



# The Spirit and the Structure: Governance, Accountability, and Sustainability in Pentecostalism: A Case of Africa

Samuel McNeil Elias Kayuni\*

1. Social Justice and Human Studies Department, School of Social and Human Studies, Atlantic International University, Pioneer Plaza, 900 Fort Street Mall 905, Honolulu, HI 96813, USA

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**Abstract:** The phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism across the African continent in the late 20th and early 21st centuries represents one of the most significant religious shifts in modern history. This expansion, however, has often been built upon a foundation of charismatic authority and less formalized governance structures, contrasting sharply with the historic, institutional models of mainline Protestant and Catholic churches. While this flexibility has been a key driver of growth, allowing for rapid adaptation and local responsiveness, it has also created significant challenges. This article argues that the pervasive lack of formalized governance structures within many African Pentecostal churches poses a critical threat to their long-term accountability, financial integrity, and overall sustainability. Through an examination of the theological, historical, and sociological factors that privilege informality, and an analysis of the resultant issues—including financial scandals, leadership crises, and communal fragmentation—this paper contends that the future vitality of African Pentecostalism is contingent upon a deliberate move towards more robust, transparent, and participatory governance models that can honor its charismatic roots while ensuring institutional resilience.

**Keywords:** African Pentecostalism, Church Governance, Accountability, Sustainability, Charismatic Authority, Ecclesiology, Leadership.

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## INTRODUCTION

The landscape of African Christianity has been profoundly reshaped by the explosive growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. From a marginal force in the early 20th century, Pentecostalism has become a central feature of Africa's religious, social, and even political milieu (Kärkkäinen, 2017). Its appeal is often attributed to its vibrant worship, emphasis on the immediate presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and its focus on practical solutions to existential problems such as poverty, sickness, and spiritual oppression (Gifford, 2004; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005).

This growth strategy has typically shunned the rigid hierarchies and bureaucratic procedures characteristic of mission-founded mainline churches, favoring instead a more fluid, Spirit-led, and personality-driven approach to church organization. This article explores the double edged sword of this organizational model. The central thesis is that the very informality that facilitates rapid growth and adaptability instantaneously incubates systemic vulnerabilities. The problem is not the Pentecostal emphasis on the Spirit's leading as such, but the frequent absence of complementary structures of accountability that can protect the community from the leadership weaknesses to ensure the church's mission continues beyond the lifespan of its architect.

The lack of formalized governance manifest in blurred succession plans, financial imperviousness, and tyrannical leadership styles threatens to undermine the long-term sustainability of these vibrant faith communities (Heuser, 2016). This paper will first establish the defining characteristics of Pentecostal ecclesiology and governance in the African perspective. It will then compare this with the more established models found in mainline churches. The core of the argument will detail the specific issues arising from structural informality: crises of leadership and succession, financial mismanagement, and communal disintegration. In conclusion, the article will propose trails towards sustainable governance that seek to resolve charismatic liveliness with institutional integrity, suggesting that the future of African Pentecostalism may depend on its ability to embrace a more holistic ecclesiological approach.

### **Africa Pentecostalism and its Ecclesiological Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA)**

To understand its governance models, one must first appreciate the distinct theological and historical DNA of African Pentecostalism. While immensely diverse, these movements share core characteristics that directly influence their organizational structures. In Pentecostalism the leader is often viewed as a "man or woman of God," a vessel specially anointed by the Spirit, and their authority is derived from this perceived anointing rather than from institutional office or academic credentials.

This creates an epistemology where divine revelation and direct guidance from the Spirit can hold more immediate authority than written policies or historical creeds (Anderson, 2014). Pentecostalism prioritizes individual and communal experience of the divine, the baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, and other spiritual gifts. African Pentecostalism has deeply indigenized the faith, incorporating worldviews that take the reality of the spirit world seriously, leading to a strong emphasis on spiritual warfare, deliverance, and blessings in the here-and-now (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005).

This practical, "power-centered" theology often translates into a pragmatic approach to church life where what "works" (e.g., in attracting crowds or producing visible miracles) can be valued over procedural correctness. Many of the largest and most influential Pentecostal churches in Africa are founded by a single, dynamic individual. These founders often have a powerful conversion or calling narrative that becomes central to the church's identity. The church is frequently built around their personality, preaching style, and spiritual gifts. Consequently, governance is naturally centralized and personalized. The founder is typically the sole apostle, president, bishop, or general overseer, wielding ultimate executive, spiritual, and often financial authority (Ukah, 2008). This model stands in stark contrast to the synodal, presbyterian, or episcopal polities of mainline churches, where authority is dispersed among committees, councils, or a college of bishops.

### **Contrast with Mainline Church Governance**

The governance gap between Pentecostal and mainline churches in Africa is not merely a difference of style but of deep-seated ecclesiological principle. Mainline churches (e.g., Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian) inherited and adapted European ecclesiastical structures, which were designed for longevity and accountability. Mainline churches operate

with well-defined structures. According to episcopal organization (e.g., Catholic, Anglican) authority is vested in bishops who oversee dioceses within a hierarchical structure.

Succession is formalized through apostolic succession or appointment processes involving other bishops and committees. In Presbyterian churches, authority is exercised by a body of elders (presbyters) who are elected by the congregation. Governance is representative and layered, from the local session to the regional presbytery and general assembly. In congregational organization (e.g., Baptists) each local congregation is autonomous and self-governing, typically making major decisions through democratic vote by members.

Although the above structures seem cumbersome, they create multiple layers of accountability on financial decisions, pastoral appointments, and doctrinal standards since they will be subject to review by bodies beyond the local pastor (Duncan, 2018).

Key features of mainline governance include:

- **Independent Financial Oversight:** Treasurers, finance committees, and external audits are standard practice, separating financial control from pastoral ministry.
- **Theological Education:** Leadership is tied to formal theological training and credentialing, ensuring a baseline of doctrinal and pastoral competence.
- **Constitutions and Canons:** Written documents that clearly outline doctrine, ethics, leadership roles, financial controls, and disciplinary procedures.
- **Term Limits and Retirement Ages:** Mandatory retirement for clergy prevents the entrenchment of power and facilitates planned succession.

These systems are designed to ensure that the institution can survive beyond any single individual and that leaders are accountable to the church and its rules, not solely to their own sense of divine calling.

### **The Accountability Vacuum: Leadership and Succession Crises**

Lack of formality of Pentecostal governance creates a significant vacuum in accountability, which becomes extremely visible during leadership transitions and in the unchecked exercise of authority. The confluence of spiritual charisma, cultural notions of patriarchal authority, and the absence of checks and balances can foster autocratic leadership, often termed the "I'm God" syndrome. The General overseer, accountable only to God, can become immune to counsel or correction from within the church.

Opposition is easily framed as revolt against God's anointed or a lack of faith (Gifford, 2015). This concentration of power disheartens transparency and can lead to personal decision-making that serves the leader's interests rather than the churches welfare. Unlike a mainline bishop, a Pentecostal founder's tenure is often for life because succession model is founder-centric. Planning for succession can be seen as an act of a challenge to the leader's God-given mandate.

Therefore, many churches are plunged into crisis upon the death or incapacitation of the founder. The resulting power struggles can be devastating. Remaining church members engage in fierce litigation and public conflicts to control the church's assets and

leadership (Ukah, 2016). The Nigerian case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is a rare positive example of a planned succession from its founder Pa Josiah Akindayomi to Enoch Adeboye in 1981, which was crucial to its global expansion. More common are stories of prolonged legal battles that drain church resources and damage its public reputation such as the 2018 to 2021 Zimbabwe Apostolic Faith Mission case which ended in high court.

### **The Financial Integrity Challenge**

In Pentecostal churches, financial control is centralized in the office of the founder-pastor. The doctrine of "seed faith" and sacrificial giving is powerfully preached, encouraging members to give generously with the expectation of divine blessing. However, the lack of accountability in how these funds are used can lead to exploitation (Burgess, 2019). Financial management is often important due to tithes, offerings, and business ventures becomes a major area of vulnerability.

There is no clear separation between the personal finances of the leader and the church's funds. No independent finance board and no requirement for external audits. Stories of pastors living in obscene luxury while their congregations remain in poverty are not uncommon and fuel public criticism. The prevalence of the prosperity gospel further complicates financial accountability.

When ministry is framed as a transaction—give to get—and the pastor is the essential conduit of God's blessing, financial contributions can become detached from their ecclesiological purpose of funding the church. The church transforms into a commercial enterprise, selling anointing oils, holy water, and special prayers for fees (Gifford, 2004). The prosperity gospel and commodification of faith not only risks exploiting the vulnerable but also ties the church's sustainability to a theology that is theologically contested and potentially unstable (Burgess, 2019). The absence of basic financial controls makes churches easy targets for embezzlement by senior leaders. Without oversight, it is difficult to prevent or detect fraud. When scandals do erupt, they are often handled internally and secretly to protect the church's reputation, allowing the problems to continue. This lack of financial integrity severely damages the church's moral authority and its ability to partner with development agencies or other reputable institutions.

### **Fragmentation and Doctrinal Instability**

Lack of binding denominational structures makes it easy to break away and form a new church. While this can be a source of innovation and growth, it often leads to fragmentation based on personality clashes rather than practical religious issues. The result is a multiplying of micro-churches, many of which are unsustainable and replicate the same governance weaknesses of their parent bodies (Heuser, 2016).

Without a robust doctrinal committee or a confessional standard to provide guidelines, teaching can easily drift into extremism. The emphasis on personal prophecy can lead to manipulation and abuse, with prophets making authoritative declarations about members' lives that demand compliance (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013). In African context unchecked teachings can promote harmful practices, such as the condemnation of medical treatment in favor of faith healing. The absence of a disciplinary structure to hold such

leader's accountable leaves victims with little recourse and exposes the entire movement to criticism.

**Case Study:** The Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), founded by Archbishop Ezekiel Guti, presents an insightful case. It is a classic example of a powerful founder-led Pentecostal movement that has achieved remarkable growth. However, it has also attempted to institutionalizing. Guti himself has spoken about the importance of "putting things in writing" and has established a formal constitution, a leadership training college, and a clear succession plan involving his son (Dube, 2020). Yet, the succession remains within the family, highlighting the persistent tension between formalization and the enduring power of dynastic impulses within African Pentecostalism. The long-term sustainability of ZAOGA will serve as a key test of whether hybrid models can succeed.

### Counterarguments: The Strengths of Informality

Any critique of Pentecostal governance must acknowledge the strategic benefits that informality has provided, which explain its persistence.

- **Adaptability:** Lack of bureaucracy allows Pentecostal churches to respond swiftly to community needs and opportunities. They can start new prayer groups, outreach programs, or even satellite churches without needing approval from the headquarters. This elasticity is a significant factor in their explosive church-planting success (Robbins, 2004).
- **Indigenization:** Informal structure allows for a high degree of indigenization. Preachers can adapt their messaging and methods to their specific local context without being constrained by a standardized policy manual. This makes the church fit to cultural idioms of its members.
- **Empowerment of Untrained Ministers:** The theology of the priesthood of all believers and the operation of spiritual gifts can, in theory, empower every member in the church. This can lead to a more living and dynamic church life where ministry is not solely the domain of ordained priests.

However, this potential is often curtailed by the very autocratic leadership this model also produces. While these strengths are real, this article contends that they are not inherently mutually exclusive with greater accountability. The challenge is to design structures that preserve agility and responsiveness while installing necessary safeguards.

### Proposed Models and Pathways

For African Pentecostalism to ensure its long-term health and integrity, a conscious movement towards structured governance is essential. This is not a call to copycat mainline churches entirely but to develop contextually appropriate models that honors its compelling identity while embedding accountability.

1. **Written constitution:** This constitution must be a living document, owned by the entire membership, not just the leader. It should clearly define a statement of faith to guard against doctrinal drift. It must outline leadership structure, roles, responsibilities, and authority of the lead pastor and the board of elders. It must

include financial policies for budgeting, spending approvals, and audits. It needs disciplinary and dispute resolution processes and a mandatory succession plan.

2. **Embracing pluralistic leadership:** moving from a mono-centric to a pluricentric leadership model is critical. This involves establishing a board of advisors with real authority, composed of spiritually mature individuals including some from outside the church staff (e.g., lawyers, business people) who can provide independent oversight (Cartledge&Swoboda, 2018).
3. **Leadership training:** While affirming the call and anointing, there should be an increased emphasis on formal theological education and management skills for leaders. This equips them to handle a growing organization.
4. **Financial transparency:** Implementing mandatory annual financial reports presented to the congregation and conducted by independent auditors. Major expenditures should require multiple signatories.
5. **Interdenominational associations :** Pentecostal churches should be encouraged to join broader Pentecostal denominations or fellowships. These can provide external accountability, peer review, and conflict mediation without imposing stifling control.

## CONCLUSION

The rise of African Pentecostalism is a testament to the powerful appeal of a faith that is experiential, empowering, and deeply relevant to the African context. Its rejection of overly formalized and foreign structures was a necessary part of its indigenization and growth. However, this article has argued that the pendulum has swung too far towards informality, creating a crisis of accountability that manifests in autocratic leadership, disastrous succession crises, financial scandals, and doctrinal instability.

These vulnerabilities threaten to undermine the very communities that Pentecostalism has built. The solution is not to abandon its charismatic vitality but to channel it through wiser structures. The future of African Pentecostalism depends on its ability to mature institutionally—to embrace written constitutions, pluralistic leadership, financial transparency, and planned succession. This is not a betrayal of its Spirit-led identity but a fulfilment of it, recognizing that the Spirit who inspires worship also gives the gift of administration (1 Corinthians 12:28) and calls for order and peace (1 Corinthians 14:40). By building structures of accountability, African Pentecostal churches can protect themselves from internal decay, safeguard their members from abuse, and ensure that their powerful message and mission are sustained for generations to come. The task is to build institutions that are as resilient and spirit-filled as the faith they are designed to serve.

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