

**The Perceived Leadership Crisis Within the Baptist Church:
An Exploratory Empirical Investigation of Selected Churches in
Memphis, Tennessee**

by

Brodie I. Johnson

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Boca Raton, Florida
USA • 2007

ISBN: 1-58112-378-7
13-ISBN: 978-1-58112-378-4

THE PERCEIVED LEADERSHIP CRISIS WITHIN THE BAPTIST CHURCH: AN
EXPLORATORY EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF SELECTED CHURCHES IN
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

by

Brodie Johnson

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Capella University

March 2007

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate church congregants' ratings of church deacons' leadership skills utilizing the MLQ instrument and compare those ratings among 4 selected churches in Memphis, Tennessee. Because the church has experienced a rapid rate of growth in its membership and has been focused on dealing with those congregation-wide *growing pains*, it has neglected to provide the support to the deacons, which is necessary for their development. The problem related to rapid growth has resulted in empirical and anecdotal statements by various congregants that church leadership is lacking, particularly in regard to crisis management. In order to investigate whether these perceptions of the church leadership issues are valid, 50 congregants from 4 selected churches were asked to complete the MLQ survey in order to assess deacon leadership skills. The results of this study results indicated that church congregants from all 4 selected churches had generally low average ratings of transformational leadership related questions and subscales as applied to church deacons. There were significant differences in the ratings between the selected churches in support of the study hypotheses. Implications and recommendations are detailed in chapter 5.

Acknowledgments

An undertaking such as a dissertation is not completed without the support of many people. My first debt of gratitude must go to my advisor, Dr. Thomas Driver. He patiently provided the vision, encouragement and advice necessary for me to proceed through the doctoral program and complete my dissertation.

Special thanks to my committee, Dr. Katherine Dew and Dr. Randolph-Meade Walker for their support, guidance, encouragement and helpful suggestions.

Words cannot express to the selected churches, the pastors and congregation for assistance with the surveys as well as those that administered the surveys. Without their help this dissertation would not have been possible.

There are many challenges in life. Some, such as this dissertation, you choose for yourself, others are mysteriously thrust upon you. I want to acknowledge my wife Delores for her love, support, encouragement and understanding in dealing with all the challenges I have faced on this journey. Nothing in a simple paragraph can express the love I have for her.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background of Study and Overview

While church-related research has increased in recent years, particularly with the expansion of university-based theology research centers such as Duke University's Pulpit and Pew Center¹, the church and its related social and spiritual phenomena remain largely understudied among social scientists (Sales & Tobin, 1995). Researchers interested in church-related topics, particularly those who seek to study subjects related to organizational and relational matters within individual churches, often meet resistance in the development and the execution of their investigations; such resistance comes both from colleagues who consider church-related research either too difficult to conduct or irrelevant to social science research agendas, and from church members themselves, who question researchers' motives and intentions (Sales & Tobin, 1995). Initiating a course of study in this particular field, then, is a challenging task. There are limited models for research about and within churches when compared to other institutions, and the interest in such subjects is largely concentrated within particular university centers. Those scholars who are interested in developing a body of church-related research are still, for the most part, in the early stages of their work; for this reason, they do not have an established canon of research material for the newer researcher to draw from in preparation for his or her work.

¹ See <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/research.html>.

Despite these obstacles, the author remains deeply committed to promoting models for church-related scholarship. Personal interest by the author stems from his own role in the founding and leadership of the Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, combined with his identity as a doctoral student; these two aspects of self combined in such a way that they motivated him to construct and then conduct research that would not only generate data about certain phenomena in this church, but could also be applied in the church setting in order to assess leadership qualities among deacons. Furthermore, it was the researcher's goal to construct a new research model that could, perhaps, be used by future investigators who wish to study similar phenomena in other church settings. These, then, are the motivations and intentions of the study that is presented here.

Statement of Problem

The particular focus of this study is leadership as it is demonstrated by the deacons of selected National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. churches in the Memphis, Tennessee area. The author's personal experiences as the founder and pastor of a Baptist church have suggested that leadership among pastors and deacons is an issue deserving of research and practice attention. Conversations with other pastors in the area support the author's observation. Nationwide, the National Baptist Convention has nearly 5 million members (The National Baptist Convention, 2007). However, National Baptist Convention President William Shaw (2004) indicated that church growth was largely thwarted by ineffective leadership. Consequently, comprehensive strategic planning, governance, and program implementation to strengthen church leadership were posited in the 2004 church plan for growth.

In the specific case of the author's church, Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church, deacons have had difficulty developing leadership skills that can help them negotiate the demands of their position in the church. Because the church has experienced a rapid rate of growth in its membership and has been focused on dealing with those congregation-wide *growing pains*, it has neglected to provide the support to the deacons that is necessary for their development. Initially, the author thought that this was a challenge unique to his own church; however, after speaking at length about this subject with local pastors, he learned that most pastors feel their churches are in a state of mild crisis due to ambiguous or unskilled leadership among deacons. The problem, then, is whether pastors' perceptions of the leadership issues in their churches are accurate, and whether they can be verified by a valid and reliable instrument.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

Research Question 1: What are the ratings of Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) questions representative of transformational leadership qualities for deacons among 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee?

Ho1: There are positive average ratings of MLQ transformational leadership qualities for deacons indicated by the 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee.

Ha1: There are negative average ratings of MLQ transformational leadership qualities for deacons indicated by the 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee.

Research Question 2: Are there significant differences of Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) ratings for deacons between the 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee?

Ho2: There are no significant differences in average MLQ transformational leadership quality ratings for deacons between the 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee.

Ha2: There are significant differences in average MLQ transformational leadership quality ratings for deacons between the 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee.

Research Question 3: What are the significant differences between the transformational leadership qualities as measured by 10 subscales (i.e., Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individual Consideration, Contingent Reward, Management-by-Exception, Laissez-Faire Leadership, Extra Effort, Effectiveness and Satisfaction) of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) for deacons among 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee?

Ho3: There are no significant differences between the transformational leadership qualities as measured by 10 subscales (i.e., Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individual Consideration, Contingent Reward, Management-by-Exception, Laissez-Faire Leadership, Extra Effort, Effectiveness and Satisfaction) of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) for deacons among 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee.

Ha3: There are significant differences between the transformational leadership qualities as measured by 10 subscales (i.e., Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individual Consideration, Contingent Reward, Management-by-Exception, Laissez-Faire Leadership, Extra Effort, Effectiveness and Satisfaction) of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) for deacons among 4 selected church groups of congregants (n = 50 each) in Memphis, Tennessee.

Significance of the Study

There are at least two levels of significance that the author identifies as benefits of this study, and these may be described as the micro level of significance and the macro level of significance. At the micro level, the author believes that the outcome of the study will directly benefit both the leaders of the selected churches that are participants in the study, as well as the general membership. It will do so by determining whether pastors' perceptions of a leadership crisis are accurate and consistent with congregants' ratings of deacons with respect to deacons' leadership skills. If the data collected confirm the pastors' perceptions, the data will also determine the particular areas of leadership that are problematic and in need of further attention. These data may be used, then, to inform potential interventions that can support the development of leadership skills among deacons in the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. churches of Memphis. It will also affect the churches involved on the micro level by beginning to expose members to the idea of the church as a potential site for social science research.

Secondly, there is significance at the macro level. On this level, the author believes that the study is significant because it represents a contribution to social science research in an area

that is, as has already been described, currently overlooked for the most part. The author believes that by modeling how churches can be studied, and by offering a solid methodological construct, other investigators with an interest in this or similar subjects can draw from this work and adapt it to suit their own research needs. This will expand the available information about churches and will enrich knowledge and understanding of church-related phenomena.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

The primary assumption about this study is that the congregants willingly participated in the research study and participated for the full duration of the investigation. The primary limitation of this study is that it is not deeply informed by past research in religious settings. Given the relative scarcity of research on the topic of leadership in the church, the author has referred to primary sources in general and transformational leadership studies as the main sources of information. The present study does not draw heavily from prior methodological models used in churches, simply because the author has not discovered any research related to leadership in the church that has used a methodological model that can be replicated using quantitative methods. The author substantiates this claim with evidence from seminal authors in the field, including Lincoln and Mamiya (1990). The author believes that these limitations are mitigated, however, by the fact that the literature of transformational leadership and extant research provide useful instruments, methodological constructs, and information that support the development of a sound methodology, and which also offer guidelines for the analysis and interpretation of data.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In order to embark upon a study situated in the church, one must be aware of the opportunities and challenges that have been reported by researchers conducting their studies in such settings. In order to embark upon a study of leadership, one must be familiar with the academic literature related to leadership; in this case, the particular area of focus is transformational leadership. Finally, it is helpful for the reader to have basic familiarity with the setting of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. church and the role that deacons play within such a denomination. These three topics are the primary subjects of this chapter. The final section of this chapter presents information about the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, the assessment instrument that was used to evaluate deacons' transformational leadership skills.

Issues Regarding Research in Church Settings

The literature about research in church settings is quite limited, though it is interesting and important to note that research focusing on church settings has increased substantially in recent years. This is evidenced by the establishment of research institutes at major divinity schools across the nation. One of the best-known of these institutes is Duke University's Pulpit and Pew Center, which has an extensive and impressive body of research on a wide range of

church-related subjects, including characteristics of the first five years of Catholic priesthood, a study on clergy salaries, and studies about pastoral morale, burn-out, and firings. The Pulpit and Pew Center clearly identifies the scope and methodology of its fellows' work, indicating that the types of research include "surveys; case studies; history and theology; clergy career issues; media studies; gender race, and ethnicity; and dissertations" (Pulpit and Pew Center, 2006, n.p.). As many students and scholars can observe, this list demonstrates that the majority of the research is qualitative rather than quantitative, so in this regard it does not provide replicable models for researchers interested in quantitative research. The Pulpit and Pew Center studies that are available to read online at <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/research.html> are, for the most part, phenomenological. As such, they offer rich anecdotal evidence about various church-related issues and concerns, but do not provide models for quantitative study.

For the researcher who is interested in a quantitative approach to religiously-oriented research, there are few, if any, models to be appropriated (Hillery, 1981). While phenomenological techniques do have value as initial investigatory approaches, and while they do help the researcher to gain subjective impressions about the phenomena being studied as they are defined and experienced by those being studied (Halling, 2002), they fail to fulfill two crucial attributes of quantitative research: (a) they do not help future researchers to replicate studies, and (b) they generally do not contribute to the formulation of a body of data that can be generalized to larger populations (Decarvalho, 1991; Hillery, 1981).

According to seminal authors in the field of African-American religious studies, "a general theory for the social analysis of black religious phenomena and a sociology of black churches has not yet appeared" (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p.2). For this reason, the authors

proposed a framework which they term a dialectical model, the intention of which is to permit the researcher to fulfill

the task of the social scientist [which is to] examine the social conditions of any particular black church, including the situation of its leadership and membership, in order to determine what its major orientation is in relation to any pair of dialectical polarities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p.12).

The dialectical model is posited on the notion that there are two polarities that characterize most dynamics that can be observed in Black churches; while Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) identify six polarities in particular, it is noted that the model offers “methodological flexibility” (p.15) and that other polarities can be added. The limitation of the dialectical model is that it provides the guidance for establishing the research question, but it does not necessarily offer a specific direction with respect to the methodological instruments to be employed. The research proposed here fits within the spirit of the dialectical framework: Is there or is there not a leadership crisis among the deacons in selected National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. churches located in Memphis, Tennessee?

For the most part, the existing social science research about churches and church-related phenomena is limited in both its scope and its ability to provide a quantitative foundation. One reason may be that church-related research is believed to be particularly challenging, as the setting is a relatively closed community that historically resists incursions from social science researchers (Campbell & Curtis, 1996). This is particularly true for churches that have a membership that is predominantly African-American (Caffoll, 1996). According to Caffoll (1996), the majority of the limited scholarship about church life has been conducted by Caucasian men, which has tended to reinforce the notion that social science research is neither relevant for nor inclusive of people from non-Caucasian ethnicities. For the most part, the

relationship between church congregants and social science researchers has been an uneasy and often distant one (Campbell & Curtis, 1996). In his study of Baptist churches, Ingram (1982) reported that he became so distracted by the resistance of congregants that he abandoned his original study in favor of a study on the *underlife* of Baptist churches. Ingram (1982) considered the congregants' resistance to be compelling, not the least reason being, he believed, that it precluded more extensive research in faith communities.

There are notable exceptions to this generalization, however, and the author is particularly interested in and grateful for the work of DeSanta (1996), who views research as one part—and a critical one—of fulfilling God's mission in the world. She contends that research is valuable and necessary because it has the potential to help identify and resolve challenges that prevent that mission from being fully realized (DeSanta, 1996). This is a perspective shared by the author, and one which informs and inspires his research. The author also concurs with Stevens-Arroyo (1997), whose concept of a *syncretic sociology* is compelling. According to this scholar, it is unimportant to assign blame to either churches or researchers. Rather, it is the responsibility of both to consider how they might forge partnerships and relationships that could yield productive results for both parties (Stevens-Arroyo, 1997).

The National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. Church

Regardless of the denomination, a church is a group comprised of individuals from various backgrounds and walks of life who come together because they want to form a community of people who share beliefs and particular faith practices. Thus, its structure, successes, and challenges can be analyzed by considering it as an organization. The National

Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc. was formed in 1886 and is today considered to be the largest denomination of African-Americans in the United States (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). In fact, “Over 29,000 clergy and 30,000 local churches are affiliated with the convention, as are 4,700 associations and 59 state conventions” (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 31). As an organization, it has an identified primary leader, the pastor in the case of a National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. church, and a group of secondary leaders, a group of individuals known as deacons. The role of deacons is integral to the life of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. church. The deacons are ordained laypeople who are expected to use their leadership skills to support the pastor’s work with the congregation (Naylor, 1955; Nichols, 1964). At many Baptist churches, the deacons are expected to possess basic personal attributes that qualify them to serve the church in a leadership capacity (Webb, 1980). At the author’s church, for instance, these attributes are identified and explained in the church’s charter, and originate in scriptural doctrine; this is true of the churches in this study as well (Johnson, 2003).

Understanding the origins and nature of these qualifications is important because it helps the reader to comprehend issues related to leadership and the specific problems of leadership the pastors in this study have identified. Drawing from the church’s charter, one can learn the most important of the responsibilities and qualifications of the deacons. The charter of Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church, which is more or less representative of the other churches’ charters as well, describes the role of the deacons in the following way:

[The responsibilities of deacons are:]To work with the Pastor in the fulfillment of the mission of the church, thereby assisting the pastor in looking after the spiritual and temporal welfare of the church; To help contact members of the church before each communion, thereby keeping in touch with the members, discovering, and correcting any instance where there appears a decline of interest to the church; To report to the pastor concerning the needs of individual members; To be faithful in attendance at regular and

special staff meetings; To work with the pastor in serving communion to the sick and shut-in; To call upon newcomers, prospects, those who are sick or shut-in. Special assignments will be made to aid in providing the service needed; To study the peace, unity and the mission of the church; To promote the growth of the church by promoting brotherhood, fellowship, and loyalty among members of the congregation; To be alert that only scriptural doctrine is taught in the church. To see that proper literature is circulated among the members; where there is no pastor, the staff of deacons will secure a minister until such time that the church will appoint a pulpit committee; to serve on special committees as assigned. (Johnson, 2003, pp.77-78)

In order to execute these responsibilities, the pastor, who suggests candidates for deaconship, looks for a potential deacon who embodies the following characteristics and qualities: “Sincerity and dedication to the cause and ministry of Jesus Christ; Not double-tongued; [exhibits extraordinary] Self-discipline; Proper marriage; Good managers at home, and they must be members of good reputation, full of the Spirit and sound wisdom” (Johnson, 2003, p. 79). While these responsibilities and characteristics are articulated in church documents, and are available for viewing by any member of the congregation, one of the challenges of leadership as expressed by local church pastors is that the leadership responsibilities are not constantly reaffirmed in a direct way. This is an obstacle for most churches: keeping the leadership challenge and responsibility fresh and at the forefront of day-to-day ministry. The pastors whose churches are studied here agreed that while the expectations about the personal characteristics of deacons are articulated well, the expectations about how deacons carry out responsibilities and embody church values and ideals are not expressed as clearly. This is an aspect of church life that is well-documented; in fact, Webb (1980) writes extensively about the fact that many churches may agree about ideal biblical and character qualifications, yet there is little consistency with respect to training, supervision, and day-to-day practice. This is a challenge that is addressed by this research study. The need for this