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Gender Disparity in Pastoral Leadership Among Churches in Sapele Baptist Association, Nigeria

Okeoghene Prosper Idjesa

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy

Delta State University,

Abraka, Nigeria

Email: prosjesa@gmail.com

Peter O. O. Ottuh

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy

Delta State University,

Abraka, Nigeria

Email: pottuh@delsu.edu.ng

***Corresponding author:**

Okeoghene Prosper Idjesa

prosjesa@gmail.com

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Abstract

ABSTRACT

The church, founded by God through Jesus Christ, is a diverse community of believers who worship, study, practice holiness, and reach out to others. However, there is a gender disparity in pastoral leadership among the churches in the Sapele Baptist Association (SaBA). This study aims to examine the extent, cause, and effect of this gender disparity in pastoral leadership among churches in the Sapele Baptist Association. Historical and phenomenological methods were employed to conduct the study, focusing on the extent of recognition of female pastoral leadership, factors contributing to the under-representation of female pastors, and the impact on the Baptist church structure. The research population includes pastors, elders, deacons, and church members. The study recommends that Baptist churches re-examine their pastoral policies and ensure equal recognition and expression of diverse gifts among men and women.

Keywords: Gender Disparity; Pastoral Leadership; Churches; Sapele Baptist Association.

INTRODUCTION

A group of believers that worship, study, practice lives of holiness, and reach out to others who are not believers is what people refer to as the church. This community was founded by God via Jesus Christ. Jesus' vow to create the church to fulfill His mandate serves as the cornerstone of the church (Ademiluka, 2017). A varied community of individuals of many colours, tribes, and nationalities who discover their identity in Christ is the goal of this community. The church ought to demonstrate unity in completeness across a wide range of backgrounds, while also recognizing and honoring diversity and offering healing to places of dysfunction and conflict in society (Kenneth, 2020). Yet there is gender disparity in pastoral leadership among the churches in the Sapele Baptist Association (SaBA). When the situation is analyzed, a theological reflection on the interpretation of certain biblical texts that are used to refuse women's pastoral role and why it is misused will be helpful.

Thus a way toward a more inclusive pastoral leadership is sought (Butler, 2020). At present, the Baptist mission recognizes the calling of females into preaching the gospel. Although the Nigerian Baptist Convention upholds the recognition of female ordained ministers, there is still unwillingness by many local Baptist churches to extend pastoral calls to them (Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2015). Sapele Baptist Association is an association of Baptist churches in Sapele Local Government Area, The general leadership has been male-dominated; almost all the pastoral leaders in the Sapele Baptist Association are male. The male influence has also affected the leadership policy of the Sapele Baptist Association. This goes to show that gender disparity in pastoral leadership of churches within the Association needs to be examined. It is against this backdrop that this study has been undertaken.

The aim is to examine the gender disparity in pastoral leadership among churches in the Sapele Baptist Association. Therefore, the points for critical examination in this paper include the extent, cause, and effect of gender disparity in pastoral leadership among churches in the Sapele Baptist Association. To facilitate the conduct of this study, the historical and phenomenological methods were employed. The data is presented with a review of the research questions that include: To what extent do churches in SaBA recognize female pastoral leadership? What factors account for the under-representation of female pastors in church leadership of the SaBA churches? How does the under-utilization of female pastors affect the Baptist church structure? Responses were reviewed and the review of relevant literature was also presented. The analysis and discussions were embodied in the responses to the research questions in each instance. The research population includes the random sample of pastors (both male and female), elders, and deacons as well as church members. The study made some recommendations including that the Baptist churches should re-examine their pastoral policies and ensure that the diverse gifts distributed equally among men and women are given recognition and free expression.

SAPELE BAPTIST ASSOCIATION

A Baptist Association is made up of Baptist churches in a locality that are cooperating with the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC). Sapele Baptist Association (SaBC) is one of such associations. Over the course of its long and illustrious history, which dates back to 1916, the Sapele Baptist Association has developed into a notable religious organization in the area, which is comprised of a number of churches. The Sapele Baptist Church, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, was the driving force behind the establishment of the Association. Through a dedication to Baptist values, the organization expanded from a small number of seceders from a community church to a thriving network of congregations. This growth was spurred by the association's founding. The association has seen exceptional development, which has

resulted in the establishment of a number of other associations throughout the course of time.

Table 1: Pastors in Sapele Baptist Church

Variable	No	%	Remark
No of church	28		
No of pastor	38		Some of the churches have between two and three pastors in the church's pastorate with one serving as a senior pastor. All pastors are theologically trained in the same Baptist theological seminaries.
No of male pastor	28	100	
No of female pastor	7	25	Some of them are pastors' spouses.
No of male pastor in church pastorate	28	100	
No of female pastor in church pastorate	0	0	Female pastors are only given other roles such as serving in the children ministry, teaching Sunday School, directing music among others.

Source: Researcher's Field Work, 2024.

The above table shows that there are now thirty-eight (38) Baptist churches that are members of the Sapele Baptist Association, which includes churches such as Bethel Baptist Church, Ebenezer Baptist Church, First Baptist Church, and many more. In the churches' pastorate are 28 pastors (all male pastors). Currently, no female pastor is serving in any church's pastorate in the Association. The function of female pastors have surfaced, which prompted the conduct of this investigation to get an understanding of the present perspectives held by members of the Baptist churches with respect to this matter.

THE BIBLE AND WOMEN PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

The word "pastor" originates from the Latin term for shepherd. However, in the context of the New Testament (NT), it is employed to refer to the function of a church leader in the process of shepherding the flock (Butler, 2020). Evangelizing, teaching, and mission work are some other vocations that are pastors undertake. The Greek grammar gives the impression that the roles of shepherd as well as teacher are synonymous, rather than being two distinct roles (Ademiluka, 2017). It is common practice for contemporary pastors to make reference to the position of elder or overseer. It is possible that the name "elder" was carried over inside the church to refer to its leaders. Historically, the term "elder" was employed to refer to Jewish communal leaders of synagogues. It is a widely held belief among Christians that the Bible does not permit women to hold the position of a pastor, as stated in 1Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet" (Eboh & Eboh, 2023). In accordance with this passage, women are not permitted to teach or exercise power over males in any capacity, including but not limited to positions of governmental office, teaching, and teaching at the high school level.

However, there are many who believe that this passage should not be interpreted in such a literal manner. These individuals include conservative Bible academics, theologians, and church leaders. After considering two different lines of reasoning, it seems that the text does not ban women from engaging in any sort of teaching, authority, including speaking. To

begin, the passage exists within the framework of an open letter written by the apostle Paul to Timothy. In this letter, Paul provides Timothy with public instructions on what he should do or not do at Ephesus. In addition to instructing men to elevate holy hands without wrath or contention, Paul asked Christians to pray for everyone, particularly for those in positions of authority in the civil government. Most denominations, on the other hand, do not take his remarks literally since, although they could have been suitable in his culture, they are not required in their traditions.

Paul recommends that women dress modestly, practice self-control, and refrain from adorning themselves with ostentatious ornaments. Many churches, on the other hand, do not agree with these regulations. In contrast to men, Paul advises females to study in absolute silence (2:11-12). Given that the sin that occurred in the Garden of Eden and the salvation that occurred through Christ's atonement make it difficult for believers to comprehend, there are scholars who argue for the continuation of Paul's method (Ademiluka, 2017). The question of whether or not churches should continue to use this method remains unanswered despite Paul's condemnation. Contemporary churches make concessions for modifications to culture when it comes to the posture of prayer and the attire that women wear, but they have not made adjustments for changes in culture whenever it comes to women teaching and pastoring as well as having power of pastoral leadership in the church (Kategile, 2020; Ademiluka, 2017). In the Bible, the concept of gender equality may be traced back to the creation myth which God created both male and female persons in his image (Genesis 1:27).

As a result of this picture, man (both male and female) becomes God's representation on earth, and it is clear that God intended for women and men to work together in all parts of church life, including leadership (Genesis 1:28). On the other hand, the Hebrew Bible is often seen as a book written by men, and it is arguable that all of its writers were male. There are a number of women who played significant positions in leadership throughout the Old Testament. Some of these ladies are Esther the Queen, Deborah the Judge, and Esther the Queen himself. Deborah, a prophetess, was responsible for leading and delivering Israel without bringing any disgrace to the Biblical text (Judges 4-5). Lapidoth, a lady who resided in the hill area of Ephraim between Bethel and Ramah, was her husband. Both of them were married to each other (Magezi & Manzanga, 2021). During her lifetime, her nation was going through a difficult period, and the people there were not willing to accept Yahweh. While sitting on the palm tree, Deborah exercised her authority over Israel and led her army in the fight against Sisera, a powerful warrior who had oppressed Israel for many years.

After King Ahasuerus divorced his wife Vashti, the decision was made to choose Esther as the queen of Persia (Esther chapter 3). Esther was a Jewish orphan who was raised by her uncle Mordecai. It was via her uncle that Esther learned that the monarch had given his approval for the king to execute all of the Israelites and take possession of their property. Despite the fact that she was banned by the law to do so, she made the decision to take action and relayed the word to all of the Jews, instructing them to fast for three days before going on to present herself before the king. She was granted a favor in the eyes of the monarch, and as a result, the lives of the Jews were taken into consideration. The Jewish people commemorated their rescue by establishing a holiday known as "*Purim*," which is still celebrated to this day (Esther 9:20).

Esther is a lady who has a character that is characterized by profound religiosity, faith, bravery, patriotism, prudence, and determination simultaneously. She fulfills a variety of duties, including those of a queen, a wife, an encourager, as well as a deliverer and protector of her people. Putting her life at danger to serve her people, she exemplified the traits that make a great leader outstanding. In the New Testament, the attitude that Jesus Christ has toward women is essential because he defies tradition and rejects the idea that women are

inferior to males (Mt. 28:9; Jn. 20:1ff). It is because of this mentality that women and their ministry during his time are given credence. According to Lateju (2023), the New Testament's perspective of women underscores the influence of God's work in Christ, which understood that the life and identity of all humans rely on grace rather than cultural ideals. This understanding of women is a key component of the New Testament. Women were the first to see the rising Lord, and they became the first witnesses to the event that serves as the foundation for all Christian teaching.

The teaching of Jesus was attractive to women because it provided them with equal status with males and opened up new paths of religious service. Women served in a variety of leadership capacities, including elders and deacons, and they found the message especially compelling. The book of Acts of Apostles highlights a number of the responsibilities that women performed in the early stages of the Christian church. These roles include the formation of the first congregation, the responsibility of evangelists, the function of prophetess, and other leadership positions. Philippians 4:2 describes how ladies worked with Paul and battled alongside him in his endeavor. Within the group of individuals that are listed in Romans chapter 16, there are six women, and it is stated that all of them were involved in the process of constructing Christian communities.

The apostle Junia was another woman who had a position of authority in the early church. The apostle Paul expresses his desire for the believers in Rome to "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles as well as were in Christ before I was" (Romans 16:7) according to the Bible. In addition to being a woman, Junia was also an apostle. According to Epp (2005), Romans 16:7 has been acknowledged as being of utmost significance in shaping the characteristics of the leadership positions that women acquired in the early Christian community. Both Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, considered themselves to be founder members of the Christian Church in addition to being personal friends and supporters of Paul. Paul entrusted them with the responsibility of managing the fledgling church that he had left behind, while she proclaimed the gospel in the same manner that Paul did. Even though neither of them had ever met Jesus of Nazareth, they both had a great confidence in him. The church may not have flourished to the extent that it did if they had not been there to teach and organize. Paul was a pioneer in the understanding of the duty that women play in Christian ministry, and the women of the day were ready to answer to the call of Christ on their lives. During the gathering of friends that is described in Romans chapter 16, Paul brought up the fact that Priscilla as well as her husband had put their lives in danger in order to assist themselves. When seen through the lens of the Bible, it is clear that God has called and accepted women to positions of authority in a variety of geographical locations and historical periods.

PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

The provision of direction and care to a church or religious community upon the part of a pastor or other church leader is what is referred to as pastoral leadership. The well-being, progress, and development of the community are the primary focuses of this endeavor, which in turn encompasses spiritual and organizational obligations. Pastoral leadership is comprised of many essential components, including but not limited to the following: church leadership, spiritual direction, servant leadership, counselling as well as support, vision casting, administration supervision, and community participation (Adeleke, 2011). Through the provision of biblical instruction, preaching, and spiritual mentoring, helps people in developing their faith and navigating the obstacles that they face in their daily lives. Moreover, they are examples of humility, empathy, as well as selflessness, often modeling their behaviour after that of Jesus. The operations of the church, the coordination of the

ministries, the supervision of the workers, and the efficiency of the church are all managed by the pastors. A healthy and successful religious community may be fostered via the application of spiritual, emotional, along with practical leadership abilities, which are all components of effective pastoral leadership.

Alterations in culture, theology, and organizational structure have all had a role in shaping the evolution of pastoral leadership in churches throughout the many periods of the history of Christianity. The apostles, who were responsible for establishing early Christian communities and overseeing the spiritual development of those groups, are credited as being the first to exercise pastoral leadership. Local churches were governed by elders, sometimes known as presbyters, while bishops were responsible for managing many congregations as the church expanded. This led to a more organized leadership system. The bishops became pivotal characters in the process of preserving the theological integrity and the unity of the church. Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire during the Constantinian Era as well as the Rise of Institutional Christianity, which occurred during the fourth and fifth centuries (Kategile, 2020). This resulted in the establishment of organization structures that were more hierarchical and formal. The ascent of the Patriarchs, which occurred during the fourth and fifth centuries, resulted in the establishment of the five great sees, with their bishops and patriarchs wielding considerable influence. There was a sharper divide among clergy (bishops, priests, as well as deacons) and laity as the leadership of the church grew more institutionalized. The clergy were responsible for spiritual leadership, while the laity played a more passive role in the life of the church.

During the Middle Ages, which lasted from the fifth to the fifteenth century, the papacy's power grew, and the Pope emerged as the most influential individual in the church's hierarchy of authority (Kategile, 2020). There was a substantial amount of influence exerted by monasteries, which evolved into centers of scholarship, spiritual rejuvenation, and missionary activity. The sacramental function of the priest was given a great deal of importance in the medieval church, especially when it came to the administration of the Eucharist and the provision of absolution when sins were committed. During the sixteenth century, the Reformation brought about a significant change in the leadership of pastoral ministries, notably among Protestant traditions (Morrison, 2024). In the history of the Roman Catholic Church, prominent figures like as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli voiced their disapproval of the hierarchical structure of the church and its reliance on the priesthood. An attitude toward church leadership that was less hierarchical and more congregational emerged as a result of this phenomenon across numerous Protestant traditions (Kategile, 2020).

A transition occurred in the role of pastors as preachers and teachers, with the emphasis shifting away from sacramental responsibilities and toward teaching, preaching, and biblical explanation. The modern and contemporary era, which spans from the 18th century to the present day, has seen the development of many types of leadership within denominations, with each denomination establishing its own structure (Kategile, 2020). There has also been a movement in the way that pastors are expected to lead churches in tackling societal challenges such as impoverishment, prejudice, and war. Pastoral care and social involvement have also undergone this transformation. Gender roles in leadership, ecumenism as well as interfaith leadership, and pastors serving as CEO-style CEOs in certain contemporary evangelical and non-denominational churches are some of the key changes and transformations that have occurred in pastoral leadership. The development of pastoral leadership is a reflection of greater changes that have occurred throughout the history of Christianity in terms of church organization theology, and cultural participation.

Traditionally, there is hardly any organization without someone in authority to mobilize and drive the affairs of the organization to success. The properly recognized and authorized individuals who perform these roles are referred to as leaders. It is apparent to note that a leader who commands, directs, coordinates, rules, administers and is generally responsible for managing organizations grabs much of the public conversations. The different approaches, situational constraints or opportunities and even the multitudes of leaders that are expected to fill every role and position have made leadership difficult to define. The definitions capture the diverse perspectives of the array of scholars who had attempted to dissect the complexity of the many domains of leadership. Unlike other informal organizations, religious ones also require leadership. The positions of leadership stem from the fact that the organizations have set out ways for individuals to gain blessings and fulfill their desires when certain ceremonies and rituals are followed. There are also some rules and rituals expected to fulfill financial or administrative responsibilities and sustain the organization into the future.

BAPTIST PERCEPTION OF FEMALE PASTORATE

Beginning in 1880, when women were first ordained into the pastoral ministry, the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) has been responsible for a number of major advancements that have been made regarding the position of women. The first person to be ordained was Moses Ladejo Stone, who was a Native American who worked as an assistant to a Southern Baptist mission minister. In the year 1930, the Nigerian Baptist Convention, which had been established in 1914, made an effort to govern the practice of ordination by imposing a significant restriction (Ojo & Ajani, 2024). The year 1931 saw the establishment of an Ordination Council, which advocated for the compulsory study of theology prior to ordination.

A review of the rules and circumstances that govern ordination has taken place since that time in order to ensure that ministerial ordination continues to be held to a high standard. The Southern Baptist Convention in the United States of America passed a resolution in 1984 that discouraged women from attaining pastoral leadership positions (Ledbetter, 2000; Shaw, 2023; Smietana, 2023). This decision signaled the beginning of discussions over the ordination of women. 1991 marked the beginning of official negotiations at the Executive level of NBC, during which the Ministerial Training Board made a recommendation to the NBC family about a planned course of action. The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) made the decision in 1992 to not ordain women; nonetheless, agitations continued, with notable people such as Aduke Akinola, the Executive Director of the Women's Missionary Union, as well as others advocating for the ordination of women.

Akinola claimed that Jesus never discriminated against men and women in ministry and that he embraced all people. He also suggested that the Ministerial Board should follow the teachings of the Bible. The ordination of women was backed by a number of other notable voices on NBC. The Ministerial Board made a recommendation for women to go into full-time ministry in 1993, and the recommendation was adopted in 1994. During the beginning, the only people who could be ordained were female pastors who were employed by the churches (Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2022). On the other hand, in the year 1999, the list of possible women ordinands was broadened to include those who were working as missionaries, and those who were employed in theological institutions and denominational offices. Two women applicants were nominated for ordination by their respective local churches in the year 1997. By the year 2010, eighty-three women had already been ordained into the full gospel ministry. As a result of the fact that they now carry out the Baptist ordinances of giving the Lord's Supper in the same manner as their male counterparts, some women have attained the position of substantive ministers in certain Baptist congregations

from the National Baptist Convention (NBC). Generally speaking, the adoption of women's ordination removed any constraints that had previously put women in positions of subordination to males in the Baptist ministry.

According to McKnight (cited in Makozi & Afolabi, 1982), the term "pastor" is not defined in the same manner that people do today from the perspective of the New Testament. When it comes to the Catholic Church along with other Protestant denominations like Lutherans and Methodists, the word "overseer" or "bishop" refers to a person who is in charge of a geographical region, while a pastor is the person who is in charge of a local congregation (Makozi & Afolabi, 1982). The majority of congregations are governed by local leaders, including a pastor or council of elders, in the Protestant denominations of the Presbyterian, Baptist, and other Protestant denominations. These denominations do not possess a hierarchy of bishops. Giving a woman the role of "pastor" could render her church ineligible for the Southern Baptist Convention, who has highlighted the significance of equality between men and women in the leadership of their churches (Ledbetter, 2000; Shaw, 2023; Smietana, 2023). Confusion has arisen as a result of this, and a request has been made for a study committee to investigate how the phrase is employed in local churches.

Elder, overseer (which is frequently rendered as bishop), pastor, as well as deacon and deacon are some of the names used in the Bible to refer to those deacons that have authority and due to the church. Regarding the connection that exists between an elder and an overseer, there is a lengthy discussion, since the New Testament does not provide a clear answer. Ray Van Neste, is of the opposite opinion that the three primary terms for pastor, elder, overseer, and pastor, all relate to the same separate duty within the church (Smietana, 2023). In the past, Southern Baptists have occasionally been cautious with the terminology that they use, particularly when referring to job titles as well as job descriptions inside the church. Because the titles "pastor" and "minister" are sometimes confused with one another, he chooses to use the position description of director instead.

An answer to the problem of misunderstanding job titles in the ministry has been presented by Bart Barber, who serves as the president of Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). For instance, both male and female members of the First Baptist Church in Farmersville, Texas, hold positions of authority within the church's ministry (Shaw, 2023). On the other hand, those who hold the title of pastor are required to be qualified for the top position in the church, but those who hold other titles have no need to be qualified for that position. Barber said that congregations who use the term "pastor" in a different way might adjust their job titles to conform to the teaching of the Southern Baptist Convention (Smietana, 2023). Debate also surrounds the gender limits that are placed on the function of pastor. Contrary to the beliefs of many Christian denominations, such as Catholics and Southern Baptists, which hold that position exclusively for males, the New Testament demonstrates that women have held major leadership positions (Makozi & Afolabi, 1982). According to Amy Peeler, one of the reasons she left the Southern Baptist Convention was because of the restrictions placed on women pastors. The Southern Baptists have decided to modify their statement of faith to make it abundantly apparent that the phrases "elder," "pastor," and "overseer" all refer to the same function.

The governance of the church could be affected in ways that were not intended by this shift. The "elder-led" model is used by a significant number of local Southern Baptist churches. This model implies that the pastor is one among a group of men who function as a governing board for the church. According to Van Neste, this arrangement does not correspond to the function that is stated in the Bible for deacons, but it demonstrates how Southern Baptists have not been specific in their vocabulary (Smietana, 2023). According to him, it is time for those in positions of authority within the church to put their words into

action and to pose challenging questions with regard to the extent to which they are adhering to the understanding that they have.

THE DILEMMA OF GENDER DISPARITY IN PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

The issue of gender disparity in pastoral leadership has long been a pervasive and persistent problem within numerous churches across different denominations. It is an undeniable social issue that has plagued the African Independent Churches (AIC) as well (Kategile, 2020). Despite the significant contributions and valuable service provided by women in various roles and even as pastoral leaders, there remains an undeniable presence of deep-rooted patriarchy and chauvinism. This social phenomenon is further perpetuated by the prevailing notion that the Bible seemingly endorses and upholds male dominance within the church hierarchy. It is essential to recognize that the construction and interpretation of these beliefs are predominantly influenced by men. Consequently, many women are marginalized and restricted from fully expressing and utilizing their innate gifts and talents within their pastoral roles, ultimately resulting in a detrimental impact on the entire church community. The repercussions of relegating women to the background are manifold. Firstly, it significantly limits the platform for women to practically demonstrate and exercise their inherent abilities and potentials. Consequently, this leads to the unfortunate proliferation of unfruitful backbiting, unnecessary competition, and a general lack of unity within most church assemblies.

These negative consequences not only hinder the overall growth and progress of the church but also obstruct the manifestation of the true teachings of Christianity – teachings rooted in love, inclusivity, and the unification of all believers, regardless of gender. Addressing this issue is not only a matter of equality and justice but a dire necessity for the betterment and advancement of the entire church body. It is crucial to challenge and dismantle the prevailing patriarchal structures and discriminatory practices that obstruct women from assuming leadership roles within the pastoral sphere. By doing so, churches can tap into the full potential and diverse capabilities of the entire congregation, fostering an environment of flourishing collaboration, genuine unity, and collective growth. According to the Baptist World Alliance (2013), it is imperative to engage in meaningful discussions, theological reflections, and profound self-examination to transform and reshape the church's approach towards gender equality in pastoral leadership. By actively involving women in decision-making processes, providing equal opportunities for leadership positions and embracing a more inclusive interpretation of scripture, churches can pave the way for significant positive change and cultivate an atmosphere where all individuals, irrespective of their gender, can thrive and contribute meaningfully to the spiritual community.

Pastoral leadership has predominantly been the business of men in most societies. The church has not been an exception from this gender imbalance. This is evident in the socialization patterns for both males and females in the church/ministry context. Women have predominantly been socialized to be submissive and obedient in all areas of their lives, whereas men have been socialized to be aggressive, dominant, and in control. As Linville reports, "The process of socialization of women starts from home and the church; women are raised to be modest, humble, quiet, and obedient to men" (Morrison (2024, p.3). This attitude often gives men a prominent position in the hierarchy of the church and, by extension, other institutions in society. The sentiments expressed in Linville's report regarding the impact of family and home on socializing individuals are further reinforced. Accordingly, the family and home serve as primary institutions that contribute to the perpetuation and reinforcement of distinct gender roles for both men and women. Otis (in Ani, 2013) argues that the process of male socialization plays a crucial role in solidifying these societal norms

and further cementing the dominant position of men. As a result, these patterns of male socialization provide an advantage to men when it comes to assuming leadership positions within the church. Such dynamics not only highlight the significance of family and home in shaping individuals' perspectives but also emphasize the existing gender disparities within religious organizations.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO GENDER DISPARITY IN THE BAPTIST CHURCH PASTORATE

To understand why there is gender disparity in pastoral leadership among Baptist churches, it is important to analyze the situation, looking at the factors that contribute to this disparity. In the Baptist Church, gender inequality is caused by a number of different elements, including those that are theological, historical, cultural, and social in nature. The foundational background for theological training of women is a contributory factor. Approximately, 1898 marked the beginning of Southern Baptist missionaries' efforts to establish the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso (NBTS), which was responsible for delivering theological education. In the beginning, only males were given the chance to get theological study since traditional society did not allow women to receive formal education in the Western style. At the beginning of the 1950s, the Women Training Centre (WTC) was formed with the purpose of offering assistance to the pastoral ministry of spouses.

On the other hand, by the 1960s, a progressive shift had begun in the way that women in the NBC were subjected to theological education. The National Board of Teachers (NBTS) awarded certificates in Religious Education (C.R.E.) to two women in the year 1965 (Ojo & Ajani, 2024). These ladies were S.A. Babalola and I.C. Ugunkah. Moji A. Adepoju and Mary O. Ologunde were the first individuals to be awarded the Bachelor of Religious Education (B.R.E) degree from the National Board of Teachers of Religion (NBTS) in the year 1977. When it comes to training in Religious Education, Theology, and Christian Music, the number of women who were accepted into NBTS increased. Four women attended the National Board of Technical Studies (NBTS) and earned their doctorate degrees (PhD) between the years 1998 and 2004 (Adeleke, 2011). Since the 1980s, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, which has resulted in a transformation of the religious landscape in the nation.

Second are the influences of culture and Pentecostalism. In defiance of the traditional culture of Africa, Pentecostal churches came into being and began to recognize the spouses of their pastors (Ojo, 2012). These churches also made efforts to promote gender equality in the context of religious worship and activities connected to Christianity. In these churches, women were more visible, and they began to fulfill major duties in worship as well as other activities that included groups of people. Patriarchy has been eroded as a result of the focus placed on spiritual equality rather than traditions, which has brought to an indirect improvement in the position and status of women within the realm of religion. Women of various Christian faiths in Nigeria have been inspired to strive to greater status and new positions in church life as a result of the presence of several examples of women who are serving in ministry roles such as preachers and church leaders (Kenneth, 2020). Gender disparity among churches is a very sensitive issue and needs to be handled with care because it deals directly with people, especially church members.

Everywhere in the world, people abound who express concern over the issue. The term "gender" is not a term of the Bible, but human civilization, in its struggle for justice, introduced the idea that gender disparity must not be encouraged. However, there are some factors that make it possible and difficult to handle this issue. It has been said that in the church, we have more women than men, and most of the women are not only committed but

actively involved in leadership roles in the church. At the family level, women have been the hand behind every man, but in the church, the issue of recognition and belongingness, whether in pastorship, deaconship, and so forth, is at stake.

Thirdly, complementarianism, which asserts that men and women possess distinct responsibilities in the church and the home, and biblical literalism, that interprets texts relating to male leadership as well as women's subordination as divine commands, are two of the most important contributions to the problem. Cultural traditions, including patriarchal societal structures, have also had a role in shaping gender standards and influencing church activities. In the past, there have been instances of male-dominated clergy, conventional perspectives on the ordination of women as pastors or elders, as well as a dearth of women in positions of authority responsible for making decisions (Butler, 2020). In addition, a smaller number of women have gone through formal theological education, and the majority of seminaries are characterized by complementarian perspectives, which restrict the chances available to women for leadership roles within the church. Some of the variables that lead to gender inequalities in the Baptist Church include social and economic issues. Women's possibilities to participate in leadership positions may be restricted as a result of broader social expectations surrounding women's duties in the business and the home. These expectations may also reinforce conventional attitudes held inside the church. By further reinforcing gender inequalities, economic inequities may put pressure on women to prioritize their duties as family members above their leadership positions in the church.

Since its inception, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which is the biggest Baptist organization, has consistently upheld a complementarian perspective on gender roles (Smietana, 2023). This perspective has a significant impact on the larger Baptist movement. Traditionalist groups are opposed to women's leadership initiatives, and there are not enough women to look up to as role models, which further restrict the potential of women rising to positions of authority. In general, the gender gap that exists within the Baptist Church is a complicated problem that is driven by a number of different variables. Other factors include present-day integration of religion and politics, misinterpretations of gender issues, persisting cultural patterns, female insecurities, self-perceptions, or efforts to take unbecoming political advantages by some men that created the demand for women in leadership positions with prices. However, cultural traditions and religious norms are the most cited and scientifically shown factors of gender discrimination. And in religious, especially Christian denominations, the situation is no different. Women's discrimination became the core and key aspect of the Christian principles where the rationale was created by spiritual barriers; though there are some shifts or openings for new interpretations of the Christian teaching that provide either limited or full right to women to participate in religious activities, to serve, and to lead.

Finally, the problem is even more intensively exacerbated because the main dogmas, principles, and doctrines of the Christian teaching were profoundly brought to light, unveiled, and illuminated by the sacred and ancient Hebrew Testament, a testament that is deeply intertwined and inseparable from the rich tapestry of Judaism, a religion that has greatly influenced and shaped the course of religious thought throughout the ages (Ani, 2013). Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge and recognize that the formation and establishment of religious traditions and their subsequent interpretation has historically been primarily carried out and dictated by the devout male believers, thereby creating a paradigm dominated by patriarchal notions. With great fervor, the inspiration and enthusiasm to embark on extensive research and exploration in this field have stemmed from acknowledging and recognizing the imperative need to place the concepts and ideals of gender and gender identity at the forefront and as a central pillar of one's faith or religious devotion. It has been

consistently proven and substantiated that an individual's preconceived understanding and perception of their religious beliefs is intimately interconnected with the traditional beliefs, cultural heritages, societal norms, understandings, expectations, and prescribed modes of behavior that have historically been attributed to gender roles, particularly those that have become deeply ingrained within the collective consciousness as stereotypical representations of men and women.

IMPLICATIONS OF PASTORAL GENDER DISPARITY FOR THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

A significantly higher percentage of male church members who participated in this research supported women's involvement in pastoral leadership than their women counterparts. As many church members believe that ministry is for every member of the body of Christ regardless of gender, the result indicating the struggle of women to be involved in pastoral leadership variables, gender, and race point to some discrepancies between perspectives held by the members of the body of Christ (Ameje, personal communication, 2025). There is a significant effect of education on the gender disparity in pastoral leadership. It is generally easier for a leader to persuade the less educated with minimal theological exposure to a belief. According to Otega (Personal communication, 2025), church leaders, therefore, should avoid creating unnecessary barriers to women's engagement in pastoral leadership. It takes seriously a vertical dimension to the mission of the church. Accordingly, a simple promise to be a particular kind of movie by selecting a particular means of witnessing or helping people materially or through the interchange of lived experiences, even if this asymmetry is explained from above.

The more complex vision of the church embodies mission as *servus servorum Dei*. The church is an *ecclesia ministerialis* - a servant community, a body in which the members submit to one another, serving and being served, according to each one's peculiar *charism*, the exercise of which becomes significant in ecclesial context, either in a ministry assigned by the community or in some other form (Ademiluka, 2017). It is not a new thing that society has always, or predominantly so, approved of an exclusively male priesthood. In the minds of many, the ministry of spiritual leadership has been seen as a male preserve. As such, there is and has always been a tendency for people to believe in the ideology of separate spheres, the idea that power belongs in the world of men and nurturing and serving comes under the domain of women. The ideology of separate spheres reduces women to a position of spiritual dependence and inferiority, fueling both domestic violence and hatred of women in general. Encouraging girls and women to pursue their interests and develop their gifts is a challenge with contemporary significance and importance. Today, in Baptist churches, women have long struggled for and finally achieved what many consider their rightful place in the corporate life of their congregations.

In some Baptist congregations, and those of a quite conservative theological persuasion, women are involved at all levels, both executive and supportive, passionately contributing their talents and wisdom. But this tremendous progress has not come easily, as it required energetic and often painful efforts at restructuring the Congregation of Believers. These courageous women, serving in various capacities within the feminine sphere, possess unique and divinely given gifts that extend beyond their current roles. It is unfortunate, however, that these gifts have not been actively pursued due to deep-rooted practices of *Ibida*, *Duze*, and *Ugbeta* - practices that perpetuate a regrettably persistent gender disparity within the context of pastoral leadership (Butler, 2020). It is disheartening to realize that the invaluable contributions and innovative perspectives of these gifted women are not being fully embraced and utilized. By neglecting to actively cultivate and empower their pastoral

leadership abilities, the churches in Sapele risks missing out on the transformative impact these women could have on the lives of congregants and the community at large (Umukoro, personal communication, 2025). The time has come for an inclusive and forward-thinking approach, one that not only recognizes the inherent worth and abilities of women but also harnesses their divine talents for the betterment of the Church and its mission. It is only through such a holistic and egalitarian vision that the church in Sapele can truly prosper and fulfill its calling as a beacon of God's love and grace.

Consequently, an indispensable aspect of the Christian faith and the teachings of the church lie in the inherent principle of equality and justice that is extended and bestowed upon all believers before the divine presence of God. This notion of equality transcends the boundaries and confines of the religious realm, encompassing the entirety of the human experience, whereby every individual is inherently identified with and recognized as an integral part of God's magnificent creation. Irrespective of one's gender identity, every human is unequivocally permitted to bask in the wonders of divine provision and is entrusted with the responsibility for the stewardship and conscientious management of the abundant resources that have been graciously bestowed upon them (Akanji, 2023). Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore the disheartening reality that oftentimes the prevailing customs, traditions, and entrenched belief systems upheld within certain segments of religious institutions seem in direct contradiction to these foundational principles. Consequently, when one contemplates and scrutinizes the prevailing arguments and attempts to justify the widely held assertion that culture inherently perpetuates a systemic bias and discrimination against women, it becomes increasingly challenging to reconcile this narrative with the essence and teachings of the Christian faith, which unequivocally espouse the principles of love, compassion, and inclusivity for all of God's cherished creations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for addressing gender disparities in pastoral leadership among churches in the Sapele Baptist Association as well as the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) including other Christian denominations are made. These are recommendations resulting from the findings of the study are as follows.

- i. It is the conviction of this paper that men and women are created by God for the purpose of serving Him and it should not be subjected to human conjecture, hence, the church organization should advocate a sensitive policy that will integrate women pastors into church governance positions.
- ii. Since many other denominations ordain women and they are functioning effectively in their pastoral role, the Nigerian Baptist should utilize affirmative action to integrate women into church governance positions.
- iii. It is also recommended that traditional beliefs and cultural prejudice should not prevent the development of women pastors; church leadership should demonstrate a supportive and inclusive approach. This should also be replicated at the seminary to encourage the development of women pastors.
- iv. It is further recommended that Baptist Associations in the NBC should encourage their churches to design and implement strategies and programmes which openly and positively encourage an increase in the number of women pastors.
- v. Lastly, it is recommended that further studies should be conducted to contribute to the development of women pastoral leadership in other settings.

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The above recommendations provide the impetus to accept the need to reevaluate our beliefs and understanding about the limited roles women can play in the church. This will help both

the church and society as a whole to play a more comprehensive and active role in their formation and development. By acknowledging, accepting, and focusing on the equality of human sex.

CONCLUSION

Findings from the research revealed that the practice of not calling women-pastors into the Baptist church pastorate is a result of some influences that are both biblical and cultural and interpreted differently by male members of the congregation and are acted upon. Investigations reveal a statistically significant gender gap in pastoral positions among congregations in the Sapele Baptist Association. The gender disparity in pastoral positions among churches in the association is in consonance with the empirical findings from the extant literature. The results of the analysis reveal that gender is a significant determinant of pastoral leadership in the SaBA and that women have a 49.3% lesser likelihood of becoming pastors than men. The SaBA rules and practices are not obviously biased towards female pastors by requiring pastoral candidates to be males. Just over a third of the congregations in the SBA are led by ordained male pastors, coupled with the prevalent use of the bi-vocational model of ministry and low usage of female pastoral leadership in each of the models.

The association faces the challenge of encouraging greater participation of women in the spiritual leadership of its member churches, which should not only be a matter of encouraging a broader, inclusive and participative approach to ministry, but also one of developing the full potential of each member church. The study also contributes to the literature by extending outside the North American context. In fact, it represents the first quantitative approach to the extent of female pastoral leadership in the state of Delta, Nigeria and utilized statistical modelling techniques. Although it is limited to a historical SBA clientele, the findings provide valuable insights into the debate on how local religious organizations can benefit from a more inclusive approach to pastoral leadership. Since Baptist churches in Nigeria operated a non-conventional structure, and each church had its governance style, operational procedures, and culture, churches could engage in a variety of policy decisions beyond the traditional policy such as ordaining female pastors. One important policy is adopting an affirmative action programme aimed at eliminating visible gender-based discrimination in their organizational structure. The traditional approach towards ordaining women is not feasible and calls into question the question of cultural insensitivity.

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Oral Interview

S/No.	Interviewee	Sex	Age	Place	Date
1	Richard Oyivbi	M	36	Sapele	28/8/24
2	Fred Ameye	M	41	Sapele	28/8/24

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3	Kenneth Umukoro	M	35	Sapele	29/8/24
4	Usude Joyce	F	31	Sapele	30/8/24
5	Jose Tobore	F	30	Sapele	1/9/24
6	Azinno Success Otega	F	40	Sapele	3/9/24
7	Felicia Okuokori	F	33	Sapele	2/9/24
8	Joy Ofonriyenor Tega	F	28	Sapele	5/9/24