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PETR CINCALA AND ALLISON SAUCEDA RETHINKING THE ROLE OF AGING PASTORS IN MINISTRY

Introduction

In October of 2016, the Financial Reporting Council in Nigeria introduced a new Governance Code,¹ stipulating that leaders or founders of nonprofit organizations, including churches and ministries, must hand over leadership to a non-family member after 70 years of age or 20 years of leadership. While this law was an attempt to combat organizational corruption and ensure financial accountability, it proved to be a bombshell; at the time of implementation, the law had the potential to impact up to 90% of the founding pastors of evangelical churches and leaders of church organizations in Nigeria.

It was no surprise that the law met with mixed reactions from Nigerians. “Many condemned the regulations, alleging they meddled in church affairs and muzzled evangelism efforts. But others hailed the code, saying provisions for pastoral succession were in the best interest of churches” (Oguntola, 2017). Some ministers questioned how the government could dictate the terms of their call to ministry. “Financial regulation is fine. But to say you must leave after a certain amount of years is beyond reasoning,” Femi Emmanuel, senior pastor of Living Spring Chapel International Lagos, stated. “Pastors are called by God and hold their tenure to the one who calls them or the church they serve” (Oguntola, 2017).

This incident may cause readers to have mixed feelings. Some will see wisdom in such a policy, while others will agree that pastors must answer to God—and God only—regarding their ministry length. Nevertheless, the Nigerian example provokes the question: Is there a connection between the age of the minister and the well-being of their congregation(s)? This article

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¹Section 9:3.

will examine this connection and offer suggestions for enhancing the unique contributions of aging pastors.

Literature Review

Does the age of a pastor have anything to do with the vitality of congregations? In 2000, a group of researchers from various denominations in the United States began surveying congregations.² Based on their analysis of the 2012 U.S. Congregational Life Surveys, Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce observed that “pastors of any age can be effective leaders and promote church vitality.” However, their research showed that older pastors have a harder time “looking to the future” than younger pastors (those under age 50). Younger pastors “more often lead congregations where many worshippers feel committed to the church’s vision and express excitement about its future” (Woolever & Bruce, 2012, p. 93).

Woolever and Bruce also reported that, when compared to younger pastors, “more pastors older than 60 serve in declining churches” (p. 83). They found that pastors between the ages of 51 and 60 were more commonly (30%) found in growing churches; pastors 40 years and younger were the second age group most likely (26%) to lead growing churches. However, less than one in five (17%) pastors older than 60 lead a growing church (Woolever & Bruce, 2012, pp. 83–84).

Healthy, growing churches draw young worshippers more readily than any other type of church (Woolever & Bruce, 2012). This is likely because congregations with a younger age profile are more likely to be future-focused; the younger generation is more likely to be hopeful, as their future has a longer trajectory (Woolever & Bruce, 2004). Worshippers in younger congregations also are more likely to feel that their gifts and contributions are welcomed (Woolever & Bruce, 2004).

The conclusions of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey confirm the results of another study conducted by Thomas Zook between 1987 to 1991. When examining leadership practices in large Protestant congregations, he reported that that the churches led by younger pastors experienced growth rates that were significantly higher than churches led by older pastors. “Pastors age 45 and younger led congregations which increased their average weekend worship attendance by 47.6%, compared with an average of 30.1% growth for pastors over the age of 45” (Zook, 1993, p. 228).

Pastoral age has even been linked to the churches’ involvement in community outreach. “Younger pastors tend to be able to embrace the idea of total community outreach more than the older pastors” (West, 1994).

²More information can be found at <http://www.uscongregations.org>.

Recent Research Analysis

Faith Communities Today (FACT), a group led by research from various religious groups,³ has also conducted a congregational research study every five years. The Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) has represented the Seventh-day Adventist Church in FACT research. ICM analyzed FACT's data from both 2010 and 2015 to learn more about how pastoral age impacts churches in the United States. Both datasets, consisting of randomly selected congregations, revealed that almost two-thirds of the pastors in American churches are over 50 years old (Table 1).

Table 1
Frequency of Senior Pastors' Age (FACT 2010 and FACT 2015)

	Total # of Congregations	40 years and less	41 to 50 years	51 to 60 years	61+ years
FACT (2010)	10937	12.9%	23.4%	36.4%	27.3%
FACT (2015)	3939	16.7%	17.9%	33.3%	29.1%

Both data sets (FACT 2010 and FACT 2015) revealed that younger clergy appear to positively correlate with vital congregations, driving the largest share of congregational growth in the United States. The 2010 data revealed that the annual growth rates of churches led by pastors younger than 50 years old are over *twice* as high as the annual growth rate of churches led by pastors over 60 (Table 2).

Table 2
Annual Growth Rate of Congregations by the Age of Senior Pastors (FACT 2010)

	Total # of Congregations	The Age of Senior Pastor			
		40 years and less	41 to 50 years	51 to 60 years	61+ years
FACT (2010)	10361	14.0%	13.3%	10.8%	6.2%

ICM researchers wanted to verify the reliability of this finding from another large dataset. Because ICM serves as a national partner of Natural Church Development (NCD America), researchers analyzed NCD congregational data gathered from U.S. congregations between 2008–2018. This data confirmed the findings of the FACT studies. Based on the NCD survey, this dataset showed that churches led by older pastors scored lower overall on the survey and experienced a significantly lower annual growth rate (AGR) than churches led by pastors younger than 40. In fact, the growth rate of churches led by pastors over 60 showed a stagnant pattern, with an AGR of 0.6% (Table 3).

³More information can be found at <https://faithcommunities.org>

Table 3

Annual Growth Rate of Congregations by the age of Senior Pastors (NCD 2018)

	Total # of Congregations	The Age of Senior Pastor			
		40 years and less	41 to 50 years	51 to 60 years	61+ years
NCD (2008–2018)	7286	11.4%	4.5%	2.2%	0.6%

The five-year (2013–2018) average annual growth rate (AAGR) results were even more alarming. Pastors in the youngest age bracket (40 years and younger) experienced the most growth (4.1%), while pastors in the two oldest age brackets (51–60 and 60+) experienced *negative* growth; that is, churches with older pastors actually got smaller (Table 4).

Table 4

Annual Growth Rate—5 years from 2013-2018 by the Age of Senior Pastors (NCD 2018)

	Total # of Congregations	The Age of Senior Pastor			
		40 years and less	41 to 50 years	51 to 60 years	61+ years
NCD (2008–2018)	6327	4.1%	1.8%	-0.1%	-1.9%

Both FACT studies and the NCD data show that churches with pastors 41–50 years of age lead the largest congregations. Two of the studies (FACT 2010 and NCD) showed that pastors 61 years and older tend to lead the smallest congregations (Table 5).

Table 5

The Average Congregation Attendance Size by the Age of Senior Pastors

	Total # of Congregations	The Age of Senior Pastor			
		40 years and less	41 to 50 years	51 to 60 years	61+ years
FACT (2010)	9277	289.7	408.0	298.7	255.6
FACT (2015)	3777	178.1	403.3	349.4	214.9
NCD (2008–2018)	7889	157.6	189.1	185.5	137.4

All three studies reported similar age patterns: older pastors served older congregants, while younger pastors relate to younger congregants—specifically children, youth, and younger adults. Both FACT studies supported the idea

that young people are key for a healthy, vital congregation. When asked if their congregation was spiritually vital and alive, churches with pastors ages 41 to 50 reported the highest health and vitality numbers. In contrast, pastors age 61 and older reported the lowest levels of health and vitality (Table 6).

Table 6
The Frequency of Congregations Spiritually Vital and Alive—Strongly Agree (%)

	Total # of Congregations	The Age of Senior Pastor			
		40 years and less	41 to 50 years	51 to 60 years	61+ years
FACT (2010)	10801	28.2%	33.1%	28.2%	26.2%
FACT (2015)	3850	20.4%	26.3%	24.6%	20.2%

The importance of these findings becomes more obvious considering Barna’s recent research release, reporting that the average age of pastors in U.S. increased from 44 years of age to 54 years of age across the last 25 years. As of 2017, more than half of all pastors were older than 54 years (Barna, 2017).

Aging Pastors and Leadership Style

One wonders why older—and thus often more experienced and wiser—pastors are less successful concerning their congregations’ health and growth. Could it be possible that age influences pastoral leadership style, which is a known contributor to congregational health and vitality (Cincala & Chase, 2018)?

In ICM’s analysis of NCD data, the relationship between pastoral leadership style and the growth/health of churches was studied. The results showed that leadership style likely plays a role in the health and growth of local churches. Pastors who claimed to have a goal-oriented, team-oriented, relational, and people-oriented leadership style had overall higher NCD health scores and higher a five-year average annual growth rate. This contrasted with those who claimed to have other leadership styles (specifically democratic, partnership, task-oriented, and serving styles of leadership). When the leadership styles of pastors were cross-tabulated by age, the following trends emerged in the goal-oriented, people-oriented, and serving styles; this may offer a glimpse as to why aging pastors are less beneficial to the health and growth of local churches (Table 7). Note, it does not include the other leadership styles as the remaining comparisons were not statistically significant.

Table 7
Leadership Style in Relation to Age

Statistically Significant Leadership Styles Comparison	40 years and less	41 to 50 years	51 to 60 years	61+ years
Goal-oriented	50.1%	43.9%	41.5%	40.5%
		$\chi^2 = 37.905, p < .001, N = 7987$		
People-oriented	44.7%	49.4%	51.7%	58.8%
		$\chi^2 = 63.516, p < .001, N = 7978$		
Serving	39.9%	42.8%	49.9%	52.4%
		$\chi^2 = 72.870, p < .001, N = 7987$		

Trend 1: Goal-oriented leadership style decreased by age groups. While older pastors carry wisdom gained by life experiences, they may no longer have an ambitious vision and/or the energy to focus on leading (Harvey, 2018). They may also be less flexible (Davis, 2006). Young pastors are assumed to have more energy to serve in growing churches (Woolever & Bruce, 2012). Thus, younger leaders appear to be more linked with setting and, based on the growth figures, achieving goals within their ministerial roles.

Trend 2: The frequency of a people-oriented leadership style increased with age. The research shows that older pastors are more people-oriented. This is likely linked to the fact that, with age, many pastors become more accepting. They no longer burst with the need to reach the masses but focus on reaching “just a few that would touch others” (Harvey, 2018, p. 192). They have learned that relationships matter, gaining a new sense of tolerance for unique views and values (Harvey, 2018).

Zook (1993) found that pastors older than 60 years of age scored significantly higher in areas such as “enabling others to act” and “encouraging the heart.” People-oriented leadership appears to be a supportive leadership style that correlates positively with health and growth.

Trend 3: Serving leadership style increased with age. With age comes “a mental shift as the importance and priorities of life are reassessed” (Harvey, 2018, p. 192). We have learned from the previous trend that with age, pastors discover that people are more important than “tasks;” they are not a means to an end but are the mission itself. While aging pastors may spend less energy on training and equipping people, they often have a desire to leave a meaningful legacy, focusing on souls and growing disciples (Harvey, 2018).

Thus, the question remains: where do aging pastors fit into our churches, and how can they contribute to church growth and health?

Levels of Leadership

In seeking to answer these questions, we will examine two different leadership models. The first model is Maxwell's five levels of leadership (Table 8), proposed in view of leadership development.

Table 8

Maxwell's Model of Leadership (2011)

Maxwell	Description
Level 1	Position
Level 2	Permission
Level 3	Production
Level 4	People Development
Level 5	Pinnacle

All leaders are on a journey.

According to Maxwell, not all leaders automatically achieve or go through all five levels. Sometimes leaders get stuck in a certain stage; perhaps because of circumstances in their life they could not change, personal insecurities, a past

with which they could not reconcile, a lack of individual growth, etc.

Almost every pastor goes through the first foundational level, "Position." In this level, the pastor is assigned or appointed to a new station. S/he often relies on rules, policies, and regulations to make sure s/he takes charge and has things under control. In this phase, the pastor may notice that congregants cooperate and do what is required, but not much more (Maxwell, 2011).

The next level, which Maxwell (2011) refers to as "Permission," then unfolds. In this stage, the leader's influence grows as s/he builds trust with church members. His/her concern for preserving the position remains, but the relational part of leadership grows as people buy into the pastor's vision. On the inside, the process of maturation continues as the leader reaches out to others, encouraging them to exercise their unique spiritual gifts and thus bear the fruit of the Spirit. In this stage, training may be beneficial to make the leader more effective in ministry.

Next comes the "Production" phase (Maxwell, 2011), during which a fit leader is recognized by his/her ability to get things done. His/her influence and credibility grow as s/he reaches goals, team morale improves, and people get motivated—even excited! Simply put, leadership becomes fun. The pastor uses his/her spiritual gifts in ministry, experiencing the fulfillment of being empowered by the Holy Spirit.

When the pastor/leader has a vision and the confidence to move forward on that vision, things move in a good direction as new people join in church fellowship, new ministries start up, etc. It is not uncommon for pastors to pray that this ministry season extends for as long as possible. Many gifted and successful church planters or pastors who love their job, wishing they could stay in the "Production" phase until retirement.

However, there are also stories of “successful” pastors who burn out because they did not recognize the necessity of moving on. Aging leaders who lose their energy, and thus their ability to contribute, lose their “Production” edge at this level. This may be because production within the church means planning and executing—even in the face of conflict or different viewpoints. Thus, these pastors may revert to “Permission” leadership to avoid the wear and tear of “Production.”

Many of those who reach Level 4, called “People Development” (Maxwell, 2011), consider this stage to be the pinnacle leadership stage, wishing to remain “on top” for as long as possible, perhaps even until retirement. However, this may not be what God has in mind for their journey.

Maxwell explains that there is yet a further level in leadership development that more experienced leaders should make part of their burden; mentoring others is a commendable activity going beyond mere maintenance. Thus, leaders in the “Pinnacle” stage (Maxwell, 2011) seek to empower their team members, compelling them to reach their *own* ministry potential. This level requires a denial of self, as the chief task in this stage is to stop leading followers, but turn followers into leaders. It is a joy to see other leaders thrive and create a legacy of leadership development.

The second leadership model is Clinton’s six phases of leadership development (Table 9). Clinton has done extensive research of leaders and their personal growth; thus, he suggests phases of a leader’s “life cycle,” reflecting many pastors’ and church leaders’ lived experiences. Again, not all leaders go or grow through every phase.

Table 9

Clinton’s Models of Leadership (1988)

Clinton	Description
Phase 1	Learning
Phase 2	Inner-life Growth
Phase 3	Ministry Maturing
Phase 4	Life Maturing
Phase 5	Convergence
Phase 6	Afterglow/Celebration

In the initial two stages, called “Learning” and “Inner-life Growth,” Clinton (1988) suggests that God is training the leader in the basics of life, testing his/her teachability, and making sure that the leader takes full advantage of what God reveals. In these phases, prayer, listening to God, obeying Him, and other similar skills grow stronger. “These early tests are crucial experiences that God uses to prepare the leaders for the next step in leadership” (Clinton, 1988, p. 45). If someone does not learn through these past experiences, they stunt their growth; thus, they will never be able to fully minister and serve the Lord as leaders.

Clinton (1988) suggests that some leaders never make it to Phase 3, “Ministry Maturing.” Difficulties, conflicts, and their inability to learn from their experiences cause them to plateau. In Phase 3, leaders learn to embrace the deeper side of human relationships, seeking God when in isolation. As a result, his/her spiritual authority is developing; the leader reaches out to others, encouraging them to exercise their unique spiritual gifts and bear the fruit of the Spirit. In this phase, we see similarities to the first three levels of Maxwell’s leadership development. It is equally true here that training may be beneficial to make the leader more effective in ministry.

During the “Life Maturing” phase, ministry priorities are established, and personal character is further developed. Although the “Life Maturing” phase presents negative elements such as isolation, crisis, and conflict, a mature character forms, and spiritual authority established.

In the “Convergence” stage, the pastor aims to maximize his/her ministry potential; his/her personality, training, experience, gifts, and even geographical location converge to create a ministry that is not only effective but also widely appreciated. It is also during this stage that leaders leave a lasting legacy.

The final stage, “Afterglow/Celebration,” brings with it a focus on growing and empowering others (Clinton, 1988). Teamwork becomes central, allowing all members to increase in performance. The “storehouse of wisdom gathered over a lifetime of leadership will continue to bless and benefit many” (Clinton, 1988, p. 47). This season culminates in an era of recognition, which Clinton refers to as “Afterglow.” Also, part of this stage is the element of celebration. “Celebration” brings great fulfillment as the leader reaps the fruit of a lifetime of ministry.

Considering these two maps for a leader’s journey, provided by Maxwell and Clinton, we have a better understanding of the stages in which aging pastors may be.

Assuming a Mentoring Role

It is beyond argument that the older generation often has wisdom that can only come through lived experiences. This maturity allows them to offer a unique, more experienced perspective. Clinton writes of this,

Quality leadership does not come easily. It requires time, experience, and repeated instances of maturity processing. Mature ministry flows from a mature character, formed in the graduate school of life A mature successful ministry flows from the one who has both ministry skills and character that has been mellowed, developed, and ripened by God’s maturing processing. Character formation is fundamental. Ministry flows out of being. (Clinton, 1988, pp. 166–167)

The spiritual maturity possessed by aging pastors, coupled with life experiences, positions them for stepping into mentoring roles. Mentoring relationships are typically long-term, allowing individuals to develop a close, personal relationship. Mentors typically end up serving multiple functions: “sounding board, counselor, feedback provider, assignment broker, cheerleader, reinforcer, role model” (McCauley, Moxley, & Van Velso, 1998, p. 168). Mentors also play a key role in a mentee’s learning and development.

Instead of pushing forward in the “Production” or “Convergence” stages, aging pastors may take a step back from an executive role into a mentoring role—away from the front line. They experience a shift in their ministry, while “the central task of leadership is *influencing God’s people toward God’s purposes*” (Clinton, 1988, p. 203, emphasis original) remains the same, the method of doing so transitions. Instead of motivating many to push towards a common goal, they become more intimately invested in nurturing just a few people. Instead of reaching their personal pinnacle, they encourage other people to reach theirs.

In Numbers 8, the biblical account of the Levites’ ordination can be found. In this passage, God sets the Levites apart for a special service. This meant the ordination process set these leaders apart from the Israelite community as an elite group of men. After the ordination ceremony had been carried out, God said, “The Levites shall be mine” (v. 14).

However, in Numbers 8:23–25, God gave explicit instructions about the term of the Levites’s service:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall come to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting. And from the age of fifty years they shall withdraw from the duty of the service and serve no more.” (ESV)

Does it seem strange that God would ordain this special group of men but then limit the number of years they could serve? However, if we keep reading, we see that God did not instruct the Levites to, after 25 years of faithful service, retire, prop up their feet, and become useless to the community that they once served. No! Instead, God instructed these chosen men to “minister to their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard” (Num. 8:26). After 25 years of active ministry, these leaders stepped back, letting others take over the tasks they had been doing. The older Levites remained present in the tent of meeting, no doubt still providing help and support to the next generation of Levites.

There is a special place for aging pastors in our churches today. The Lord has called them to a special task: investing in the next generation of leaders, as one can only do with a lifetime of experiences and lessons learned behind them. Serving in this capacity is a gift to the entire body!

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