Examining the Influence of Strategic Leadership on Organizational Growth in Megachurches in the USA: A Critical Literature Review

Oscar Mumba

School of Business and Management, Texila American University, Guyana, South America

Abstract

This article presents a critical literature review examining the influence of strategic leadership on the organizational growth of megachurches in the United States. Strategic leadership is a pivotal force in the success and expansion of organizations; yet, a significant research gap exists regarding its specific application within the unique context of large religious nonprofits. This study synthesizes and analyzes existing scholarly works to explore the nuanced relationship between key strategic leadership practices—strategic vision, objective setting, strategy crafting, implementation, and performance evaluation—and the multifaceted growth of megachurch organizations. Adopting a qualitative approach guided by a hermeneutic research philosophy, this review employs a thematic analysis of academic literature to identify core themes, theoretical underpinnings, and emerging patterns. The findings reveal that megachurch growth is a complex phenomenon that extends beyond numerical increases to encompass spiritual maturity, service expansion, and community impact. The leader's vision profoundly shapes the adoption of business principles within a spiritual framework and the effective management of unique resources. The study concludes that strategic leadership is a critical determinant of megachurch vitality and sustainability, offering practical insights for leaders and identifying key areas for future scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: *Church Growth, Leadership Theory, Megachurch, Organizational Growth, Pastoral, Strategic Leadership.*

Introduction

Strategic leadership is widely recognized as a crucial driver of success and expansion across various organizational types [1, 2]. Within the United States' religious landscape, megachurches—Protestant congregations with a regular weekly attendance of 2,000 or more—represent a significant and influential organizational phenomenon [3, 4]. These institutions have not only demonstrated remarkable growth in an era where many traditional denominations face declining attendance, but they have also become powerful influencers of public opinion and societal views due to their vast resources and sizable followings [3, 5]. The ability of these complex organizations to thrive is intricately linked to the leadership provided by their pastors and executive teams [6].

This research addresses a significant gap in the academic literature regarding the specific dynamics of strategic leadership within megachurch settings [7, 8]. This gap is not just a void in knowledge, but a crucial area that needs to be filled to understand the unique strategies and processes that successful leaders employ to foster organizational growth. The core components of strategic leadership—encompassing the vision, decision-making, and management practices of top leaders—are acknowledged as critical; yet, the mechanisms of their influence on growth remain under-theorized and under-examined in this specific context. Existing

knowledge provides a limited understanding of how strategic principles, often developed in corporate settings, are adapted and implemented within these unique, value-driven environments [9, 27]. This limitation hinders both academic theory and the practical development of effective leadership within one of the most vital segments of contemporary American religion.

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine and elucidate the influence of strategic leadership practices on the multifaceted dimensions of organizational growth within the specific context of megachurches in the United States, employing a critical literature approach [12]. This is achieved by pursuing several specific objectives: (1) to understand the influence of strategic vision; (2) to ascertain the role of setting specific objectives; (3) to determine the impact of crafting a strategy; (4) to understand the process of implementing strategy; and (5) to ascertain the influence of evaluating performance on the organizational growth of megachurches [10]. The novelty of this work lies in its synthesis of a fragmented body of literature through a robust theoretical framework, integrating Strategic Leadership Theory, Upper Echelons Theory, the Resource-Based View, and others to create a holistic model [1, 6]. By systematically analyzing and deconstructing existing research, this article aims to contribute to leadership studies and the sociology of religion, while offering valuable, evidence-based insights for practitioners navigating the complexities of leading large, nonprofit organizations [5, 11, 32].

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach, specifically a critical literature review, to conduct an in-depth examination of the relationship between strategic leadership and organizational growth in US megachurches [13]. A qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate due to its strength in exploring complex and nuanced phenomena, as well as synthesizing diverse perspectives from existing scholarly work to produce a rich and holistic understanding [14, 15]. The research was guided by a hermeneutic philosophy, a method of interpretation that emphasizes the in-depth interpretation of textual data to uncover underlying meanings, assumptions, and patterns. This philosophy was chosen for its suitability in understanding and interpreting the complex and nuanced data found in the literature on strategic leadership in megachurches.

Research Design and Data Source

The primary research design employed a critical literature review [12, 16]. This method involves a systematic process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing knowledge on a topic. Still, it goes beyond mere summary to actively engage with the literature, question its assumptions, and identify power dynamics or biases. The data for the study consisted exclusively of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic journal articles, scholarly books, published dissertations, and credible industry reports [17]. The subjects of the study were the texts themselves—the arguments, theories, and empirical findings presented by other researchers [18].

Data Collection and Processing

A systematic literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and ProQuest [19]. Search terms included combinations of "megachurch," "strategic leadership," "organizational growth," "church growth," and "large congregations," utilizing Boolean operators to refine the results [19]. Strict inclusion and exclusion criteria governed the selection of literature [16]. Inclusion criteria specified: peer-reviewed scholarly publications, texts published in English, and studies focusing on megachurches within the USA that directly addressed the core constructs [4, 20]. Non-scholarly sources, non-English texts, and literature

focused on contexts outside the US were excluded [4]. A particular emphasis was placed on literature from the last two decades to ensure currency. To organize the collected data, a Literature Matrix was developed. This tool enabled the systematic extraction and comparison of key information across sources, including theoretical frameworks, methodologies, findings, and limitations. Throughout the process, Concept Maps were used as a visual tool to illustrate relationships between concepts and identify emerging themes. Concept Maps are a visual representation of the relationships between different concepts, allowing for a deeper level of analysis and synthesis of the literature.

Data Analysis

The core analytical technique employed was a comprehensive thematic analysis, guided by the hermeneutic and critical lens of the research design [12]. This iterative process involved several stages: (1) **Familiarization**, through intensive reading of the selected literature; (2) **Generating Initial Codes**, by systematically identifying patterns and features relevant to the research questions; (3) **Searching for Themes**, by collating codes into potential overarching themes that captured significant patterns in the data [22]; (4) **Reviewing Themes**, by refining them against the dataset for coherence and distinctiveness [22]; (5) **Defining and Naming Themes**, to articulate the essence of each theme; and (6) **Producing the Report**, by synthesizing the analysis into a coherent narrative supported by compelling examples from the literature. This process involved not only summarizing but also critically interpreting the findings in the context of the study's theoretical framework, identifying gaps, contradictions, and dominant narratives within the existing body of knowledge [12]. The analysis involved extracting both qualitative insights and quantitative statistical data reported in the reviewed studies, such as descriptive statistics on megachurch operations and demographics, to provide a comprehensive picture of the field.

Results

The thematic analysis of the literature revealed several key themes regarding the influence of strategic leadership on the growth of megachurches. These results integrate qualitative insights with statistical data reported in the source materials, providing a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon.

Reported Statistical Context of U.S. Megachurches

The literature provides a clear statistical backdrop for understanding the scale and characteristics of the organizations under review. A megachurch is typically defined as a Protestant congregation with a sustained weekly attendance of 2,000 or more individuals [3, 4]. These organizations operate on a significant scale; for instance, the average budget of a megachurch in 2019 was reported to be $7 million [3]. Leadership characteristics are also statistically documented: the average age of a lead pastor in a U.S. megachurch is 53, with an average tenure of 15 years in their position [3]. Furthermore, demographic trends within these churches show a notable increase in multiracial congregations, reflecting an adaptation to broader societal shifts [3]. These statistics underscore the complexity and significant resource base that necessitate strategic, rather than purely administrative, leadership.

The Primacy of Strategic and Visionary Leadership

A dominant theme across the literature is the critical role of the senior leader in establishing and communicating a compelling strategic vision. This extends beyond simple management, requiring leaders to anticipate future trends, maintain flexibility, and empower others to achieve the organization's goals [1, 6, 25]. Visionary leadership is consistently highlighted as pivotal for navigating dynamic environments and driving growth [20, 26]. This vision often creates a "dramatic web" that offers meaning and purpose, resonating with the congregation

to attract newcomers and retain existing members. The leader's ability to articulate this vision is framed not just as a task, but as the central mechanism through which strategic direction is established and maintained [28].

The Multifaceted Nature of Organizational Growth

The analysis shows that organizational growth in megachurches is understood as a multidimensional concept. It extends far beyond numerical metrics, such as weekly attendance and financial contributions [29]. The literature describes growth as also encompassing the spiritual maturity of the congregation [20, 30], the expansion of services and ministries (e.g., youth outreach, community service) [3, 30], the development of multisite campuses [4], and an increase in overall community impact [3, 26]. Leaders are often evaluated, and evaluate themselves, against a balanced scorecard of objectives that includes both quantitative and qualitative measures [30, 31]. This result suggests that effective strategic leadership in this context should prioritize holistic development, rather than merely numerical expansion.

Adaptation of Corporate Strategy in a Spiritual Context

A significant pattern identified is the application of principles from the corporate world to the church's operational model [1, 27]. This includes formal processes for setting specific objectives, crafting detailed strategies, implementing them systematically, and evaluating performance [10]. Megachurch leaders are found to leverage strategic tools and management models to enhance organizational effectiveness [9]. For example, the use of multisite expansion is a common growth strategy borrowed from business franchising models [4]. However, this adaptation is not a simple transfer. The results show that successful leaders must integrate these business principles with the church's core spiritual mission and ethical values in a sophisticated manner, a process that

requires navigating the tension between missional faithfulness and operational efficiency.

The Strategic Management of Culture and Resources

The literature emphasizes that strategy is implemented through organizational culture [21, 26, 30]. Strategic leaders play a crucial role in intentionally shaping and maintaining a mission-aligned culture characterized by shared norms, values, and beliefs. This becomes increasingly complex and vital as the organization scales. Concurrently, the results highlight the importance of resource management. In line with the Resource-Based View (RBV), megachurches are conceptualized as bundles of unique resources, including the "human capital" of a charismatic pastor, a large volunteer base, significant financial assets, and strong community networks. A key finding is that growth is driven by the leader's ability to identify, cultivate, and leverage these valuable, rare, and inimitable resources to achieve a "competitive advantage" in the religious marketplace.

The Influence of Leadership Characteristics and Context

The background and characteristics of the senior leader and their top management team are found to significantly influence strategic choices and outcomes. Factors such as a leader's tenure, education, and prior career experiences shape their cognitive frameworks and values, which in turn dictate their strategic direction and risk tolerance. The findings also strongly support a contingency perspective, indicating that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership [2]. Effective leadership is contingent upon the fit between the leader's style, the organization's stage of development, and the specific demands of the external environment. Leaders must be adept at diagnosing their context and adapting their strategies accordingly to sustain growth.

Discussion

The results of this critical literature review provide a multifaceted understanding of how strategic leadership influences megachurch growth, serving as a bridge between established organizational theories and the realities of a unique non-profit context [5, 12]. The discussion here interprets the key findings by connecting them to the theoretical framework that guided the study [10].

The primacy of visionary leadership, identified as a core theme, aligns directly with Strategic Leadership Theory (SLT) and Upper Echelons Theory (UET) [1, 6]. SLT posits that a leader's primary role is to set long-term direction and make consequential decisions, which is embodied in the finding that a compelling vision is the central mechanism for growth [1, 6, 25]. UET further explains this by suggesting that the content and delivery of this vision are profoundly shaped by the leader's personal values, experiences, and cognitive base. The documented 15-year average tenure of lead pastors [3] suggests a high degree of stability, which, through a UET lens, could imply a prolonged period during which a single leader's vision shapes the organization. This long tenure might foster deep cultural integration but could also present challenges for adaptability and succession planning, a critical issue highlighted by Organizational Growth Theory (OGT).

The finding that megachurch growth is a multifaceted phenomenon challenges simplistic, purely numerical definitions and supports a more holistic view, aligning with a balanced scorecard approach [30]. This broad definition of success, encompassing spiritual and community impact alongside attendance figures, highlights the unique nature of these non-profit entities [29]. The significant financial resources, such as the average budget of $7 million [3], create the capacity for this diverse impact, but also intensify the need for sophisticated strategic planning and performance evaluation, as identified in the results [10]. The application of corporate strategic processes—objective setting, strategy crafting, implementation, and evaluation—can be understood as a response to this complexity. This finding is illuminated by Institutional Theory, which suggests that organizations adopt practices deemed legitimate and effective within their environment to ensure survival and growth. In the contemporary U.S., data-driven, strategic management has become an institutionalized norm, and megachurches appear to be mimicking these practices from the corporate sector to manage their large-scale operations effectively [9].

The results concerning the management of culture and resources strongly support the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm. RBV conceptualizes an organization as a unique bundle of resources and argues that sustained advantage comes from leveraging those that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). The finding that pastor quality, strong community networks, and unique ministry approaches are key drivers of growth is a direct reflection of RBV. Strategic leaders in this context are not just spiritual guides but also stewards and developers of these critical, often intangible, assets. Their success depends on crafting strategies that leverage these internal strengths [6].

Finally, the influence of leadership characteristics and context confirms the propositions of Contingency Theory [2]. The finding that effectiveness depends on the fit between leadership style and the situation refutes the notion of a "one best way" to lead a megachurch. A leadership approach that works in a rapidly growing, entrepreneurial church at one stage of development (per OGT) may fail in a more mature, established institution facing different challenges. This underscores the necessity for leaders to possess high adaptive competency and the managerial discretion to adjust strategies in response to both internal and external changes, a key tenet of SLT [1, 6].

A crucial outcome of this discussion is the identification of research gaps. While the literature confirms what is already known (i.e., that strategic leadership matters), it is less clear on *how* it achieves this. There is a need for more granular research on the specific mechanisms of leadership influence on growth, the development of leadership competencies tailored to this unique context, and the long-term impacts of digital transformation on strategy and growth [2, 32]. This review synthesizes what is known, but its greater contribution may lie in highlighting these clear paths for future inquiry [6].

Conclusion

This critical literature review confirms that strategic leadership is a significant and multifaceted driver of organizational growth in U.S. megachurches [2, 6]. The study systematically synthesized a diverse body of literature to demonstrate that the influence of leadership extends beyond charismatic personality to encompass a deliberate and strategic process [1, 4, 6]. The key components of this process—formulating a compelling vision, setting clear objectives, crafting and implementing adaptive strategies, and evaluating performance—are integral to navigating the complexities of leading large, value-driven organizations [10].

The findings demonstrate that successful megachurch growth is not merely numerical, but holistic, encompassing spiritual development, ministry expansion, and community engagement [3, 30]. This growth is contingent upon leaders who can skillfully integrate established business principles within a spiritual framework, manage and leverage unique organizational resources, and adapt their strategies to fit their specific context and stage of development [9]. By framing these findings within established organizational theories, such as Strategic Leadership Theory, the Resource-Based View, and Contingency Theory, this study provides a robust conceptual model for understanding the phenomenon [6, 10].

Theoretically, this research contributes to synthesizing a fragmented field and applying established leadership theories to the unique non-profit context of megachurches [5, 11]. Practically, it offers valuable insights for leaders of megachurches and other large non-profits by outlining the documented links between strategic practices and growth outcomes. Societally, it contributes to a more informed public understanding of the organizational dynamics that fuel these influential institutions [3, 5]. Ultimately, by identifying specific gaps in the current body of research, this dissertation provides a clear direction for further scholarly inquiry into this important and evolving area of study [2, 6].

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study is a critical literature review based on previously published data and did not require ethical approval.

Acknowledgements

References

[1]. Grandy, G., 2013, An exploratory study of strategic leadership in churches. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 34(7), 616–638, https://doi.org/10.1108/lodj-08-2011-0081

[2]. Jaleha, A. A., & Machuki, V. N., 2018, Strategic Leadership and Organizational Performance: A Critical Review of Literature. *European Scientific Journal*, 14(35), 124-148, https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2018.v14n35p124

[3]. Bird, W., & Thumma, S., 2020, The Megachurch 2020 Report. *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, https://hartsem.edu/hirr/research-reports/megachurch-2020/

[4]. Andrews, A. O., 2023, Leading through Change and Growth: An Analysis of Leadership in Megachurches. *International Journal of Leadership and Change*, 11(1), 1-13.

[5]. Wellman, J. K., Jr., Corcoran, K. E., & Stockly, K., 2020, High on God: How the Megachurch is Redefining American Religion. *Oxford University Press.*

[6]. Ireland, R. D., & Hitt, M. A., 1999, Achieving and maintaining strategic competitiveness in the 21st century: The role of strategic leadership. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 13(1), 43-57, https://doi.org/10.5465/ame.1999.1567311

[7]. Robinson, A. B., 2015, Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations. *Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.*

[8]. Carter, S. C., 2017, The New Evangelicals: Expanding the Vision of the Common Good. *Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.*

[9]. Allen, D. E., 2015, The Application of Strategic Management in Nonprofit Organizations. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing*, 27(4), 378-393, https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2015.1065984

[10]. Thompson, A. A., Peteraf, M. A., Gamble, J. E., & Strickland, A. J., 2020, Crafting and executing strategy: The quest for competitive advantage: Concepts and cases. *McGraw-Hill Education.*

[11]. De Vos, A. S., Strydom, H., Fouché, C. B., & Delport, C. S. L., 2013, Research at grass roots: For the social sciences and human service professions (4th ed.). *Van Schaik Publishers.*

[12]. Snyder, H., 2019, Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333-339, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

[13]. Creswell, J. W., 2014, *Research design:* Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). *Sage Publications.*

[14]. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S., 2018, The Sage handbook of qualitative research (5th ed.). *Sage Publications.*

[15]. Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J., 2016, Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (4th ed.). *Jossey-Bass.*

[16]. Booth, A., Sutton, A., & Papaioannou, D., 2016, Systematic approaches to a successful literature review (2nd ed.). *Sage.*

[17]. Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A., 2015, Research methods for business students (7th ed.). *Pearson Education.*

[18]. Yin, R. K., 2014, Case study research: Design and methods (5th ed.). *Sage Publications.*

[19]. Fink, A., 2019, Conducting research literature reviews: From the internet to paper (5th ed.). *Sage Publications.*

[20]. Asifatu, S., 2022, Visionary Leadership and Church Growth: A Case Study of Christ Apostolic Church International, Accra, Ghana. *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology*, 4(2), 55-66.

[21]. Mwangi, M. W., Njoroge, J. G., & Kiragu, J. N., 2024. Leadership, Organizational Culture, and Church Growth in Pentecostal Churches in Nakuru County, Kenya. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 9(1), 1-16.

[22]. Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E., 2006, Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80-92, https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500107

[23]. Patton, M. Q., 2015, Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice (4th ed.). *Sage Publications*.

[24]. Anney, V. N., 2014, Ensuring the quality of the findings of qualitative research: Looking at trustworthiness criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 5(2), 272-281.

[25]. Jenssen, S. A., 2020, Vision as a Relational and Dynamic Phenomenon in a Faith-Based Organization. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 10(S7), 41-59, https://doi.org/10.18291/njwls.121516

[26]. Bauman, D. C., 2022, How to Lead When You're Not in Charge: A Model of Upward Leadership. *Journal of Management and Organization*, 28(3), 560-577, https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2020.1

[27]. Boya, B., & Chiloane-Phetla, G. E., 2022, The relevance of strategic management for non-profit organisations: A case study of selected orphanages in Gauteng province, South Africa. *Journal of Public Administration*, 57(2), 226-241.

[28]. Udoboho, P. I., 2024, Strategic Leadership Practices and Organisational Performance of Quoted Manufacturing Companies in Nigeria. *International Journal of Advanced and Multidisciplinary Social Science*, 10(1), 1-11.

[29]. Bernardes, M. E., & Ferreira, M. A., 2023, Strategies for Organizational Growth and Legitimacy: A Case Study of a Credit Cooperative. *Journal of Contemporary Administration*, 27(1), e210214, https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-7849rac2023210214.en

[30]. Boggs, D. J., & Fields, D., 2010, Exploring the practical application of a balanced scorecard in a nonprofit organization: A case study. *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 15(3), 1-17.

[31]. Awuku-Gyampoh, R., & Asare, J. K., 2019, Church Structures and Their Impact on Church Growth. A Case Study of Selected Churches in the New Juaben Municipality, Ghana. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 8(8), 213-220, https://doi.org/10.24940/ijird/2019/v8/i8/AUG19062

[32]. Hitt, M. A., Ireland, R. D., & Hoskisson, R. E., 2012, Strategic management: Competitiveness & globalization (10th ed.). *Cengage Learning*.