Zambia: Are Youths Splitting Churches?

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By Charles Simungwa, Times of Zambia, 3 June 2015

It is something of a paradox that Zambia, declared a Christian Nation more than two decades ago, is witnessing rising fragmentation in many churches. Like a festering wound, congregations across the various denominations in the country are falling apart, driven in large part by boisterous youth groups that seem not to flinch at the notion of "standing up" to the church leadership. The whirlpool is becoming almost unstoppable, as cracks open up in many congregations that are steeped in disagreements over a number of issues, chiefly finances and terms of office. The very rock upon which Christianity is supposed to rest is crumbling, quite fast, and the possibility that the divisions will continue is high.

The declaration was accorded constitutional status after it was included in the preamble in 1996. The growing discord in the Church generally, therefore, lends support to such protestations, and it is likely to drive away a good number of the flock if nothing is done to arrest the situation.

It is a matter that calls for urgent attention of leaders in all the three mother church bodies - the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia, Council of Churches in Zambia, and the Zambia Episcopal Conference. At first, it was the Pentecostal churches that suffered the indignity of divisions which mostly led to breakaway congregations, but the segment referred to as traditional churches has not been spared in recent years.

Open dissensions have claimed the latest victim in the form of United Church of Zambia (UCZ) in a number of congregations across the country, where some congregants, mainly the youth wings, profer wide-ranging charges against their ministers. The legitimacy of some claims is questionable, but there is need for careful examination of the sources of these conflicts, particularly by the highest church organ, the synod.

The differences in UCZ follow on the heels of wrangles in the Anglican Church, which has been wobbling for a number of years, as protests that some overseers have exceeded their term limits in some congregations and accusations of financial impropriety mount. More recently, some members of the Ndola branch of the Anglican Church were excommunicated after they were accused of fanning the onslaught on the church leadership.

The Roman Catholic Church faced a near fracture in 2007 when some disaffected priests broke away to form the Movement for Married Priests Now- Zambia Chapter. Luckily for the church, there was no major rupture as the agitation by the former priests who had disengaged themselves from the vows of celibacy fizzled out soon after.

The Baptist Church has in recent times similarly been in the limelight, albeit for wrong reasons which have introduced gulfs among the flock. But there are arguments in some congregations that it is not only the youths who are at the centre of this uprising. Some so-called founder members, who regard newcomers as intruders and, with gusto, seek to control new pastors - or reverends - are standing at the eye of the storm.

Interestingly, some of them are the ones who seem to have 'overstayed' with old ideas and are resisting the fact that the psychology of church management has changed over the years. One would expect such typically sleazy conduct to arise in churches that revolve around individuals, but it has spread to long-established denominations with a countrywide reach.

The discernible qualification appears to be how long one has lived in an area to claim ownership of a congregation. It has been fashionable for some old members to oppose fresh ideas and always refer to "when we started this congregation" in order to defend their positions, however outlandish. Admittedly, some church leaders have become overbearing, at times even keeping the church executive...
at arm’s length. It could be called a test of the power scale between the pastor and elders, most times with devastating results.

Some commentators have too often said that leadership positions within the church are similar to the job of chief executive officer within a major corporation. There are budgets to balance, people to manage and resources to allocate. In many ways, the church is an organisation similar to most businesses, and members could fail to agree on certain issues.

However, to escalate the differences to the levels now being witnessed has been a depressing experience for genuine congregants seeking salvation. In churches that have been bickering, a frightening trend has emerged in which the Sunday services are targeted as a way to attract the attention of people outside of the congregation.

The new practice has been for the marauding forces to shut the doors (at times even windows) with whatever objects they have the first thing on a Sunday morning. By the time worshippers arrive for the service, the message will have been delivered even without placards: there is trouble here, and no-one is allowed to enter this, or our, building. The congregants who lack patience find a perfect opportunity to migrate to other churches, hence fuelling the bothersome factions.

A point of note is that, as long as foul attitudes are not curtailed, such feuding is unlikely to end even if a new pastor were to be brought to a split congregation. Not surprisingly, the growing commotions have led to the multiplicity of churches in Zambia, and given birth to all manner of priests some of whom are involved in endless scandals, including adultery and financial mismanagement.

Some people have observed that the rise of many churches, with curious names, at any space, including near taverns and in garages, is evidence that Zambia has been invaded by false prophets.

Contrary to claims that the numerous churches in the country represent spiritual growth, factionalism has markedly become the bane of many Christians, and it is stifling development in the faith.

Whether or not it is the youths who have turned into high-risk members, and driving the confusion, is a matter for individual congregations to decide, and the right decisions made before the Christian Nation tag is further desecrated.