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Christians should go back to Bible roots



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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2014 - 07:00 -- BY ISHMAEL I MUNENE

As 'prophet Dr' Victor Kanyari's theological transgression of biblical proportions exits the news headlines and the shock effect dissipates, Kenyans are returning to their old habits. 'Prophet Dr' Kanyari's coterie of followers is back in business, unmoved by the damning expose. Elite worshippers gloss over their own Augean stables; 'prophet Dr' Kanyari's antics are the stuff of the hoi polloi.

Yet, both rich and poor, highly educated and those not, are unwitting co-conspirators in the death of the Church—God's people in whom Christ dwells, and its reincarnation as an institution owned and operated by individuals or corporate groups.

Nowhere is this institutional entrapment of the Church and the self-serving rationalisation by the clergy more apparent than in financial matters. With the exception of Nairobi Chapel (and associated Mavuno Church) that posts its audited financial statements online, in most churches financial matters are conducted in dark, smoked-filled rooms.



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During my visits to Kenya, phone calls to elite 'M-Pesa' churches seeking information on finances, including pastoral and staff salaries, have only elicited stern reminders of confidentiality. Worshippers have not fared better, believing hook, line and sinker the warped logic of pastoral salary confidentiality. A spiritually and biblically comatose laity is enormously good business for the clergy.

The Apostle Paul's letters to the Corinthians visualised the Church as a dynamic organism with life-flowing energy. Christ is the head of this body and organises members through the impulses of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 13 and 14, he envisions the Church as a dynamic entity where all members' gifts, from clergy to laity, are appropriately ordered and governed through institutional elements of leadership, policy and structure for furtherance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The furtherance of the gospel is through proclamation, celebration, teaching, ordering as well as deeds of love and justice. None is superior to the other.

The Church is characterised by unity within functional diversity and honoured in the division of labour. The proclamation, teaching and celebration are major roles of the clergy; the ordering (governance) is performed by elected 'ruling elders' and deeds of love and justice by deacons and laity. In matters of money and housekeeping, all have a spiritual responsibility—elders, clergy, paid staff and laity.

How did we arrive at the likes of 'prophet Dr' Kanyari and his cabal of celebrity 'M-Pesa fundraising bishops' owning and controlling the Church as a personal institution for self-aggrandisement?

No doubt, the rigid hierarchy of medieval Catholicism of the second and third centuries marked the beginning of the embellishment of the clergy over the laity in church matters. While contemporary pastoral work is based on Ephesians 4:11-12, where the pastor's job is described as "equipping the saints for the work of the ministry", Kenyan clergy only give lip service to this call.

The result is a dependency model of churchgoers: pastors do the ministry while the people are grateful recipients of their professional care. Pastors are regarded as experts in spiritual matters (prayers, prophecy, miracles, etc), while the congregants view themselves as enfeebled objects incapable of nourishing each other spiritually, despite decades of attending church.

This dependency model of pastoral care has given rise to 'prophet Dr' Kanyari and his ilk with their snake oil salesmen antics purveying prayers and miracles to the highest bidder. Viewing themselves as omniscient, they mimic the multi-talented pastors of megachurches in the US who appear to operate like well-oiled machines. The spiritually malnourished congregation becomes solely dependent on these pastors, an addiction pastors cannot let go. It is a congregation that rarely reads the Bible to discern God's will. It is a congregation that does not pray because it lacks the formula to do so. It is an impoverished tithe-giving congregation awed by the wealth and opulent lifestyle of the pastor while s/he preaches prosperity and blessings hereafter.

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Equally, the congregation has convoluted views of pastors. They are viewed as the ubiquitous multi-talented servants of God. They are perceived as motivational speakers who provide biblical vignettes for escape from daily troubles rather than spiritually equipping them to confront the hard realities of a broken world. They are regarded as the possessors of the Church rather than ones who have given their life to the ministry so that the people of God may thrive spiritually.

This co-dependency creates what we have come to see in the charismatic churches in Kenya today: pastors and bishops believe that God's presence is borne only by them and the congregation cannot be channels of God's mighty activity and power. The church has become a picture of a dependent child stuck in a suffocating attachment to a publicity-seeking wealthy pastor.

AG Githu Muigai's proposed legal framework may partially ameliorate the quandary. The real solution lies in returning the ministry to the people. This requires a professional trained clergy who are equipped to train all God's people for the ministry. It needs a Bible-reading and praying congregation active in ministry. It also needs a US-like Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability to provide oversight and accountability to member churches.

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