adias and Akenbor (2020) emphasize that succession planning is vital for organizational survival in Nigerian schools. Dada et al. (2020, 2021) corroborate this, noting that leadership continuity is essential for FBIs to sustain growth amidst generational transitions.

Community Engagement and Social Impact

Community engagement is consistently identified as a growth driver. Onwu (2020) argues that FBIs thrive when they integrate spiritual goals with social impact initiatives. Respondents in this study highlighted outreach and youth engagement as central to expansion. This aligns with Jenssen's (2020) findings that churches grow when they prioritize both spiritual nourishment and community service.

Technology and Innovation

Modernization remains a pressing issue. Okoro (2022) stresses that FBIs must embrace digital tools, social media, and artificial intelligence to remain relevant. Leaders interviewed acknowledged the importance of technology but admitted gaps in adoption. This reflects Eze's (2022) observation that doctrinal rigidity and resistance to change often hinder modernization in African FBIs.

Synthesis

Taken together, the literature and findings suggest that strategic leadership in FBIs must be multidimensional—rooted in faith, guided by servant leadership, sustained through succession planning, and strengthened by innovation. Without deliberate reforms, FBIs risk stagnation despite current growth.

Methods

This study adopted a rapid mixed-methods design to explore the relationship between strategic leadership and organisational growth in faith-based institutions (FBIs) in Nigeria. The combination of a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews provided both breadth and depth of insights.

Survey

A structured questionnaire was administered to members of selected FBIs, targeting leaders and active participants. The survey measured perceptions of leadership practices, organisational culture, and indicators of institutional growth. Responses were collected from 60 participants, ensuring representation across different demographic and leadership categories.

Interviews

To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with church leaders and administrators. A total of five interviews were carried out, focusing on leadership strategies, challenges, and contextual practices influencing growth. Questions were framed in accessible language to ensure clarity and openness of responses.

Sampling and Data Collection

Participants were purposively selected from diverse congregations, with emphasis on Nigerian FBIs to capture contextual realities. Data collection spanned [insert timeframe], using both in-person and digital methods where appropriate.

Data Analysis

Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify common trends, while interview transcripts were thematically coded to draw out key patterns and illustrative insights. The integration of both datasets enabled triangulation and enriched interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality. Responses were anonymised to protect privacy, and participation remained voluntary throughout the process.

Results

Survey Findings

The survey was completed by 60 respondents, ranging in age from 18 to 60 years. Participants included members, volunteers, staff, and pastors, providing perspectives from diverse roles within faith-based institutions (FBIs).

- **Length of Affiliation:** About 40% of respondents had been affiliated for less than five years, while the remaining 60% had been members for five to over twenty years, ensuring a mix of fresh and long-term perspectives.
- **Effectiveness of Strategic Planning:** 30 respondents rated their institution's leadership as very effective in strategic planning, reflecting confidence in leadership processes.
- **Balancing Spiritual and Administrative Roles:** Over 55% believed that leadership successfully balances the spiritual mission with administrative demands, while the remainder rated this balance as average.
- **Perceptions of Organisational Growth:** More than half of respondents perceived rapid growth in their institutions over the past five years, while others described growth as moderate or stable.
- **Drivers of Growth:** Nearly 40% identified community engagement as the most significant contributor to growth. Other factors cited were visionary leadership, strong governance, and prioritising spiritual values, while only 2% viewed member care as the primary driver.
- **Leadership Challenges:** Respondents highlighted recurring challenges including adapting to technology, internal politics and bureaucracy, financial criteria for selecting leaders, communication gaps, weak financial strategy, poor succession planning, and lack of synergy at head-office level.

Interview Findings

Five in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders occupying diverse roles, including a Provost, Administrator, Clergy, Pastor, Cell Leader, and Church Worker. Each oversees a considerable number of members and contributes significantly to institutional growth.

Interviews with senior pastors and ministry leaders revealed recurring themes on the role of vision, innovation, and accountability in driving growth. One pastor noted: 'Our commitment to strategic planning has not only expanded membership but also strengthened discipleship structures.' Leaders also highlighted challenges such as limited financial resources, resistance to change, and balancing spiritual priorities with administrative demands.

- **Leadership Styles:** Approaches varied among respondents, ranging from servant leadership to hybrid autocratic-democratic models and exemplary leadership. Despite stylistic differences, all agreed that their institutions had experienced notable growth in membership, finances, outreach, and activities in recent years.

- **Strategies Driving Growth:** Planning and vision casting were consistently identified as central to growth. The Administrator, also head of the Leadership Institute at The Elevation Church, emphasised long- and short-term goal setting as key. The Provost of a Catholic institution attributed recent growth to the rise of young, vibrant, and strategic leadership. All leaders affirmed that their Christian faith and biblical teachings directly shape their leadership philosophy, influencing organisational decisions and practices.

- **Balancing Spiritual and Organisational Goals:** Leaders stressed the complementary relationship between spiritual and organisational objectives. The Provost noted: "When you meet your spiritual goals, the benefits follow into areas such as structure and organisation." He further advocated integrating biblical principles with relevant secular knowledge for effective institutional growth.

- **Challenges Highlighted:** Respondents identified barriers such as insufficient training, doctrinal rigidity, limited adaptation to modern contexts, and delayed adoption of technology. Ongoing reforms within institutions (e.g., Catholic churches) are gradually addressing these issues.

- **Future Growth Needs:** Leaders recommended exemplary leadership, stronger planning and organisation, innovative strategies, and embracing modern tools such as social media and artificial intelligence.

- **Qualities of Future Leaders:** Integrity, emotional intelligence, spirituality, patience, humility, and the ability to listen were identified as essential qualities for upcoming church leaders.

- **Improving Leadership Effectiveness:** A recurring theme was the urgent need for structured training and capacity building, which leaders believed would improve effectiveness and sustainability.

Integrated Patterns

The integration of survey and interview findings highlights several consistent themes:

1. **Planning and Vision as Drivers of Growth:** Both survey respondents and interviewees emphasised the importance of strategic planning and clear vision casting in facilitating organisational growth.

2. **Faith as a Foundational Principle:** Leaders stressed that biblical teachings influence leadership practices, while survey respondents affirmed that balancing spiritual and administrative responsibilities is critical.

3. Community Engagement and Strategic Leadership: Survey respondents identified community engagement as a major growth driver, while interviews highlighted the role of strategic and vibrant leadership. Together, these suggest that outward-facing strategies coupled with inward organisational strength drive growth.

4. Leadership Challenges: Both datasets pointed to challenges such as adapting to technology, managing internal politics, and ensuring leadership continuity. Interviews further revealed the need for structured training and reform, echoing survey concerns about weak succession planning.

5. Future Directions: Across both datasets, there was consensus on the need for exemplary, innovative, and well-trained leaders who are spiritually grounded yet open to modern strategies.

Overall, the results demonstrate that while FBIs in Nigeria are experiencing significant growth, sustaining this progress will require addressing leadership challenges through deliberate planning, training, and innovation.

Table 1. Summary of Methods and key Results

Data Source	Focus Area	Key Findings
Survey (n = X)	Leadership practices	Close link between vision casting, accountability, structures and organisational growth
Survey (n = X)	Challenges	Resource constraints and resistance to change were identified as major barriers
Interviews (n = X)	Strategic leadership role	Leaders emphasised succession planning, mentoring and servant-leadership and innovation as essential for sustainable growth
Interviews (n = X)	Organisational outcomes	Growth was understood not just in numerical

		terms but also in spiritual impact, institutional sustainability and community influence
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Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that strategic leadership plays a critical role in driving organisational growth within faith-based institutions (FBIs) in Nigeria. Both survey and interview results affirm that leadership practices such as vision casting, planning, and community engagement have contributed significantly to growth in membership, finances, and outreach.

Strategic Leadership and Growth

The results show that effective strategic planning is widely recognised within FBIs, with 30 survey respondents rating their institution's planning capacity as very effective. Interviewees further reinforced this by stressing that growth is largely driven by deliberate planning and visionary leadership. This aligns with prior studies (e.g., Adegbite, 2019; Nwankwo, 2021), which argue that strategic foresight enables religious organisations to remain relevant and competitive in changing environments.

Balancing Spiritual and Administrative Priorities

Survey findings indicate that over 55% of respondents believe their leaders effectively balance spiritual and administrative responsibilities. This is echoed in the interviews, where leaders highlighted the complementary nature of spiritual and organisational goals. The Provost's assertion that "when you meet your spiritual goals, the benefits follow into structure and organisation" reflects the growing consensus in literature that sustainable growth in FBIs requires integrating biblical principles with organisational management skills (Onwu, 2020).

Leadership Styles and Faith Influence

Leaders described diverse leadership styles ranging from servant leadership to hybrid and exemplary models. However, a unifying theme was the strong influence of Christian faith and biblical teachings on leadership approaches. This reflects Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership theory, where service and humility underpin organisational success,

and supports African-context studies (Oladipo, 2018) that emphasise the centrality of faith in leadership effectiveness.

Drivers of Growth

Community engagement emerged as a top driver of growth, with nearly 40% of survey respondents selecting it as the most important factor. This corresponds with the interviewees' recognition of outreach, planning, and youthful strategic leadership as critical to expansion. Together, these findings highlight that growth in Nigerian FBIs is sustained through outward-facing strategies (community engagement) combined with internal organisational strength (visionary and vibrant leadership).

Leadership Challenges

Both quantitative and qualitative findings identified major challenges that could undermine long-term growth. These include technological adaptation, internal politics, poor succession planning, communication gaps, and financial mismanagement. Leaders also pointed to insufficient training and doctrinal rigidity as limiting factors. These results resonate with existing studies (Adewale, 2021; Eze, 2022), which argue that FBIs in Africa often struggle with modernisation and continuity. Addressing these issues is essential for sustainable growth.

Future Leadership and Organisational Sustainability

The interviews underscored the need for exemplary leadership and capacity building. Respondents emphasised qualities such as integrity, emotional intelligence, humility, and adaptability as vital for future leaders. Moreover, the recognition of tools such as artificial intelligence and social media indicates a willingness to adapt, but also a gap in practical training. This supports calls in contemporary literature (Okoro, 2022) for FBIs to embrace digital tools and structured leadership development as part of their strategic growth agenda.

Synthesis

Taken together, the findings suggest that strategic leadership, rooted in faith but open to innovation, is the cornerstone of organisational growth in FBIs. While growth is evident, sustainability depends on overcoming challenges through training, generational continuity, and technological adaptation. These results reinforce the argument that Nigerian FBIs can thrive in a dynamic environment when they adopt a balanced, forward-looking leadership model that integrates spiritual convictions with modern strategic tools.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between strategic leadership and organisational growth in faith-based institutions (FBIs) in Nigeria using a rapid mixed-methods approach. Findings from surveys and interviews confirm that FBIs are experiencing significant growth in membership, finances, outreach, and influence. Central to this growth are leadership practices such as vision casting, strategic planning, community engagement, and vibrant leadership.

The study also highlights that Christian faith and biblical principles remain at the core of leadership approaches within FBIs, influencing both decision-making and organisational practices. However, the results equally reveal pressing leadership challenges including technological adaptation, internal politics, poor succession planning, doctrinal rigidity, and insufficient leadership training.

Overall, the evidence suggests that while strategic leadership has enabled FBIs to grow, sustaining this growth will require deliberate reforms, continuous training, and integration of modern strategies with faith-driven leadership principles.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for faith-based institutions in Nigeria and similar contexts:

1. **Invest in Leadership Training and Development:** Structured training programmes should be prioritised to equip current and emerging leaders with both biblical grounding and modern management skills.
2. **Strengthen Succession Planning**
Institutions should create clear frameworks for leadership continuity to ensure smooth generational transitions and long-term stability.
3. **Leverage Technology and Innovation**
FBIs should adopt digital tools such as social media, artificial intelligence, and modern communication platforms to enhance outreach, engagement, and organisational efficiency.
4. **Balance Spiritual and Administrative Responsibilities**
Leaders must continue integrating spiritual convictions with effective organisational management practices to maintain credibility and sustainability.

5. Enhance Community Engagement

Since community engagement was identified as a major growth driver, FBIs should expand their social impact initiatives to strengthen trust, visibility, and influence.

6. Address Internal Politics and Bureaucracy

Transparent governance structures and accountability systems should be put in place to reduce internal conflict and ensure effective decision-making.

By implementing these recommendations, faith-based institutions can consolidate their current growth, address leadership challenges, and position themselves for sustainable impact in a rapidly changing environment.

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