

**BAPTIST LEADERSHIP:
DEMOCRACY, KAKISTOCRACY OR
ADHOCRACY?¹**

*Dr. SB Pierce
University of Pretoria
Pretoria*

ABSTRACT

A relationship based approach of leadership theory known as Leader-Member Exchange provides a tool to understand the perceived tendency of Baptist pastors to digress from traditional servant models of leadership toward a “great man theory” (Rost 1993) or “heroic leadership” (Burns 1975) which has led to member dissatisfaction and conflict in some churches. This leadership praxis tends to exclude the majority of Baptist members from leadership and places such leadership over and above them. Resulting in compliance, conformity and disempowerment.

The objectives of the research were to propose a new hypothesis and definition of Baptist leadership based on the work of Uhl-Bien and Rost. The hermeneutical methodology involved a method of continuous reflective interaction between theory, literature and empirical results. The data were collected from six Baptist churches in both South Africa and the USA by means of an extensive questionnaire which explored the perceptions of Baptist church members toward their leadership in general and their pastor as the leader in particular.

The results of the research demonstrated that in situations where there were higher levels of LMX, positive outcomes were noted, particularly in the freedom to exercise authority and decision making.

¹ This article is in part based on a doctoral thesis submitted in the Dept of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria. Prof Cas Vos was the promoter and Prof Hennie Pieterse the co-promoter.

Baptist church structure has been called “congregational” for centuries, and the leadership paradigm has been referred to commonly as “servant leadership”. However, history and experience may have parted ways, suggesting that, with regard to leadership, many Baptist pastors struggle in apophatic darkness, by simply stating what Baptist leadership is NOT: Presbyterian, monarchical or some other paradigm. Perhaps it could be referred to as “management by design”.

Three of the many options for church structure found in Baptist praxis were studied and it is discussed how LMX theory may assist in the evaluation of leadership in the local church within those particular paradigms.

1 IS BAPTIST CHURCH GOVERNMENT DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is the fabric into which the Baptist church is woven. The very warp and woof of Baptist government has become associated with democratic government and practice, particularly in the USA, but I must point out the inadequacy of democracy to describe the Baptist ecclesiological structure. Hence, to answer the above question, in a word, “No!”

The word “government” unfortunately associates the Church with unfortunate political practices like scandals, bureaucratic bungling and particularly adversarial politics; a scenario all too familiar to present day Baptists.

I also do not think that the holding of office in a Church was ever supposed to be the result of a Church vote. It should rather be the result of the gift of leadership and the calling of God upon a person, and then the recognition of that calling and gift by the Church, not so much in a formal sense, but in a sense that the “people of God” are “people of faith” – the gift of leadership should be a matter of faith and consensus.

Nothing in principle should impede the church in performing the exercise of taking and adapting democratic principles of governance, which it may transform to fit its own theological self-understanding, and as such, it is important for Baptists that every member should

have the opportunity to participate in the governance of the Church (participative democracy).

Furthermore, the Baptist community has always adopted an electoral method as a fundamental process of establishing leadership and decision making, albeit with varying fortunes.

The literature points out that from the earliest times there were various forms of church community structures (Swidler 1982:230); from the very charismatic Pauline community at Corinth to the more Presbyterian, ordered community at Jerusalem. Through a lengthy development, the mono-episcopal structure gradually evolved and slowly spread, until by the end of the second century it was generally accepted and practiced.

However, the insistence that one particular structure and leadership paradigm is more biblical than others must be seen in the light of the extremely divergent praxis noted in Baptist churches all over the world. The principle of autonomy of the local church has led individual churches to adopt a multiplicity of models.

One argument for democracy is that the New Testament proclaims that all socio-religious inequalities are abolished in Jesus Christ, which makes Jesus' followers radically equal in the power of the Holy Spirit. This leads many Baptists to believe that the Church should operate on democratic principles. However, with the sovereign outpouring of gifts from the Father God, it becomes obvious that Christians are radically unequal; with some possessing greater gifts than others.

But it is the negative aspects and associations with democracy that can cause harm to the church, not the least of which is the development of adversarial democracy, which Tudyka (quoted in Urresti 1970:9) calls "competitive democracy", seen for example in the USA, which puts the rights of the collective organisation over the rights of the individual, for instance as with party democracy. Add to this the "militant democracy" we are now seeing in Zimbabwe, which cause the most harm.

Democracy is ingrained in many of us from an early age. Some of our earliest childhood experiences are about the election of representatives in school and government.

When disagreements are encountered in such places a vote is taken and the majority rules. This concept of electoral representation and majority rule and "one man, one vote" is defined and explained as democracy.

The adversarial democratic paradigm assumes that people's interests are always in conflict, and thus it is nearly always militant.

It is naive to assume that in a Church voting situation, those in the congregation who supported a losing proposition automatically assume it is God's will. More often than not a lost vote leads to polarisation and further antagonism.

So much of Baptist church administrative life follows Roberts' Rules of order, because of humankind's inherent inclination toward conflict, and the need for rules to keep administration and tempers on an even keel.

During the research time frame in church BUSA, after a potentially schismatic church meeting, lawyers needed to be consulted to render opinions on minutiae of procedure, church meetings were arenas of conflict, and there was simply no thought of seeking harmony and fellowship. Adversarial politics was seen and heard in the hallways and in the Sunday school classrooms. Members' votes were elicited through conversation, email, and focus groups. Groups of people stood arm in arm in solidarity with one point of view at meetings.

Dale Dunlap (quoted in Urresti 1970:53) says that democracy in the local Church or denomination can lead to further problems of excessive individualism, the "tyranny of the 51%", and the "oligarchy of the elite".

In such a scenario, LMX provides a key role in interpreting the relevance of "in group", "out group" dynamics. The research highlighted the tendency for the "in group" in Church P2SA to know more facts, have more information, be more positively mobilised, against coherence and cohesion among those in the "out group" who thought "something was wrong", but could not identify the source of their malcontent.

The leadership paradigm in BUSA was that of a pastoral "team" which, through a seven year process of leadership exchange and developed relationships with key people, became the "in group". Voting was strictly on "in group/out group" lines, but church governance was a microcosm of the politicking commonly found in US governance. It was relevant to note that in terms of relational exchanges between leaders and followers, tenure was a very important factor.

Pastoral tenure is an important aspect in LMX. In the literature, the first stage of the life cycle of exchange relationships, which Uhl-Bien and Graen (1995) call the *relationship building* phase, a

stranger may be introduced to the group, the task of the group is one of “role-finding”. In other words, where does this person fit into the larger picture, particularly in terms of the adversarial politics and value system congruence? If no significant and immediate “exchange” is offered, the tendency of the group is to defer further exchanges. Exchanges during this phase are a type of “cash and carry”, where the offer of an “in group” relationship is reciprocated by the offer of support, for example by means of the promise of a much valued vote.

The different stages are noted in the diagram on the next page: Typically Southern Baptist Churches in the USA follow a corporate paradigm of leadership and may employ a pastor who is viewed as a “Chief Religious Officer” and thus members become the “shareholders”.

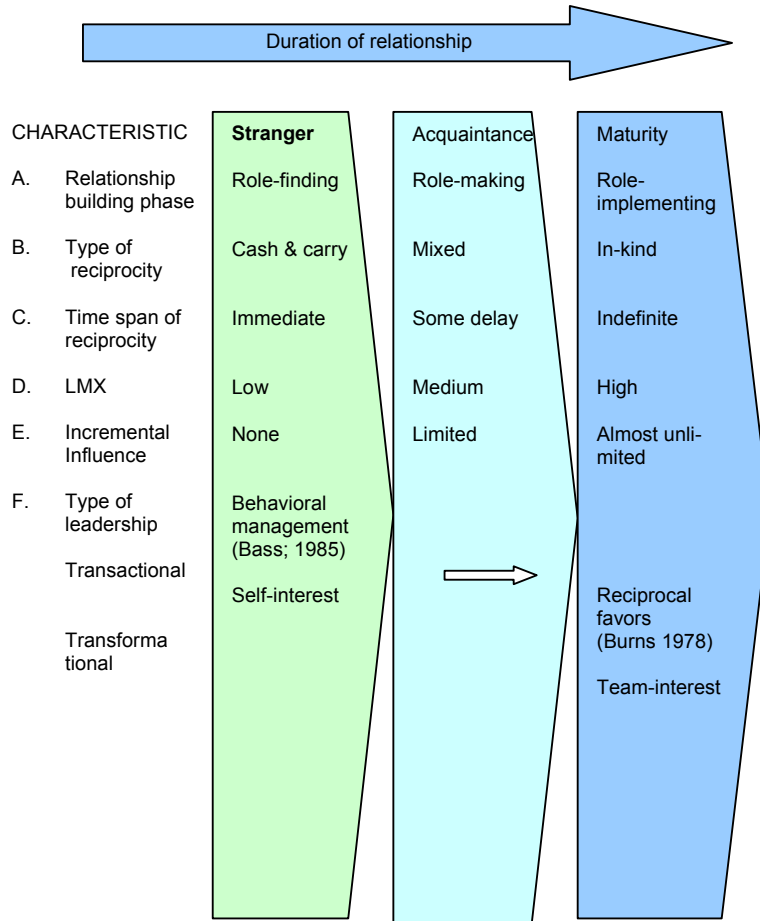
In this paradigm, the biblical metaphors of the “Body”, the “Vine”, the “Bride and Groom” are lost somewhere in a world of managerial bureaucracy, where the members of the church are seen as resources, tools or cogs in a machine. The success criteria for this type of organisation are “bottom line” figures of conversions and baptisms and are evidence of God’s blessing.

In this corporate scenario, the tasks of the pastor include strategic planning, vision casting, management of staff, financial planning, conflict resolution, programming, fund raising, and facility management. Elder boards on which I have served often consist of white-collar corporate minded individuals, whose concern is “net gain”, “bottom line” and “consumer satisfaction”. It is not difficult to see how this can be easily transferred to the mind-set of followers.

Turning to Christian literature may not help either. The many facets of leadership literature include:

- The traits of personal and or interpersonal qualities of leaders (in contrast to followers) and how leaders are selected.
- The skill sets of leaders, and the training of leaders.
- An examination of the situations that elicit leadership responses; and the specific tasks a leader must master in order to lead a congregation.
- The ability to execute tasks or to have the expertise to solve problems.

The life span of leadership relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995)



The problem with leadership literature, however, is the failure to understand that the congregational leadership paradigm is rooted in relationships. Firstly between individuals and their Saviour (as in the Baptist principle of regenerate Church membership) and then in relationships between leaders and followers, and a study of the pastor as “heroic leader”, would give a skewed understanding of leadership, which is borne out in Rost’s (1993) work.

In the democratic church heroic leadership can be harmful to followership as they become increasingly dependent on the gifts and personality of the leader. By almost deifying church leaders we affirm that they are “special” and over and above everyone else.

It feels good to be treated as an expert who is all wise and receive mass affirmation from followers, but the euphoric feelings of celebrity status and follower adulation may soon disappear if they do not live up to follower’s perceptions.

Furthermore in the democratic paradigm, natural leadership is not encouraged to develop. In the research it was noted that in churches with higher levels of LMX contrary opinions were not seen as a threat.

2 IS BAPTIST CHURCH GOVERNMENT KAKISTOCRACY?

Relevant to the research was the question of what transpires in the local church when leaders are forcibly removed from office?

Pierce (1998) addresses the matter of “forced termination” of pastors, and refers to a study in the USA (1998:18) which details the principal reasons for pastoral termination as lack of communication, moral problems, performance problems and style of leadership as the top four, making up nearly 50 per cent of the total reasons for termination. During the period of this research it was documented that the average tenure of pastors of all denominations in the USA was nine months (Pierce 1998:26).

No recent research in South Africa has been undertaken as to the reasons for pastoral vacancies, and terminations, but I argue for the lack of understanding of leadership as a relationship as a primary source of dissatisfaction and resignation.

Leadership is rooted in relationships; first of all a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and secondly as a relationship between those called to lead, and those called to follow.

The tragedy is that in some churches, when leadership is removed (“terminated” being a more common practice in the USA), the ensuing leadership vacuum is sometimes filled by the least able. A neologism has been coined by the website Wikipedia, (although there are questions about the scholarship, I find it appropriate for my work) called “kakistocracy” (from the Greek work “kakos” = bad) which refers to a situation in which leadership is exercised by the worst possible or least qualified people.

The example in P2USA may be characteristic of this type of leadership. After a decision by the elder board met with disapproval, people shouted out during prayer times and told the person praying to “shut up”. The internet was used to insult members, some of whom were physically threatened by the new leadership. Secret meetings were held, and the church became “ungovernable”. People’s own agendas came to the front, which led to a major split in the church.

It is interesting to note that some Baptist churches have a long history of “pastor abuse”, short tenure, termination and bad leadership.

From my 30 years experience in the pastorate, I have observed that in the “interregnum”, kakistocracy seems to empower poor leadership practice and ensure that the subsequent pastoral incumbent will receive the same treatment.

In the research, the timing did not fit the soon to be unfolded scenario in church P2USA, but the data did reveal a hesitancy on the part of respondents to give personal perceptions to many of the questions regarding the praxis of leadership, because of the expectations of later repercussions.

3 IS BAPTIST CHURCH GOVERNMENT ADHOCRACY?

Adhocracy is a structural system that breaks away from the traditional bureaucracy associated with church governance by not holding to formal rules and regulations. It has no standardised procedures for dealing with surfacing problems; it is adaptive and creative, focusing on the entrepreneurial skills of all participants.

The one negative challenge that adhocracy presents is that it provides a forum for greater occurrences for personal conflict of opinions because it encourages participation in leadership at every level.

The term “adhocracy” was introduced by Toffler in his famous *Future shock* in 1970, but was further developed by Henry Mintzberg (1979). His taxonomy included two basic forms, namely *operating adhocracy* and *administrative adhocracy*.

Adhocracy focuses on innovation and connectedness, and not the speciality of one “professional” to lead the organisation. This fits into the biblical paradigm of the church as the functioning body, where every part is equally important.

In my personal definition of leadership, following in the tradition of Rost, “leadership is a reciprocal Christ-like influence relationship between elders and members whose intention is real change in their furtherance of God’s Kingdom.” Influence that exchange relationships between leaders and followers are of the utmost importance, and effective influencing and understanding springs largely from healthy relationships among the members of both groups.

Literature research demonstrates that legitimisation is given and taken away as part of dynamic exchange processes. Failure to meet the terms of the exchange means running the risk of losing legitimacy.

The research indicated that indeed members do have perceptions about their leadership, whether that is a person (the Pastor) a group (the elders) or a team (pastoral team). The perceptions are influenced positively when the leadership makes an effort in the relationship. “Effort” includes such things as conversations, pastoral and personal visits, spending time with people.

There was a noticeable tendency in the research to view leadership from a “great man” or even “charismatic leadership” perspective, and predominantly there is a transformational paradigm in place in local Baptist churches, where the pastor/s are seen as those who cast the vision, and the members are those who need to be uplifted.

However the breadth of response, even in this smaller population, leads me to conclude that leadership is far more complex than many Baptists would admit, and cannot fit into the Newtonian cause and effect analysis, and would better be described in terms of “quantum leadership”, which can be analysed by means of LMX theory.

Another useful perspective on quantum leadership is provided by Fairholm (1998) in describing leadership “mindsets”. He suggests that five distinct ways of conceptualising (and enacting) leadership, in which the first three represent the transformational paradigm, while the latter two represent quantum thinking:

- Leadership as a science of management – Emphasis is placed on efficiency (the best ways) and effectiveness (productivity).
- Leadership as excellence management – The focus is on systematically striving for improvements in the quality of the organisation’s people, processes, and products.
- Leadership as values-displacement activities – Goal achievement is pursued through activities aimed at aligning members’ values and visions with those of the organisation.
- Leadership as building a culture of trust – The focus is on establishing and maintaining an ethos of trust, based on shared values and an ethic of respect and equal worth.
- Whole-soul or spiritual leadership – The focus is on fostering members’ continuous growth, improvement, self-awareness, and self-leadership by accommodating not only their professional selves but also their private selves; working with the spirit (the soul, the heart, or the character) of followers at the emotional, value, intellectual, and technical levels.

The sense of building a culture of trust featured significantly in the data from the research, and most notably in church PSA.

In the research, trust was the value that Baptist people held the most “dearly”, and it had positive outcomes in terms of LMX theory and the legitimation of leadership who had taken the time to focus on relationships in their ministry.

In church PSA, I gained a sense (and the data confirmed that) of healthy support for their pastor and elders and a deep understanding of his frustrations and joys in the ministry. The data supported my casual observations during the actual research, with the quality of responses from this church. The personal comments in particular reflected a maturity and insight into leadership in terms of leader-member exchanges. Members in this church knew what was happening in the church, in personal conversation with them; they had opinions on important matters that not only affected the local church, but the whole denomination as well.

It is my considered opinion that the people who comprise the Body of Christ in this church have demonstrated a higher level of LMX than for example church P2SA, where there were undertones

of negativity and a sense of dark tension between the leadership and the members.

Analysis of some of the data indicated that when members of the dyad put in an effort in their relationship, there was a direct correlation to trust, a positive value and indication of higher levels of LMX, with members being included in decision making and enjoying the confidence of the leadership. Furthermore when the leadership stays in touch with the people through communication, making an effort or whatever means, there is a heightened sense of accountability between members of the leader-follower dyad.

Baptist church members are continually evaluating the leadership in the church, and when poor leadership is perceived, there is a statistically verifiable loss of confidence in the wisdom, experience and judgment in the leadership. Thus we may be able to conclude that the perception of leadership authority on the part of Baptist church members should not be studied in terms of the Weberian schema, of bureaucracy and sources of authority, but rather in the exploration of a new paradigm which focuses on relationships, namely that of LMX theory.

This is particularly true of LMX relationships in structures that have voluntary membership.

Leadership is not just found in the actions, personality and traits of pastors, because they may not be the most influential persons in the church. Take the example of Lech Walesa or the Ayatollah Khomeini, before they took office.

Heifetz (1994:17) correctly states: "Leaders not only influence followers, but are under their influence as well."

An understanding of exchange theory of leadership is also important to the Baptist paradigm of leadership, in the sense that one of the most fundamental axioms of social behaviour is found in the axiom "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours". When a Baptist leader demonstrates an understanding, or belief or acceptance in the value system of a follower, it will result in the enlargement of their "zone of influence", particularly as they relate to the values of trust, truth and honesty, which the research demonstrates are the most highly valued among Baptist believers.

The research also shows the high value that followers place on the gift of preaching and using the Word of God. A fine example of this exchange is found in the way in which South African Baptists have admired the life, ministry, and especially the teaching of the

late Dr Rex Mathie. Dr Mathie was revered as one of the greatest expositors of Scripture that has ever served churches in the Baptist Union of Southern Africa. His giftedness in preaching and teaching and mentoring your pastors earned him the respect (*sic* legitimisation) of the whole denomination. His counsel was sought on every matter. The reciprocation was one of gratitude and loyalty and not through legalistic obligation.

In the research, in Church BUSA there was a clear delineation between the “in group” represented by the pastoral staff and few selected church members, who, interestingly were younger in chronological age and had shorter tenure in the church; and the “out group” represented mostly (but not solely) by the older (60+) age group who had longer tenure in the church, but whose opinion was less and less solicited. It was clearly evident that the pastors sought an individualised relationship with the “in group”, to the extent that they went on holiday together, played golf and met socially outside the Church.

Using LMX theory, one recognises that there is no such thing as consistent behaviour between leader/followers relationships, and that greater support is given to “in group” members by the leadership. Furthermore, “in group” members are more dependable, understand the vision of the church, work harder, and display more satisfaction than the “out group”. In these positive dyads the result is mutual trust, respect, and a greater degree of reciprocal influence.

In the research, it was consistently reported that the “out group” received less information, were given fewer important tasks to do in the church, and had a more formal relationship with the pastor. These criteria have commonality with Drury’s (2004) understanding of “out group” dynamics. In this church, the pastor had adjusted to the expectations of the “in group” of followers, and it was primarily from this group that his legitimisation emerged.

As early as the 1950s, Thibault and Kelley (1959) viewed leadership as an exchange relation in which the followers surrendered some of their status and autonomy in return for the services of a leader in maintaining goal direction and unity in action for the group. In other words, the leader gains legitimisation, but pays for it by assuming a heavier load of responsibility and interactional stress.

In BUSA I was able to observe this in the course of completing the research. The church leadership had developed a “laager mentality”, and sought advice and support from a selective group, mostly

defined by age. There was a strong sense of polarisation in the church, and a clear sense of positive affection by the in group and a sense of frustration and unhappiness on the part of the out group.

4 CONCLUSION

The definitive environment for any exchange between leaders and followers has to be the ecclesiastical leadership paradigm in which leadership takes place.

If leadership is based on the corporate, “profit and loss” model, and if the church is growing (profit), and the people are happy (customer satisfaction), then the pastor is rewarded, he/she stands in high favour with the people, the zone of influence is extended, and legitimisation is powerful. However if attendance is declining and people are dissatisfied, pastors are criticised and possibly terminated.

Romberger points out (1999:10) that in the corporate paradigm of leadership personnel evaluations often fail to incorporate Christ-like qualities and character in their assessment.

If the Church has a servant leadership/followership paradigm satisfaction will be determined by different criteria, and particularly in Baptist Churches where preaching is highly prized, it will have close connection to follower satisfaction.

In the three churches researched in the USA, the sense of the church operating as a business appeared strongly, with an emphasis on numbers and dollars as indications of success, and tied to pastoral legitimation. The focus was placed on the pastor as the source of information about current church trends, latest programs and “what will work and what won’t”. There was a strong indication of professionalisation and management of church resources, with preaching the Word a distant second.

The assumption, I believe, among many pastors today is that new life in a church can be created only when people shed their suits, don golf shirts and trendy trousers, and think and act like the most passionate entrepreneurs. The problem is, they rarely understand when it makes sense to do those things – or how to do them. Mark Maletz and Nitin Nohria (2001) conducted a unique research project that attempted to answer those questions.

Their project focused on “whitespace leadership” (a metaphor borrowed from the printing industry that refers to the space on a page not occupied by the printed letters) and which they adapted to the

large but mostly unoccupied territory in the life of every organisation (*sic* Church) where rules are vague, authority is fuzzy, budgets are nonexistent, and strategy is unclear – and where entrepreneurial activity that helps reinvent and renew an organisation most often takes place.

This was brilliantly demonstrated in the research in church BUSA, where a small but vocal part of the population sought to hold on to traditional values, but the larger and younger majority (by far) wanted more contemporary worship and innovative ideas in preaching. The pastor actually did dress trendier, used entrepreneurial ideas in worship and preaching, and the result has been a dramatic growth in the church.

Maletz and Nohria shadowed entrepreneurial managers operating in the whitespace and met with top managers about their efforts to oversee whitespace activities. Using examples from the financial services, computer, and e-commerce industries, the authors explain when it's imperative to operate in the whitespace -- and when it's wiser to stay in the traditional blackspace.

Even with the best trained Bible expositor as pastor, and the godliest men and women as deacons or elders, and every good intention to realise the purposes of the church as outlined in the Scriptures, unless there is a shift from central control of ministry committees by the few called to leadership; toward the people themselves given the opportunity to use their God given gifts in leadership, the Church may languish in mediocrity. The inclusion of followers in the process of implementing real change and the establishment of mutual purposes is essential to healthy leadership practice in that it opens a whole new arena of entrepreneurial opportunity.

Heifetz (1994:183) points out that there is a scarcity of leadership with people in authority, and this is true especially when leadership is not veified in the person of a leader, their traits and giftedness. This statement is borne out in real life when one continually hears of churches engaged in “power struggles” which involves a win-lose mentality.

I believe that leadership is also exercised by people without authority. However, such people, often called “entrepreneurs” (Heifetz) in the literature are often perceived as a threat to the vision of the church, or mavericks, troublemakers by those in pastoral authority, mostly as a result of our perception that we cannot have leadership without authority.

The question remains: Can we have leadership “from the foot of the table”, from “outside the in group”. Gandhi said a resounding “Yes!” So did Martin Luther King Jr and others whose formal authority was within a particular group of people, but whose entrepreneurial leadership extended across formal and informal boundaries.

The question is, what sort of people does the followership of Baptist churches comprise? As has previously been mentioned, the membership of the Baptist church is restricted to those who have a clear testimony to having been regenerated by the Spirit, and usually are willing to testify to this experience by means of believers’ baptism. Some churches hold rigorous interview programs so that “meaningful membership” is implemented. New members are instructed in how things work, the vision of the church, and the responsibilities of membership and where they can fit into the programs of the church. But I know of no situation where a church instructs new members in the responsibility of their role as leaders. Thus they miss the opportunity of assimilating potential new leaders because of the restrictions of authority. Many pastors fail to see that members are *ipso facto* leaders in some aspect of their lives, in their homes, school, business or sport, and the insights and experience they bring to the table are invaluable.

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