

**The African American Baptist Pastor and Church Government:
The Myth of the Dictator**

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James Sullivan asserts that congregational government has always been the way of life in Baptist churches.¹ This is true when the context of Baptist is Anglo Southern Baptist. When the African American Baptist church—including the traditional mainline National Baptist, the Full Gospel Baptist, and the emerging African American Southern Baptist—is examined more broadly, one will find a church government that is a cultural hybrid of congregational authority and historical necessity. Although church government in both African American and Anglo Southern Baptist churches are democratic, it must be understood that “the black church has its own way of being democratic.”²

A myth exists that African American pastors exercise unlimited dictatorial power over congregations. As with many myths, there is a strand of truth on which this idea is built—in the African American Baptist church the pastor is expected to exercise a great degree of control over every facet of church life. The power exercised by the African American pastor is that authority delegated to each pastor by the congregation as it seeks to express God’s sovereign authority

¹James Sullivan, *Southern Baptist Polity at Work in a Church* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1987), 93.

²Floyd Massey and Samuel McKinney, *Church Administration in the Black Perspective* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1976), 37.

over the life of the congregation.³ The degree of control that the pastor has, however, is still subject to the will of the congregation. In this way both Anglo Southern and African American Baptist churches are congregationally governed—the difference is the extent of control.

African American Baptist Church Government

The church polity of the historic African American Baptist church is best termed as “congregational-sanctioned pastoral-government.” The position of George McCalep, an African American Southern Baptist pastor, notes that the voting of a church for a pastor represents and typifies the practice of congregational-sanctioned pastoral-government: “The only vote on a person should come when the church votes to discern the will of God in the calling of a pastor. Afterwards, other methods and procedures should be established to select leadership positions.”⁴

Since 1926, the stated polity of the National Baptist Convention—the largest African American mainline denomination—affirms the right of the local church to self-government by divine authority.⁵ Hence, African American Baptist churches practice congregational government. The extent of congregational involvement is more limited than that of the typical Anglo Southern Baptist churches. Congregational involvement in the polity of African American Baptist churches is twofold. First, the congregation decides who will be pastor. Second, the congregation decides the timing of the transfer of decision-making power from the church officers to the pastor.

The African American pastor does not truly become the pastor of the church until these two processes have occurred. “When elected and installed, he is not truly the pastor. He becomes

³Ibid., 33.

⁴George McCalep, *Faithful Over a Few Things* (Lithonia, GA: Orman Press Lithonia, 1996), 21.

the pastor as his ability becomes respected and he grows in the hearts of the people. To become pastor means that some officers release authority.”⁶

Inherent to these two things happening for the pastor in the life of the church is a concentration of power in one person. As a safeguard to prevent the transfer of authority to a person who is not worthy of the office of pastor, the African American Baptist church has established a pathway—a rite of passage—to authority through which the pastor must traverse.

Pathway to Power

For the African American pastor—especially in the first pastorate—the process of becoming the pastor may take up to ten years. During the first few years, the pastor transitions from election as pastor to becoming the pastor by accomplishing two tasks: achieving social engagement with the congregation and building a community of influence. These two processes form a pathway to power for the pastor in the church.

Social Engagement

Social engagement is a necessary component for becoming effectively indigenous to the congregation. Social engagement is the intimate involvement of the pastor with the members of the congregation (and community). Through this intimate involvement, the pastor learns and experiences the culture of the congregation, thereby identifying with them.⁷ The African American church is a social-religious organization providing program-ministries for the people of the congregation and community. Historically, church membership was the accepted way of

⁵A.M. Townsend, *The Baptist Standard Church Directory and Busy Pastor's Guide* (Nashville: Sunday School Publishing Board of the NBC USA, 1926), 26.

⁶Massey and McKinney, *Church Administration in the Black Perspective*, 35.

⁷Hozell Francis, *Church Planting in the African American Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 20-21.

establishing identity and status for African Americans when few if any alternative social structures existed through which a sense of community could be established. These limited options have changed to some degree in recent times as education and new opportunities for non-church associations have increased. The social identities in Africa-American communities are, however, still largely defined by the church. African American church-life demands that the pastor master the art of social engagement—an essential skill for building a community of influence.

Community of Influence

Black church life has always been community based, but not necessarily location specific to a neighborhood. The term now used by African Americans to describe the relation of community and neighborhood is “Da hood,” a corruption of the words “the neighborhood.” The phrase is meant to convey feelings about the place where one first obtained inclusion into a community defined by connection to a person of influence. In the Black community, churches build pastors, then pastors build communities of influence from which the church grows and ministers.

The concept of community is best understood as the influence that a pastor may exert upon all neighborhoods within five to twenty minutes driving distance. African American church members will journey almost any distance so long as they find a church led by a pastor from their own community of influence.

Ways in which the African American pastor builds a community of influence include:

- Membership in clubs and social organizations
- Political activities (ex. a campaign worker)
- Interchurch fellowship on Annual Day activities

- Serving as an advocate for a church member with police, welfare, school, and other public agencies
- Civil rights activities
- Serving on civic and organizational boards
- Operation of head start or day care centers
- Ministerial alliances
- Serving as moderator for one of the many local African American church associations (African American church associations, in keeping with the concept of community, are not related to an area, but rather to a person of influence)
- Surrogate father in households headed by single mother
- Recruiting and grooming “Sons of the House” associate ministers
- Using influence to place “Son of the House” as pastors in churches with vacant pulpits
- Family arbitrators
- Preaching revivals—there are no vocational evangelist in the African American community

The Black church as a social force in the life of the race is nothing new. The Black church tradition is deeply embedded in the politics of the African American community. Upon examination of the listed ways in which the African American pastors construct communities of influence, one will find that the role of the African American pastor of today is a continuation of the historic role assigned to them by the church and the community.

The Role and Authority of the Pastor

The accomplishment of these two tasks—social engagement and building a community of influence—demonstrates the worthiness of the pastor to receive and execute the roles and

tasks historically assigned to the black church by the black community. The Black church historian Carter G. Woodson states that the Black church has historically served many social purposes that were never required among other groups.⁸ The high pastoral control in the African American church is a necessary pairing of authority with the expected, historic role of the pastor in the African American community—to speak quickly and authoritatively concerning the needs of the local congregation and the wider community.

The accomplishment of these two tasks allows the congregation to recognize and assent to the divine authority of the African American pastor. The pastor is a prophetic minister with a prophetic message and provides leadership to the congregation through the congregational-sanctioned pastoral-government structure.⁹ The role of the African American pastor is in many ways a parallel to the role of the Old Testament prophet. The authority of the pastor is derived from the call of God and the call of the people. “When a black pastor tells someone to do something, he is not speaking for himself but for the congregation.”¹⁰

A major difference between Anglo and African-American pastors is found in the amount of accountability exerted by the congregation or a group within the congregation over the pastor. Unlike the common practice of pastoral accountability found in many Anglo congregations, a report on local church, African-American pastors revealed that only ten percent of those pastors surveyed said that there was a group in the church to which they were accountable.¹¹ The report

⁸Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (London: Duke University Press Durham, 1990), 44.

⁹Carlyle Stewart III, *African American Church Growth: 12 Principles for Prophetic Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 22-23.

¹⁰Massey and McKinney, *Church Administration in the Black Perspective*, 33

¹¹George Barna, *African Americans & Their Faith* (Oxnard, CA: The Barna Institute 1999), 74.

also showed that the older the pastor, the less authority the lay leaders of the church possessed and the less accountability there was for the pastor.

Prerogative Power

One has power—the ability to do or act—only if one has the authority and influence to bring about change or achieve a desired goal.¹² For the African American Baptist pastor, success in traversing the pathway to power results in the power to set goals and enact change in line with the preferences of the pastor. This pastoral preference is known as “prerogative power.”

Although common in many ways to all African American Baptist pastors—including the National, Full Gospel, and Southern Baptist—prerogative power is a National Baptist distinctive.

“The black church demands that the pastor lead.”¹³ Any African American Baptist pastor who cannot assert prerogative power is “considered ineffectual and weak.” The lack of prerogative power can prove fatal to the ministry of a National Baptist pastor.¹⁴ “A pastor, failing to give forceful leadership, strikes the death blow to his own program.”¹⁵ One expression of the prerogative of power for National Baptist pastors is to determine the external relationships of their churches with other local churches. In the traditional African American church, “characteristically, the preferences of the local pastor determine largely whether there will be any external affiliation or activities and how they will be expressed.”¹⁶

¹²Massey and McKinney, *Church Administration in the Black Perspective*, 33

¹³Ibid., 35.

¹⁴Ibid., 35.

¹⁵Ibid., 37.

¹⁶Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 41

National Baptist Pastors and Associational Bodies

Church associations among black Baptists in America predate associations among many Anglo Baptists. In 1834 black Baptists in Ohio formed the Providence Baptist Association. Following the lead of the Baptists of Ohio, Illinois black Baptists in 1838 formed the Wood River Baptist Association.¹⁷

The main expression of the African American Baptist church association today is found in the National Baptist Convention. The National Baptist Convention is an umbrella grouping of at least four autonomous national bodies—National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., Progressive Baptist Convention, National Missionary Baptist Convention, and the National Baptist Convention of America. Also within the structure of the National Baptist Convention, one will find local associations, district associations, and state conventions.¹⁸

Financial support of these National Baptist associational bodies typically is the payment of “representations fees.”¹⁹ Representation fees are similar to the Dues system used to support Annual Days programs in the local church. Fees are received in lieu of a system of continual, monthly percentage giving, such as the Cooperate Program of the Southern Baptist Convention. Churches quarterly “represent” to the association, which in turn “represent” (at least semi-annually) to the state convention, which in turn “represent” annually to one of the national bodies.

The National Baptist Convention understands the concept “association” to be a distinctively Baptist concept and defines the word as “the coming together of churches and

¹⁷National Baptist Convention available from <http://www.nationalbaptist.com>; Internet; accessed 30 April 2004.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Massey and McKinney, *Church Administration in the Black Perspective*, 87.

churches only, for the purpose of forwarding in mass effort the great cause of missions and Christian education.”²⁰ The motive then and now for blacks organizing themselves in associations and conventions is for fellowship and mutual support; no denominational authority can compel participation.²¹

The non-geographical sense of community and the identification with persons of influence shape the structure of African American associations. It is not unusual to find up to a dozen National Baptist local church associations and four different state and national conventions overlapping in one geographical area. National Baptist churches located within sight of each other frequently belong to different associations, state conventions, and the national bodies of the National Baptist Convention. The determination as to which associational bodies a church should unite, if any, is the prerogative of the local church pastor and is understood as an appropriate expression of congregational-sanctioned pastoral-government.

Prerogative Power and Church Association

Although all messengers represent the local church to an associational body, the pastor is the authoritative messenger.²² Not only does the pastor decide which, if any, associational bodies the church will belong, more importantly the pastor will determine the financial amount the church will “represent.” According to Sandy F. Ray, “if a black Baptist pastor told the denominational leader his congregation would give a certain amount to an objective, then it

²⁰A.M. Townsend, *The Baptist Standard Church Directory and Busy Pastor’s Guide*, 52

²¹Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 41.

²²National Baptist Convention available from <http://www.nationalbaptist.com>; Internet; accessed 30 April 2004.

would be forthcoming, but if the pastor said he had to meet with his officers, that meant the pastor was not planning to contribute.”²³

A National Baptist person of influence within an associational body (convention presidents and officers, district moderators, association moderators) can exercise a certain degree of control over an individual pastor through the benefaction system of high-status appointment to various boards and committees. Individual pastors, however, have the option of not participating in that associational body. Since the National Baptist associations are so loosely attached and local churches largely autonomous, the pastor can move the congregation’s membership with any associational body with relative ease (this is especially true when compared to congregational membership with associational bodies within the Southern Baptist Convention).²⁴

The relative ease with which the National Baptist pastor can associate the congregation has led to the dual alignment of some local black Baptist church with both a National Baptist and a predominately Anglo Southern or American Baptist Convention. Many National Baptist leaders discourage dual alignments; however, these leaders have no power to prevent these relationships. The only recourse available to dissuade dual alignments (or for that matter, any decision of a pastor) is to ostracize that local church pastor.²⁵ Since the African American Baptist pastor is granted considerable power to conduct the affairs of an autonomous church, the pastor neither needs nor seeks any permission from any external church association to associate or disassociate with any local, state, or national body.²⁶ It is the prerogative power of the pastor.

²³Massey and McKinney, *Church Administration in the Black Perspective*, 87.

²⁴Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 43.

²⁵Massey and McKinney, *Church Administration in the Black Perspective*, 88.

²⁶Lincoln, 42.

Checks and Balances

The authority of African American Baptist pastors may seem without boundaries to the outside observer if the system of checks and balances commonly practiced in the African American Baptist church is unknown. One way that the authority of the African American pastor is kept in check is the manner in which the pastor receives compensation during the first five to ten years of ministry at a local church. The formula for pay is roughly as follows: one-half from the congregation, one-fourth from interchurch fellowships, and one-fourth from the annual anniversary of the pastor. The fourth that is received from interchurch fellowships—preaching at other churches for special occasions—is related to the ability of the pastor to establish a community of influence as well as the development of preaching skills. An amount equivalent to one fourth of the salary is given to the pastor once a year at the time of the anniversary of the call of the pastor to serve the local congregation. This anniversary is called Annual Day.

The Annual Days program ministry evolved from the Dues System in which each family or adult was asked to give a fixed amount of money annually at scheduled worship events—Annual Days.²⁷ These Annual Days form the core activities of the ministry of most African American Baptist churches. The impact of these annual days upon the expectation of African Americans for what a church should look and feel like cannot be overstated. Annual Days not only include the Pastor's Anniversary, but also include the Church Anniversary, Men's Day, Women's Day, Friends and Family Day, and other designated occasions. Recently added to the Annual Days are the Martin Luther King Birthday and Black History Month Observances. Of paramount in importance to the life of the African American Baptist church, however, is the Pastor's Anniversary.

²⁷Jim Culp, Hal Hopkins, Alexander Lyman, and George McCutcheon, *Ministering Together: A Guide for Developing and Promoting the Budget in Black Churches* (SBC Stewardship Commission NSB-1).

Benjamin Baker describes the pastor's anniversary as an appreciation service for the pastor that is both a celebration and confirmation.²⁸ What is being confirmed by pocket book vote is the desire of the congregation for the pastor to remain the pastor. The anniversary of an African-American pastor is in fact a church wide referendum on the ministry of the pastor.

The authority of the African American pastor to associate or disassociate with external associational bodies is kept in check by the only body that the pastor is accountable to—the local church. To the outside observer, the exercise of prerogative power may seem to make the pastor “law.” The ultimate final authority, however, rests in the hand of the members of the congregation. The congregation can express their displeasure with a pastor by the denial of the office of the pastor through a vote of the church or the exercise the power of secession—individual or groups leaving the congregation.²⁹

Since it is often difficult to remove an African American Baptist pastor by vote of a church, secession is more the norm used by the church to curb the prerogative power of the pastor. Unlike Anglo Baptist churches, secessions or “splits” within National Baptist churches are rarely done over doctrinal issues.³⁰ The patterns of naming churches that result from splits reveal the purpose of those splits—Hope Baptist, New Hope Baptist, Greater Hope Baptist, Greater New Hope Baptist, Greater Hope Baptist #2. This pattern of naming signals to the community that there is no change in basic doctrine, style of worship, or program ministries; the change is in leadership and “followship.” Church splits can occur in which the pastor either stays at the church while a group leaves and establishes a new church, or the pastor leaves the church

²⁸Benjamin Baker, *Special Occasions in the Black Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press 1989), 93.

²⁹Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 42.

³⁰The advent of the Full Gospel Baptist Churches, splits from National Baptist churches, during the 1980's were rare splits over doctrine issues.

with a following of members—a change in fellowship—and establishes a new church where members can readily accept the prerogative power of the pastor.

Church splits provide members of local National Baptist congregations with an effective way to check the prerogative power of the pastor; one must have and keep sheep to be a Shepard. A church split is a church wide referendum on the ministry of the pastor by which the members vote with their feet.

The African American church expects strong, decisive leadership from the pastor. All actions and decisions made by other leaders are subject to the review and veto of the pastor. No meetings, actions, or discussions are allowed without first obtaining the permission of the pastor. This type pastoral authority, however, is far from dictatorial; the congregation sanctions the authority.³¹ “The right to lead must be earned and unless properly used, can be taken away.”³²

Summary

African American Baptist churches are congregationally governed. The level of pastoral control in the African American church is a necessary pairing of authority with the expected historic role of the pastor. The authority of the African American pastor may seem without boundaries or parameters to an outside observer if the system of checks and balances is unknown. The congregation maintains control over the authority of the African American pastor through the method of compensation, an annual referendum on the pastor’s ministry, a change in leadership, and or a change in fellowship.

³¹Massey and McKinney, *Church Administration in the Black Perspective*, 33-37.

³²*Ibid.*, 35.