

PASTORAL CARE AND CHURCH GROWTH IN IKWERRE SOUTH DISTRICT OF ASSEMBLIES OF GOD (AG) NIGERIA, RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT

This research explored the relationship between pastoral care and church growth in the Ikwerre South District of the Assemblies of God Church, Nigeria. This is predicated on the fact that since its establishment in the 1950s, the district has expanded to 142 churches by 2022. It examined the historical background of the district, analyzed the link between effective pastoral care and church expansion, evaluated the impact of pastoral care practices on growth, identified challenges affecting their delivery and proposed strategies for improvement. It also highlighted relevant tools and platforms that can enhance pastoral effectiveness and promote church development in the district. The study was anchored on the Transformational Leadership Theory and the Systems Theory of Church Growth. A descriptive survey design was employed. The target population consisted of 2,000 members of the Assemblies of God Church in Ikwerre South District, with a sample of 100 participants drawn from 50 different churches in the district. The sample includes 30 pastors, 25 deacons, 20 deaconesses, and 25 full members (communicants). Data were obtained through oral interviews, observations and secondary materials and analyzed descriptively. The findings revealed that pastoral care activities such as intentional discipleship, counselling, visitation, community outreach, mission participation and welfare support, revival meetings, contemporary musical instruments, improved worship facilities, prayer groups, digital innovations, and leadership training are essential resources that enhance both spiritual and numerical growth. The study concluded that pastoral care serves as the cornerstone of the Assemblies of God Church's spiritual vitality and numerical expansion in Ikwerre South District. It recommended

strengthening discipleship structures, broadening welfare support, ensuring steady mission funding, and adopting digital technologies to boost pastoral effectiveness.

Keywords: *Church, pastoral care, congregation, church growth, Ikwerre South District*

Introduction

The relationship between pastoral care and church growth remains a central topic in both ecclesiology and missiology. This is largely because pastoral care plays a crucial role in shaping the spiritual, emotional, and organizational wellbeing of a congregation—factors that directly influence its growth. As a religious and social institution, the church relies on the pastor to provide spiritual nourishment and to attend to the emotional and even material needs of members. Pastoral care is therefore a sacred responsibility entrusted to church leaders to nurture, guide, and support their congregations. Within the life of the church, pastoral care often determines whether a congregation thrives or declines. Many churches flourish or falter depending on the quality of pastoral leadership they receive. Wagner (1990), a leading proponent of church growth, argues that pastoral care is indispensable to the vitality and expansion of the church. He maintains that the pastor's leadership qualities help shape a culture that promotes both spiritual maturity and numerical increase. This perspective aligns with widespread observations that parishioners frequently attribute a church's success or decline to the effectiveness of its pastor. Scholars consistently highlight the multidimensional nature of pastoral leadership, emphasizing the importance of preaching, vision sharing, relational engagement, and administrative competence in building a healthy and dynamic church.

In the Assemblies of God Church, Ikwerre South District, several structural and leadership challenges complicate pastoral effectiveness. The District Superintendent and six presbyters administer the district in accordance with the General Council's constitution and district bylaws, including the regular transfer of pastors among congregations. While routine, these transfers sometimes create transitional and leadership gaps. Deeper challenges, however, are rooted in specific pastoral weaknesses. Some pastors exhibit deficiencies in ministry management, and when assigned to congregations averaging 250 members, attendance and giving often decline within a short period. By contrast, when new pastors assume leadership, these same congregations typically experience renewed growth in both membership and finances. In extreme cases, underperforming pastors fail to remit expected returns, forcing the district headquarters to intervene financially. Such trends highlight the consequences of ineffective pastoral leadership. As Nwachukwu (2015) notes, weak pastoral leadership frequently results in stagnation, waning member commitment, and financial instability. When pastors fail to meet the spiritual, emotional, and social needs of congregants, members gradually disengage, leading to reduced attendance, loss of belonging, and diminished contributions. Pastors who show these tendencies are often criticized for neglecting essential pastoral duties such as preaching, teaching, counseling, and maintaining healthy relationships with church officers, including deacons and departmental heads. Other recurring issues include ethical lapses, inadequate devotion to prayer and spiritual discipline, and general neglect of pastoral responsibilities. These failures create dissatisfaction among members, many of whom leave to seek fellowship in churches where they believe their needs will be better met.

Statement of the Problem

The growth and stability of the church are closely linked to the quality of its leadership; thus, many of the challenges faced by congregations today can be traced to deficiencies in pastoral care. Numerous churches report stagnation and other growth-related problems that stem largely from ineffective pastoral practices. The situation becomes more troubling when pastors who are expected to provide direction and solutions for the spiritual and organizational wellbeing of the church begin to rely on others for guidance. This reflects a lack of awareness that the overall health and growth of any congregation are largely determined by the strength of its pastoral leadership. It is from this leadership gap that the present study emerges, seeking to make a modest but meaningful contribution to ongoing discussions on the role of pastoral care in local church growth. Dairo (2008) notes that many churches in Nigeria are burdened by false doctrines, preconceived ideas, and human traditions that contradict the leading of the Holy Spirit, thereby hindering church growth and sustainability. The Apostle Paul emphasizes that a true church leader must possess the capacity to guide and inspire others. Although these virtues may manifest differently among leaders, each pastor must demonstrate them to a significant degree in order to promote steady and sustainable church development. A leader characterized by harshness rather than gentleness, excessiveness instead of self-control, or disgraceful behaviour rather than respectability ultimately disqualifies himself from effective ministry (Bible Organization, 2004).

These principles highlight the need for moral integrity and spiritual maturity as essential qualities for pastoral leadership and church advancement. The specific challenges identified in this study include pastoral misconduct, violation of ministerial ethics, abandonment of pastoral responsibilities for personal or business pursuits, inadequate doctrinal teaching, poor interpersonal relationships between pastors and church workers, and, in some instances, the use of unchristian or diabolical practices to attract followers. Such issues undermine the spiritual integrity and public witness of the church, eroding members' trust and weakening overall growth. Addressing these concerns is therefore essential for fostering genuine revival and sustainable expansion within the Assemblies of God Church, Ikwerre South District, Rivers state and the wider Nigerian church community.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine how pastoral care enhances the growth of the church in Assemblies of God church in Ikwerre South District.

The objectives are to:

- i. Analyze the connection between effective pastoral care and growth in the Assemblies of God Church, Ikwerre South District.
- ii. Assess the effectiveness of pastoral care in contributing to the growth of Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District.
- iii. Identify common challenges in delivering pastoral care and strategize solutions.

Research Questions

- i. What is the connection between effective pastoral care and church growth in Assemblies of God Church, Ikwerre South District?

- ii. How effective is pastoral care in contributing to the growth of Assemblies of God Church in Ikwerre South District?
- iii. What are the common challenges in delivering pastoral care and possible solutions?

Theoretical Framework

Transformational Leadership Theory

One of the most influential theories in understanding the effect of pastoral care on the growth of the church is Transformational Leadership Theory. This theory, developed by Bass (1985), posits that leaders who inspire, motivate, and engage followers are more likely to influence organizational growth. In the context of pastoral ministry or care, pastors who exhibit transformational leadership can create a compelling vision for the church, encourage congregational participation, and lead by example in faith and action. According to Dunn and Hiscox (2019), churches with pastors who adopt transformational leadership styles such as inspiring members through powerful preaching, empowering volunteers and fostering an inclusive, dynamic church culture, tend to experience high growth rates. Transformational pastors can inspire their congregations not only to grow spiritually but also to be more effectively involved in evangelism and outreaches, which directly leads to numerical growth and sustainability. It is on this basis that this theory is used because of its relevance to the effect of pastoral care on the growth of the church.

Methodology

The study utilizes a descriptive survey design, which enables the researchers to study a large population by sampling a representative subset. The target population consists of approximately 2,000 members of the Assemblies of God Church in Ikwerre South District. However, the study surveyed a sample of 100 participants drawn from 50 different churches in the district. The sample includes 30 pastors, 25 deacons, 20 deaconesses, and 25 full members (communicants). Purposive sampling was used to select adult leaders and full members who provided relevant information for the study. Data collection primarily relied on observation and oral interviews, ensuring confidentiality to encourage participants to share accurate responses. Secondary sources, including textbooks, journals, newspapers, and online materials, were also consulted. This provided valuable insights into the relationship between pastors and members and their involvement in church growth and community care.

For data analysis, the researcher employed a descriptive approach, balancing collected data with textual analysis of documents. The study used frequency analysis to validate the reliability of the data and ensure clarity and precision in the findings. The use of departmental and automated libraries helped authenticate the research and support the findings.

Findings and Discussion

1. The Connection between Effective Pastoral Care and Growth in Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District

Every living organism has the tendency to grow when placed in the right environment and the right food to feed on. A right environment will produce a healthy organism that will grow and reproduce. In the same way, a healthy church environment will produce a healthy church that will grow and reproduce. Church growth is the natural result of church health (Rick Warren, 1989). On the other hand, church growth is strengthened when ministry is carried

out primarily by the members rather than concentrated in the hands of the pastor. The pastor's task is to recruit, equip, delegate, and supervise the ministry of the people. William (1964) affirms that leaders who wish to move the church beyond its familiar limits must act as catalysts if dynamic growth is to occur. Many churches remain stagnant because they lack such catalytic leaders capable of motivating members toward growth. Experience has shown that merely desiring growth is insufficient; a church that does not genuinely want to grow will ultimately remain stagnant.

Assemblies of God Church in Ikwerre South District does not see church growth as mere increase in the number of attendees or expanding the church's physical infrastructure; rather, it also encompasses enriching the spiritual lives of its members, enhancing community outreach and improving administrative practices. On the other hand, the Assemblies of God Church pastors are in charge of strategic and administrative processes involved in overseeing day to day operations and long-term planning of the church. It is essential for ensuring that the church's resources in the Assemblies of God Church are optimally used to supporting its mission and facilitate growth (Freedom, 2025). In addition, pastors are in charge of fostering a sense of community, spiritual nourishment, and outreach to the wider society. When conducted efficiently and ethically, the church pastors contribute significantly to the sustainability and expansion of the church's influence and impact (Amadi, 2024). According to Samuel (2024), community engagement and evangelism are integral components of pastoral care as a means of church growth. These activities must be carefully managed to ensure they align with the church's broader mission and vision. However, this area involves planning, executing, and evaluating outreach programmes, fellowship groups, and evangelistic initiatives. The following are the connection between effective pastoral care and church growth in Assemblies of God Church, Ikwerre South District.

i) Community Outreach/Evangelism: The Assemblies of God Church local pastors in Ikwerre South District are in charge of organizing crusade in order to save souls that are heading to hell. As at 2022 the Assemblies of God Ikwerre South District organized a crusade at Rumueme Girls Secondary School where the late Rev. Dr. Uma Ukpai was the guest minister. Through this crusade many persons gave their lives to Jesus Christ and brought an increase of membership in the Ikwerre South District of Assemblies of God Church. One feature in this congregation is community outreach. As of 2025, the Assemblies of God Church at Ojoto mile 3 went with two hundred (200) youths to partner with the pastors of the local church in Assemblies of God Church Obelle Community in Emohua Local Government Area. These youths won a lot of souls for Christ, supported by their local Pastors namely Rev'ds Isaac Nwakwu, Obinna Ella, Harmony Oji and Pastor Okereke Okechukwu.

ii) Visitation: It is the duty of the local church pastor of Assemblies of God, Ikwerre South District to visit her members. Visitation helps the pastor to know the state of his members, particularly to those that are not regular to church activities. When pastors talk one on one with their members, opportunities for counselling and prayer are provided. However, the Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District usually organizes an annual programme from the General Council tagged October "Enlargement Campaign". This programme gives the pastor the opportunity to visit and support his members that have not been to the church for some time.

iii) Counselling: Through counselling God, the pastor interacts with his members for purposes of offering direction, encouragement and support. In the District, Wednesdays are set apart for such services.

iv) Prayer: Prayer is the life wire of the Assemblies of God Church in compliance with Apostle Paul's charge to "pray without ceasing" (I Thessalonians 5:17). To give effect to the power of prayer, Pastors also organize personal retreats to equip themselves for the assignment. In the Assemblies of God Church Mgbuoshimini Rumueme 2, vigil for prayers for the church is held every last Friday of the month with the invitation of guest preachers.

v) Financial Support: The Assemblies of God pastors not only to support the church in prayers but also offer financial assistance to their members in the payment of their school fees, paying some part of their house rent, support in paying their medical bills, etc. In 2024, a pastor from the Assemblies of God Church 1 Agip Estate in Rumueme section 2 provided some financial support for a member whose business went down and as a result of it he was able to stabilize in his business, which aborted his plan to relocate to the village. Again, in Assemblies of God Church Nkpor, a pastor raised money in support of the businesses of her members. The implication of this is that the income of the church improved as such members gave more than when their businesses were almost crumbling.

2. The Effectiveness of Pastoral Care in Contributing to Growth of Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District

The Assemblies of God Church pastors play effective role in the pastoral care which is another ministry that influences church growth. The pastor's ability is to provide meaningful pastoral care which helps to build strong relationships within the congregation and fosters a sense of belonging and community in the District is essential. According to Amadi (2025), churches that are characterized by strong pastoral care often see higher levels of member retention, as members feel more valued and supported. Therefore, this relational aspect of ministry is particularly important in the context of church growth, as people are more likely to remain engaged and invite others to a church where they feel loved and nurtured. The Assemblies of God Church District leaders see pastoral care as contribution to the spiritual maturity of believers, equipping them to serve and lead in the church community, which in turn leads to organic growth, as members becomes active participant in the life of the church (Samuel, 2024). Again, one of the significant factor in the Assemblies of God church between pastoral care and church growth is the pastor's ability to develop and equip lay leaders within the church.

In many growing churches, the success of ministry efforts is not solely attributed to the pastor but to the active participation of lay leaders. Therefore, the leadership qualities of pastors are crucial in establishing a culture of growth and vitality within the congregation. The Assemblies of God District leaders opine that pastors who are proactive in equipping their members and responding to their spiritual needs tend to see more dynamic church growth, both numerically and spiritually (Freedom, 2025). The following are the effectiveness of pastoral care in contributing to growth of Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District.

i) Discipleship/Mentorship: The Assemblies of God Church pastor in the local level sees discipleship and mentorship as major contribution to the growth of the church in the district.

Therefore, the pastor in the local church designs a class called the inquirer class which is also known as baptismal class. This class is designed to train new converts of the church to be like Christ and to teach them the tenets of faith of Assemblies of God, made up of sixteen topics. Every member before he or she is baptized must pass through this channel of Discipleship and must be tested through oral interview before he or she is baptized, if successful. Again, the Assemblies of God pastors organizes Tuesday bible study which the pastor prepares very well in order to feed his members with the spiritual food of the word of God. The Tuesday bible study class holds from 6.00pm to 7.30pm. It provides room for interactions, where by a member asks questions for his or her own understanding. The class is made up of people of different academic background, literate and illiterate. Some time, an interpreter is required for the benefit of the illiterates. The class closes early enough to give room for question and contribution in the lesson.

ii) Establishment of School in the Church Premises: Schools are usually opened in church premises as a means of helping the less privileged members and non-members to send their children to such schools. For example, the school at Nkpor does not collect fee and other levies from the less privileged, which has led to the growth of the church because some parents took advantage of it to be bringing their children to the school and in the passage of time became effective members of the church.

iii) Mission Work: The Assemblies of God pastors play a major role in the mission work both in the General Council and District. As of 2021, Assemblies of God Ikwerre South District pastors received the approval of the General Council and sent missionaries to Kogi State for the planting of churches (Ahanba, 2021).

3. Common Challenges in Delivery of Pastoral Care in Assemblies of God Ikwerre South District

Challenges are always attached in any endeavor someone ventures into. The pastoral care in Ikwerre South District is not insulated from this. Some of these challenges in the Assemblies of God Ikwerre South District are as follows:

- **Members running from one church to another in the Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District:** This act could be termed “Harlotry” in a sense. However, this is not without a cause. Some of the reasons include the inability of some pastors to give them what they want in terms of teaching the word of God. Some pastors are leaving their duties in pursuit of white collar job. In one of the churches, Rumuolumeni church 3, the pastor was found quarrelling with her members. In the Assemblies of God Church Obelle 4, a Deacon reported their pastor to the District for his continuous quarrel in the church and that made the district to transfer the pastor from the church with a serious warning never to repeat such act (Charles, 2024).
- **Poor allowance to pastors by the District:** Assemblies of God pastors are one of the least paid pastors compared to their counterparts in other Pentecostal churches. Support from members is affected by the economic meltdown in the country. Some of the pastors in the rural area embark on one business or the other. At Rumuekpe Section, the pastors are into farming in order to cater for their families. The hardship faced by parents in the ministry has

caused some of the pastors' children to leave the Church. The effect of this is a decimation in the membership of the church (Ahamba, 2025).

- **Lack of Financial Support by the Members:** This is a very serious issue affecting pastoral care. The poor economic situation limits the assistance pastors receive from their members. It is even worse in the rural areas. This affects pastors psychologically and morally. Imagine when a pastor could not pay the fees of his children in tertiary institutions as was the case in 2024 at Rumuolumeni section 2 and Rumueme Section 2 or feed well with his family (Charles, 2024).
- **Community Crisis:** Community crises have caused members to run for their dear life and as a result of this, the pastors in those local churches became restless. As of 2018 in Obelle Iba community, the crisis in that area rendered the communities helpless, as a result, the people ran including the members of the church who would have been the backbone (financial pillar) of the church, including taking good care of the pastor's need.
- **Lack of Financial Support to Organized Outreach:** Because of financial problem, outreaches that would have been done in some of these crises-ridden areas such as Uvuahu 2 Section and Rumuekpe section have suffered serious setback. According to Amamba (2024), outreach could not be sponsored because of finances as well as pastors who were displaced could not reach out to some of their financial members. The crises equally affected the businesses of their members within the geographical areas of the church.
- **Lack of Financial Support by the District to the Local Church Pastor:** Despite the crises that affected these pastors and their financial members, Assemblies of God Ikwerre South District has not been able to live up to their standard in supporting some of the pastors particularly in rural communities. (Ezekwu, 2024). It is expected that outreaches should be handled by the local pastors to prove their ministry but where support from the District is lacking, then there is a huge challenge. For example, a crusade organized by a local church in Assemblies of God Church Nkpor Community was only sponsored by the pastors and deacons and other financial members (Ebenezer, 2024).
- **Poor Communication from the members to the local pastor:** Communication gap indeed has existed in some of the local churches in Assemblies of God Church between members and pastors. As of 2024, in one of the churches in the Assemblies of God Ikwerre South District, a member was taken to the hospital and spent some days without informing the pastor that would have been not only prayed but visited. Another related development is that of a member who gained admission to study in the higher institution and had almost finished his first semester, before letting his pastor know about it. That brought a little misunderstanding between the pastor and the member because of it the pastor could not support him. Again, cases of travelling by members in the Ikwerre South District without letting their pastors know has been commonly reported to the District of Assemblies of God (Chizindu, 2024).
- **Members not being regular to church services and other activities:** It has been commonly reported by some pastors in the district that members of some local churches have this experience, such as Mgbuoshimini Church, Emohua, Rumuji and Assemblies of God 2

Choba. This has negatively affected the growth of the church in those areas whereas the pastors are ready and willing to take care of them through their teachings (Amadi, 2025).

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that pastoral care in the Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District serves as the backbone of both spiritual and numerical growth within the district. The church's journey, tracing its origin from the Rivers District in the 1950s at No. 5 Emole Street, through the post-civil war revival, to its eventual administrative separation in 2010, reflects a history of resilience, adaptability, and commitment to the Great Commission. This growth, which culminated in the establishment of 142 churches by 2022, is anchored on a pastoral care approach that combines spiritual nurture with practical support, ensuring members' needs are addressed holistically. Intentional discipleship, community outreach, consistent visitation, counselling, targeted mission work, and financial assistance form the foundation of this approach, directly contributing to member retention, spiritual maturity, and the attraction of new converts.

However, the district has not been without challenges. Diverse educational backgrounds among congregants, the need to adequately support the less privileged, and the burden of sustaining mission work across different contexts present significant hurdles. These issues are mitigated through tailored discipleship programs designed to meet members at their point of understanding, community support initiatives that extend care to vulnerable groups, and collaborative missionary efforts that pool resources and manpower across local congregations. A major factor in the district's sustained growth is the deliberate use of various tools and platforms to strengthen pastoral care. These include regular revival programmes with quality speakers, which not only ignite spiritual renewal but also attract outsiders who often become permanent members; the acquisition of modern musical equipment that enhances worship and draws people through praise and music ministry; the establishment of adequate and permanent worship facilities that confer both legitimacy and stability on local churches; and the building of dedicated prayer teams whose intercession empowers pastoral effectiveness and fortifies the church spiritually.

Furthermore, digital technology, including social media and live-streaming platforms, have become powerful means of extending pastoral reach beyond physical boundaries, while Church Management Systems streamline administration and free pastors to focus on ministry. Text messaging platforms and digital discipleship tools ensure constant engagement, fostering relational intimacy and spiritual accountability. Leadership development initiatives, coupled with technical and media worship growth, empower both clergy and laity to serve more effectively, further strengthening the church's capacity for expansion.

Ultimately, the Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District stands as a testament to how a blend of historical legacy, intentional pastoral care, community engagement, modern technology, and collaborative leadership can produce a vibrant, growing, and spiritually healthy church. The district's ability to preserve its Pentecostal heritage while innovatively embracing contemporary ministry tools positions it as a model for effective pastoral care and sustainable church growth, not only within the Assemblies of God Nigeria but also as an example to other Christian denominations seeking to balance tradition with modern ministry demands.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District should deepen its discipleship and mentorship systems. With the development of a structured training that caters for different literacy levels and learning styles, members can be equipped with good knowledge of the Church's history. This will ensure that all members fully understand the Assemblies of God's tenets of faith before baptism and continue growing spiritually thereafter.
2. The Assemblies of God Church Ikwerre South District should expand welfare programmes to include vocational training, healthcare support, and scholarship schemes even to children of pastors. These initiatives will not only address pressing community needs but also strengthen the church's role as a hub for holistic transformation, thereby attracting and retaining members.

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