

THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OGBOMOSO

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION MINISTRY:

A TOOL FOR CHURCH GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

What does the education ministry have to do with numerical increase in a church? Judging from regular thinking one may answer, "Nothing, really." It is obvious enough, with regard to the other aspect of church growth (spiritual growth), that when the Sunday school class member, for instance, gets insights regularly from teachings he will advance in knowledge and maturity. Also, church folk are taught that quality (spiritual growth) should automatically lead to quantity (numerical increase); but many times it stops at teaching. There is no deliberate effort in many churches to make this knowledge a practical experience in the life of their members. Education informs us that theory without praxis leads to a lack of fulfillment. Therefore, this research was carried out to investigate how the religious education ministry leads, or contributes to numerical church growth, with materials from library sources and the experiences of different churches in Ogbomoso Conference and beyond. The sample used for the study consists of forty (40) churches. Data was collected using a self-developed questionnaire with two sections, A and B. Section B raised questions on personal data for the respondents to answer. The data collected was analyzed using the SPSS Statistics Data Editor and Processor, and conclusions were arrived at based on frequency of response to questions and cumulative percentage of response by respondents. A major discovery is that numerical increase will come through helping the church member cultivate a dynamic lifestyle of witnessing through teachings and other educational programmes of the church. The study recommended that education ministries in churches should make their programmes as outreach-oriented as possible.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that the contemporary church is complacent towards evangelism yet she desires numerical growth. In this era of overflow of revelation knowledge many church members feed fat on good spiritual food, but do not put to use what they receive from teachings, sermons and other forms of output from God's storehouse. The situation is compounded by the church's seeming indifference to this vital issue of personal witnessing. The emphasis and push from the pulpit to encourage people in this direction is at a dismal low. Thus, both the individual member and the church as a whole is paying a price; both are losing the benefits of personal witness which, for the member is a strengthened spiritual life, and for the church is more population in the church through increase in membership. Additionally, when Christians are equipped with adequate knowledge and hearts that have become burdened for souls through the constant demand made on them in church to go-make disciples, they become like Samson's three hundred foxes released into the farmland of the enemy to cause devastation by confronting and overthrowing misconceptions in the minds of men so they can come into the kingdom of God.

Numerical growth is a concern to the church because its attainment is inclusive in the mandate to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). The unsaved person of today who will become a disciple tomorrow must first be contacted through witnessing before being conscripted into God's training school of discipleship. Equally, the witness who will reach him/her must be made effective by training so that the message will be presented clearly and without ambiguity. Religious education, as has been, discussed, has a great role to play in ensuring this. This research has explored the link between church (numerical) increase and religious (or Christian) education. Elmer Towns, an authority on church growth, describes a

situation in which “Workers are diligent in evangelism, but their churches are not growing. They are not seeing souls baptized and added to the church. The reasons for nongrowth are not mystical, nor are they subjective. Reasons for nongrowth are usually discernible. Workers are probably not applying the correct principles that would bring in a greater harvest.” http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/towns_articles/3/

Correct principles for operation of a venture are often discovered through research when someone stays on a lead and makes investigations. The onus to advance the ministry committed to a church lies on that church’s leadership. This work has contributed understanding that would help to make evangelism and efforts for expansion in churches more strategic and result-oriented. As the saying goes, ‘work smarter not harder’, growth will come to churches when they learn to look inwards and discover the keys they may have neglected. The religious education ministry is one such key. Pastors and church leaders are encouraged to put to use what is shared here with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The multiple role of the religious education ministry is brought to the fore when it is aligned to the outreach-church-increase project; then its full potentials to boost the work of the church become harnessed and this leads to effectiveness.

Recommendations

The recommendations are the major concerns that this work stirs up, namely:

1. Religious education ministries in churches should cultivate an evangelistic mindset and fashion their programmes as much as possible to be outreach-oriented.
2. Sunday school class members, WMU, MMU, Adult Education programmes, all Youth-grade activities, and even the children’s ministry should be inundated with outreach-evangelism-soul winning emphasis.

3. Teachings should be structured to reflect the need to share the love and mercy of God with neighbours, colleagues at work, mates at school, relations in the family, etc.
4. With regards to evangelism Church members should be taught to “go for the kill”; that is, approach evangelism and personal witnessing with the mindset to make converts not to engage in religious disputations. As “fishers of men” they should be aware that the same principle the fisherman uses applies to them – the fisherman goes to catch fish, not to chat with the fish. However, for “soul fishing” to be a success the word of God, which is the “bait”, must be fine-tuned in the heart of the witness. He must not go to share a word he is not certain or confident about, even (and especially) with first-time hearers. This means he must be taught what to share.
5. Church folk should be taught that, though the onus of convicting and converting hearts lies with the Holy Spirit and not with the human soul-winner, the Holy Spirit passes through the soul-winner to reach another soul. If the is not positive about the word he goes to share, the “fish” will not bite the bait. Religious education has much to do in this regard.