

AN EVALUATION OF THE CHURCH LEADERS PERCEPTION OF
THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST CONVENTION CONGREGATIONAL
POLITY

NBTS
M-DIV.
Okun 1-e

AN ESSAY PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES OF THE NIGERIAN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY OGBOMOSO, NIGERIA.

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY IN THEOLOGY

BY
OKUNLOLA, JAMES OLANIYI

OGBOMOSO, OYO STATE

JUNE, 2006.

06 - 1021

ABSTRACT

In recent times there has been clamour by some members of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, that the convention should re-examine the denomination's congregational model of church government in the light of contemporary development in Christian world. In view of the above, the study was carried out to evaluate the perception of church leaders on the congregation polity of the Nigerian Baptist Convention using Akure Baptist Association in Ondo State as a case study

The study reviewed the concept of church polity, models of church government and also Baptist and Congregational Church Polity among others. A set of questionnaires was also administered on church leaders in Akure Baptist Association of Ondo Baptist Conference. Descriptive statistics of percentages, pie charts were used to analyze the information obtained from the field. Results indicated that all the church leaders were aware of congregational model of church government however, most of them do not understand the theological basis of Baptist Congregational model. All the respondents agreed that the local church authority has helped in church growth, mission and evangelistic work. Eighty percent of the respondents also stated that the process of church in conference has help minimized conflicts in churches, while 20 percent disagreed. Seventy percent of the leaders agreed that the process of church in conference was okay while 20 percent disagreed and 10 percent were undecided. Sixty percent of the respondent disagreed with the autonomy of churches in extending call to Pastor and having the power to reject such Pastors during crisis, 20 percents supported the idea while 20 percents were indifferent. Eighty percent of the respondents also asserted that local church autonomy has not created opportunity for local church leaders to be

extremely powerful in the church while 20 percent believed that leaders could easily abuse the process of local church autonomy and wreck havoc in such congregation.

The study concluded that the Nigerian Baptist Convention should device means of ensuring compliance with convention in session directives to churches as many churches flout joint decisions taken during convention in session by hiding under the disguise of church autonomy.

All the respondents asserted that congregational model of church polity has enhanced church growth through freedom to evangelize anywhere and anytime as led by the Holy Spirit.

The church leaders also said that the model has promoted accountability and stewardship which has helped to minimize conflict and promote transparency as a congregation of people of God. Most respondents believed that voting during the Church-In-Conference is biblical but members should be *made to pray to receive from God* preceding such meeting.

The church leaders all agreed that the issue of pastor taking permission from Church-In-Conference on administrative matters is in order. This they asserted will help promote peace in churches. On general administration the Convention, members stated that the General Secretary should be more empowered to take some decisions on behalf of the Convention as led by the Holy Spirit. The respondents also reported that there are some sections in the Nigerian Baptist Convention constitution that has to be re-amended. This include the need to change or restructure the present method of holding Convention-In-Session, so that it can fulfill its role as the final arbiter and authority in the life of the Nigerian Baptist Convention.

It is the opinion church members that if the church leaders are spiritually filled it would not be a problem to practice local church autonomy. Member also suggested that there is the need to review the present method of Convention – in – Session to accommodate more spiritual activities so that delegates would be spiritually fulfilled.

Conclusion

From the findings of the study, it would be necessary that pastors in the Nigerian Baptist Convention should be educated on the need to teach their member theological basis of congregational model of church polity adopted by the Baptist. This would let the church member

know that every practice has spiritual backing and they must be ready to be accountable to God. Their understanding of church autonomy will makes them apply it appropriately thus fulfilling the dream of Baptist founding fathers and God that has given the denomination enablement over the years.

This is because the model will only be workable when those who operate it, especially the leaders understand the theological basis of the model. For Church-In-Session they are saying I am acting on God's authority after consulting with him, members will think twice before voting based on emotion or in-fulfillment of lobbying carried out earlier. It was also make them know that congregational form of church government should not be equated with political democracy.

The study has also shown that leaders saw the need to re-model the Annual Convention-In-Session which is presently regarded as too unwieldy to attain the expected role its suppose to perform.

In view of the fact that the churches believed that they are absolutely free and fully autonomous, some of the directives of Convention-In-session are easily flouted. A case cited include directive that all churches without pastors and with financial capability to do so, should immediately call a pastor. This had been disregarded by many local churches under the disguise that Convention-In-Session cannot dictate to the churches.

Churches should always pray very well before choosing their leaders. This is because for Autonomy of local church to succeed, leaders must be spiritually alert otherwise it would be abused. Meetings must be conducted under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as it was done in the days of early apostles where the church will gather together, pray and seek the face of God before taking any decision. This is because the study revealed that if this is not done rather promoting church growth, congregational policy may be abused.

Recommendations

There is the need to review some sections of the Nigerian Baptist Convention constitution as it relates to member participation in decision making. While acknowledging the freedom of individuals but a situation where a member of the church would not have attended any church services or business meeting in a Quarter and he comes on the day of the church – in – Conference and would like to participate in decision making like voting should be discouraged.

The churches recognize Baptist belief in competency of individual soul, there should be discipline and the need to know spiritual implications of attending Church-In-Conference. Any member who is not spiritually prepared before the meeting has no business during the meeting.

At every convention – in – Session there should be a session devoted to teachings on theological basis of congregational polity and Baptist Faith, beliefs and Practices. Pastors should also be mandated to do the same things in their local churches. This will enhance members understanding of the basis of Baptist practice as some are members by marriage and some by conversion. If such opportunities are not created it would be difficult for them to have a thorough understanding of Baptist practice.

The present method of conducting Convention-In-Session should change to give rooms for more spiritual activities. It is suggested that, Convention-In-Session should comprise of Convention Congress and Convention Council. Convention Congress should include all delegates while Convention Council should include some specified people who during the Convention deals with all administrative matters and finally in form the Convention Congress for notification or approval. Convention Congress should deal basically with spiritual matters and ratification of recommendations. This would allow for fellowship, inspiration and encouragement to accomplish divine mission for God.

Convention-In-Session should find way of ensuring that members or churches who flout the decision jointly taken by it are flouted. There is the need to make members understand that contractual relationship still exists under the cooperative system and as such deterrent members should be disciplined.

The present unwieldy nature of the Convention – in - Session should be reviewed. This is because it is at presently deficient in some areas and not be able to fulfill its role as the final arbiter and authority.