

Church Polity: Analysis of the Congregational Model and Its Applicability in the African Rural Context

Johnny Sefu Kalonda
Email: sefukalondaj@gmail.com

Abstract

The study examines the effectiveness of the Congregational Model, which emphasizes autonomy, shared leadership, and accountability in African rural settings while considering realities such as limited literacy, restricted access to Scripture, and a shortage of trained church leaders. The significance of this research lies in its potential to guide church planters and local leaders in selecting a governance model that aligns with the unique challenges and needs of rural communities, thereby promoting a healthy and thriving church community. The library research draws on biblical and historical considerations, as well as personal experience under the congregational model. The study advocates for a flexible approach to church polity that considers both the merits and limitations of various options. Church planters in a Congregationalist context should adopt an elder-rule model, where trained elders hold authority under Christ and oversight of the missional role of the church.

Keywords: Congregational Model, Congregationalism, Congregationalist, Church Governance, Church Polity

Introduction

A local church or congregation may struggle to function effectively without a structured leadership style. Local churches that lack a formal leadership approach can face disorganization, confusion, and weakened spiritual guidance. Leadership is indeed necessary for the church to operate with purpose and direction. John Maxwell's assertion that "Everything rises and falls on leadership"¹ reflects the significant impact leadership has on organizational success, including within the church. Leeman argues that "The difference between a local church and a group of Christians is nothing more or less than church polity."²

¹ John C. Maxwell, *The 360-Degree Leader: Developing Your Influence from Anywhere in the Organisation* (Nelson Business, 2005), 249.

² Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, eds., *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2015), 1.



In other words, polity distinguishes a local church from any other group of Christian believers. He asserts, “No polity, no local church.”³ Leeman presents four reasons why local churches should have a form of polity: First, “Polity establishes the local Church.”⁴ It serves as the framework that unites individual believers into a local congregation by organizing them under a shared identity and authority. Second, “Polity guards the gospel what and who.”⁵ It safeguards the integrity of the gospel by formally identifying both its true message and its genuine adherents, thereby distinguishing the church from the secular world. Third, “Polity gives shape to Christian discipleship.”⁶ It not only restrains sin but also empowers each church member to represent Jesus and actively participate in his rule throughout their lives. Finally, “Polity strengthens a church’s witness.”⁷ It advances the church’s mission, particularly in evangelism, by providing the structure that facilitates and supports gospel work across the nations.

The Congregational Model entails the autonomy of each local church and a democratic structure wherein each member is entitled to a vote.⁸ This differs from other forms of church government, such as the Episcopal model, which assigns primary leadership responsibilities to a bishop, or the Presbyterian model, which assigns them to elders.⁹ I concur with Grudem that there is room for amicable disagreement on the issue of church polity since it is not a major doctrine.¹⁰ Similarly, as Decker observes, “There is no didactic text in the NT which gives specific instructions regarding church polity.”¹¹ Each governance model possesses its own strengths and weaknesses, and not all models are equally supported by Scripture.

Many local churches adopt their denomination’s model of governance based on their denominational tradition. It is so common to hear people saying, “This is how we do things as Brethren, Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics...” However, we should consider whether the congregational model is applicable in all contexts. The model should not necessarily be applied the same way across the board. There is room to consider the context in which the local church is being planted. A local church can start with Model X and transition to Model

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Fearn: Mentor, 2005), 935.

⁹ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth*, Illustrated edition (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 769.

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 1994), 789.

¹¹ Rodney J. Decker, ‘Polity and the Elder Issue,’ *Grace Theological Journal* 9, no. 2 (1988): 276.



Y of church governance over time, depending on the church's growth. The chosen model inevitably has repercussions for the health of the body of Christ.

All Christian denominations agree that Jesus is the source of the church's power and authority and that differences in church governance arise when it comes to the application of this delegated authority.¹² It is wise to have some flexibility in terms of what fits well for a particular local church since the goal of each church is to foster obedience to God.¹³ Therefore, this analysis of the congregational model of church governance aims to guide church planters in understanding church polity. The primary objective is to ensure the flourishing of the church of Christ, to promote the name of God effectively, and to facilitate the making of disciples within a rural context. The following sections outline the congregational model, its historical and biblical basis, its merits and demerits, and recommendations for its applicability in rural African settings.

Analysis of the Congregational Model

Definition of Terms

The understanding of terms such as “church,” “polity,” and “Congregationalism” may differ from one person to another. It is, therefore, appropriate to define these terms.

What is a church?

The term “church” is from the Greek noun ἐκκλησία.¹⁴ It refers to a community of believers who profess their true faith in Christ.¹⁵ This church is understood to be both visible and invisible.¹⁶ Article 19 of The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church states that “The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”¹⁷ The description of the church as a holy people refers to a family of members who encourage one another and maintain the confession that unites them.¹⁸ Similarly, Mbewe defines the church as a gathering of people who come

¹² Walter B. Shurden, “The Priesthood of All Believers and Pastoral Authority in Baptist Thought,” *Faith and Mission* 7, no. 1 (1989): 1.

¹³ James Leo Garrett, ‘An Affirmation of Congregational Polity,’ *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 3, no. 1 (2005): 55.

¹⁴ Rick Brannan, ed., ‘Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament,’ in *Lexham Research Lexicons* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 568.

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 855.

¹⁷ The Right Reverend John H. Rodgers and J. I. Packer, *The 39 Articles of Religion: A Commentary With Introduction to Systematic Theology* (California: Anglican House Media Ministry, 2016), 402.

¹⁸ James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapid, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 50.



together for worship and fulfill the mission given to them by Jesus Christ.¹⁹ In this paper, the term “church” will be used to refer specifically to a local congregation.

What is polity?

The term “Polity” is defined as “the form or method of government of a nation, state, or church.”²⁰ In its ecclesiastical usage, the term refers to the form of government of a church and is sometimes extended to refer to the church’s doctrinal and liturgical positions.²¹ Sullivan states that polity is how a church structures itself to accomplish its purpose.²² There are typically three recognized types of polity: episcopal, synodal/ presbyterian, and congregational.

Congregationalism

Congregationalism refers to a form of church governance characterized by democratic principles, where local churches have a significant degree of autonomy.²³ The governance model rests on the autonomy and independence of each local assembly.²⁴ Fairbairn states that Congregationalism was a response against sacerdotalism.²⁵ Hence, no official person within a local congregation was allowed to stand as the mediator between the congregants and God. Believers were considered priests according to the teaching of the New Testament, which gave them the right and responsibility to participate in the governance of their local congregation.²⁶

Description of the Congregational Model

The congregational model is a form of church governance that emphasizes the autonomy of individual congregations, free from external control by civil authorities or hierarchical ecclesiastical structures.²⁷ These individual congregational churches are not accountable to ecclesiastical structures and church umbrella bodies. They structure and run their churches as

¹⁹ Conrad Mbewe, *God’s Design for the Church: A Guide for African Pastors and Ministry Leaders* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 24.

²⁰ Reader’s Digest Association, *The Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Pleasantville: Reader’s Digest Assoc., 1975), 1045.

²¹ ‘Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion. 3: O-Z’ (Washington: The Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, 1979), 2820.

²² John Sullivan, ‘Baptist Polity and the State Convention,’ *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 3, no. 1 (2005): 137.

²³ Peter Toon and Steven B. Cowan, eds., *Who Runs the Church? Four Views on Church Government*, Counterpoints Church Life (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2004), 190.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁵ A. M. Fairbairn, *Studies in Religion and Theology: The Church: In Idea and in History* (New York: Cornell University Library, 2009), 227.

²⁶ John B. Carpenter, ‘Baptist Polity Inherited from Congregationalism,’ *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 20, no. 2 (2023): 166–67.

²⁷ Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 819.



they see fit. Browne, an advocate for this model, asserts that congregations should operate without being bound by the dictates of secular governments or the oversight of prelates within ecclesiastical hierarchies.²⁸ Instead, final authority is placed in the hands of believers in each local congregation.²⁹

In this model, the congregation functions as the ultimate authority under the lordship of Christ and is guided by divinely appointed elders. While it is not, in most cases, a pure democracy, where every decision is subject to a congregational vote, the congregation serves as the final arbiter in all matters concerning the local church.³⁰ Elders and deacons play significant roles in providing leadership and guidance within the church. While they offer counsel and direction, decisions ultimately rest with the congregation. Disagreements between the church and its leaders necessitate a return to the Scriptures to reconcile differences, reaffirming the centrality of biblical authority in the congregation's decision-making process.³¹

Different approaches to congregational polity exist, as alluded to by Grudem.³² They range from single elder/pastor models to plural elder structures. Some advocate for a corporate board setup resembling a modern business, where the pastor is viewed as an employee rather than a spiritual leader.³³ Some of these churches have a Human Resources Officer in charge of recruitment and other tasks, an approach that lacks biblical precedent and potentially undermines pastoral authority. Others advocate for complete democracy, where all decisions are subject to congregational votes. This approach can lead to decision-making paralysis as the church grows. The approach often results in endless debates that hinder progress and foster a mindset that perpetuates the status quo.

Additionally, it deviates from the New Testament pattern, where elders are entrusted with ruling authority within a church.³⁴ A more extreme view denies the need for any form of government, relying only on the Holy Spirit and consensus among believers.³⁵ While appealing in theory, this approach is unsustainable and prone to abuse, as subjective feelings may overshadow wisdom and reason in decision-making.

²⁸ Toon and Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?*, 137.

²⁹ James Leo Garrett, *An Affirmation of Congregational Polity*, 39.

³⁰ Dever and Leeman, *Baptist Foundations*, 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³² Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 812–21.

³³ Tony Garland, 'Authority Inversion: The Subversion of Pastoral Leadership,' *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 18, no. 54 (2014): 164.

³⁴ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 770.

³⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 936.



Only two offices are recognized in a congregational model: the office of an elder and the office of a deacon. Officers (elders or deacons) are selected by the congregation (Acts 1:15; 6:3) and appointed or installed by the already-serving elders.³⁶ In this model, there is no difference between pastor and elder; these titles are used interchangeably.³⁷ Elders' role is more spiritual (teaching, preaching God's Word, and prayer), while the deacons are more serving the other aspects of the member's life (material, social, etc). In terms of providing leadership, most of them serve as advisors to the congregation, helping to decide matters of discipline, conduct, doctrine, leadership, and finances.³⁸

Biblical and Theological Basis of the Congregational Model

Supporters of the congregational model find its biblical and theological basis in several key passages and principles from the Scriptures. These foundations shape the worldview and major points that define Congregationalism.

Christ, as the Head of the Church

Congregationalists emphasize that Christ is the only head over the church, all rule and authority (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22; Col 1:18, 2:10), and he is the mediator of the New Covenant Church (1 Tim 2:5–6). The authority of church leaders is derived from God, and they serve as instruments through which God governs his church. A view that is less disputed by Christian denominations, both evangelicals and non-evangelicals.³⁹ This is the case with some Christian denominations that have elevated their church leaders as mediators and dispensers of grace.⁴⁰

The Role of Elders

According to 1 Timothy 5:17, the primary responsibility of elders and pastors is to preach and teach God's Word, while deacons assist in practical ministry tasks (Acts 6). The elders are not just passive people waiting to implement the decision made by the congregation. They provide spiritual leadership to their congregation (Matt 23:3; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1–14). According to Denver and Leeman, elders' authority is tied to the Scripture and their ability to persuade according to it.⁴¹ They do not function independently but in conjunction with the congregation, which is the final authority.

³⁶ Ibid., 806.

³⁷ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 758.

³⁸ Daniel L. Akin, Chad Brand, and R. Stanton Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 171.

³⁹ Shurden, "The Priesthood of All Believers and Pastoral Authority in Baptist Thought," 25.

⁴⁰ Dever and Leeman, *Baptist Foundations*, 77.

⁴¹ Ibid., 70.



Plurality of Elders

Throughout the New Testament, there are references to a plurality of elders serving in local churches. For example, in Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in every church in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. It is noted that “Paul’s churches followed the synagogue pattern of leadership by elders,” and for that matter, it involved several elders in every church. The church in Ephesus also had more than one elder (Acts 20:17). Timothy was consecrated by a council of elders, not a single elder (1 Tim 4:14; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:5; James 5:14). The single-elder congregational churches are churches that do not have multiple elders overseeing the church’s affairs; instead, one elder is in charge. While it is not sinful to have a single elder, advocates of the plurality of elders argue that this approach is not grounded in Scripture.

Priesthood of All Believers

Every believer is considered a priest (1 Pet 2:4–10, Rev 1:5–6, 20:6) with direct access to God (Heb 4:16, 10:19). Because of this, Congregationalists believe that all believers are empowered and gifted by the Holy Spirit, and therefore, they have a role in decision-making processes within the church. While writing about the benefits of believers being involved in decision-making, James L. Garrett says that members grow in faith and understanding as they seek to solve every issue in light of God’s Word.⁴²

Patterns of Church Governance

Congregationalists argue that the New Testament offers examples of congregational decision-making and the autonomy of local churches. For instance, Matthew 18 outlines a process of reconciliation within the church, culminating in the involvement of the whole congregation in matters of discipline. Waldron writes, “No greater exercise of church power is conceivable. If the local church is competent for church discipline, then it is competent to all lesser exercises of authority.”⁴³ Additionally, there are several reasons to believe that the church was autonomous from the early church. Paul’s letters to various churches and Jesus’ letters to individual churches in Revelation demonstrate the autonomy of those churches. There is no hierarchical structure imposed from the outside; instead, each congregation has the resources

⁴² Akin, Brand, and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Governance*, 200.

⁴³ Toon and Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?*, 211.



to address issues internally. Jamieson adds that even in their stature, the apostles could not make certain decisions on their own; they called for a council.⁴⁴

Historical Basis of the Congregational Model of Church Governance

The congregational model of church governance can be traced back to the early efforts of reformers and dissenters who sought to restore the moral ethos and governance structure of the 16th-century Christian church.⁴⁵ One prominent figure in this movement was Jean Morely, who advocated for a governance model where authority rested in the hands of the people, akin to democracy.⁴⁶ Morely drew inspiration from biblical examples such as the election of Matthias (Acts 1) and Stephen (Acts 6), which demonstrated the church's ability to elect its leaders. Despite facing rejection and excommunication for his beliefs, Morely remained steadfast in his convictions, refusing to recant unless shown to be wrong by scriptures.⁴⁷

The Puritan movement further advanced the congregational form of church governance, as Puritans believed it was difficult to reform the English State Church fully.⁴⁸ They organized their congregations to safeguard the church's rights to consent to the appointment of officers and to discipline members. Central to the Puritan principle was adherence to the model of church government outlined in scriptures, without adding or subtracting from it⁴⁹ as stated in Deuteronomy 12:32: *"Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it."* The writings and teachings of figures such as John Greenwood, Henry Barrow, and John Penry also influenced many despite their persecution and eventual deaths. A striking demonstration of this is found in Penry's response when pressured to recount their teaching on church governance. Penry wrote, "Imprisonment, judgments, yea, death itself, are not meet weapons to convince men's consciences, grounded on the word of God."⁵⁰

The repression under Archbishop William Laud prompted remaining Puritans within the Church of England to seek freedom of worship. In the 17th century, this atmosphere of

⁴⁴ Bobby Jamieson. *Why New Testament Polity Is Prescriptive*, 9Marks, 2013. Accessed 23 May 2025, <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalall-churches-saints-why-new-testament-polity-prescriptive/>

⁴⁵ Dever and Leeman, *Baptist Foundations*, 29.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 47.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁹ Toon and Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?*, 206.

⁵⁰ Dever and Leeman, *Baptist Foundations*, 34.



freedom, particularly under Cromwell's leadership, provided fertile ground for the development of Congregationalism in places of exile, such as Plymouth, Massachusetts.⁵¹

It is also important to note that, historically, advocates of plural-elder Congregationalism were closely associated with the Reformed and Puritan traditions.⁵² Early church writings, such as those by Ignatius and the Didache, "elect for yourselves bishops and deacons who are a credit to the Lord, men who are gentle, generous, faithful, and well tried."⁵³ A transition towards monarchical episcopacy occurred in the patristic era, deviating from the original plural-elder Congregationalism. Despite this transition, the congregational model experienced a resurgence during the English Reformation among Separatists, Baptists, and Independents.⁵⁴

This model of governance has spread globally to other Christian denominations, marking a resurgence of congregational polity. However, its application remains unclear. There is confusion within the modern ideas about governance.⁵⁵ Today, the model is found in many African churches, although it often takes different forms based on the understanding of it in each context.

Merits and Demerits of the Congregational Model

There is no system of governance in the church that is entirely bad or entirely good. This also applies to the Congregational Model. It is also important to note that not all of them have equal strengths and weaknesses; some can be recommended, while others may not be as viable, such as the no-government system, in which the congregation relies solely on the Holy Spirit, as they claim. This could have been the sure way of governing the church of Christ, being privileged to receive direct instructions from Christ through the Holy Spirit. However, this is not how Christ runs his church. He has left believers with his written and sufficient Word, which offers guidance on matters of faith and conduct (1 Tim 3:15, cf. 2 Tim 3:15–17). It also acknowledges human authority in the church (1 Tim 5:17).

Merits

First, autonomy: The model empowers each local church to make decisions that are pertinent to its specific context. Choices concerning annual themes, selected books for exposition, and materials utilized in discipleship classes are determined independently, without influence or

⁵¹ Ibid., 35.

⁵² Toon and Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?*, 192.

⁵³ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁴ Akin, Brand, and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 206.

⁵⁵ Carpenter, *Baptist Polity Inherited from Congregationalism*, 172.



imposition from external entities. Second, shared leadership and accountability: In most cases, churches that adhere to the Congregational Model of church governance typically have a plurality of elders. Even in cases where it is a single elder, the elder is, in most cases, surrounded by a group of other leaders, deacons, or church staff. Therefore, having more than one leader is preferable to having none, as the congregation will benefit from the diverse gifts of multiple individuals. However, as noted by Newton, “One man or a group of men serving as pastor(s) cannot take care of all the needs in any ministry.”⁵⁶ It needs a congregation of believers willing to serve one another for the building up of their local church community. When applied effectively, the model safeguards leaders against the risk of abusing power. Being accountable to members also encourages leaders to work with transparency, knowing that they will give an account for every action taken on behalf of the church.

Third, authority vested in the congregation: Congregationalists argue that authority vested in the “many” of the congregation is less likely to be abused and much easier to correct than authority vested in the “few” of other ecclesiastical systems.⁵⁷ The sad event of the Shakahola massacre in Kenya can serve as an illustration. More than 340 lives were lost because of the cultic teaching of Paul Mackenzie, the leader and founder of Good News International Ministries. This sad event could have been avoided if Mackenzie hadn’t had absolute authority without any accountability to its members.

Fourth, protection from false doctrine: Grudem asserts,

False doctrine often seems to be adopted by the theologians of the church first, by the pastors second, and by the informed laity, who are daily reading their Bibles and walking with the Lord last. Therefore, if the leadership begins to stray in doctrine or in life, and there is no election by the congregation, then the church as a whole has no practical means of getting hold of the situation and turning it around. But if officers are elected by the church, then there is a system of “checks and balances” whereby even the governing authority of the church has some accountability to the church as a whole.⁵⁸

This statement emphasizes the crucial role of congregational involvement in church governance as a safeguard against doctrinal error. If church leaders are not held accountable through mechanisms such as congregational elections, the church lacks a practical means to correct its course.

⁵⁶ Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 44.

⁵⁷ Toon and Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?* 143.

⁵⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 806–7.



Demerits

First, there is a potential for division and conflict: a lack of centralized power may lead to division due to differing views on interpreting God's Word or other matters. There is a high chance that scenarios like the Corinthian church, where people divided themselves among leaders (1 Cor 3:4), could occur. Endless debates and delays in decision-making affect the church's effective functioning.

Second, potential abuse of power. Congregationalists are convinced, as mentioned earlier, that authority vested in many is less likely to be abused. However, the same merit may turn out to be a weakness in some situations. For instance, involving members in all important decisions concerning the church may be effective, but it is not always the case. Some charismatic leaders or members can sway people to follow their position even when it may not be beneficial for building up the church. Reid put it this way, "In such a model, loud voices, not necessarily godly ones, tend to rule the day. A congregational polity can lead to a 'good old boy system' where a few who know how to work for a crowd or win their positions run the church."⁵⁹ Sometimes, wealthy individuals may have more influence, especially if they sponsor the majority of the church's projects.

Third, challenges with immature believers. Even in the context of a nuclear family, there are certain decisions that parents don't involve their kids in because of their maturity level. Indeed, immature members do not always know what is best for the church. Their votes are often influenced by peers, the majority, or by some influential members or leaders who know how to sway a crowd, as mentioned earlier.

Some congregational churches have attempted to safeguard their congregation from such scenarios by implementing a lengthy process before someone is allowed to become a member. It is noted that "If the membership of the church is critically involved in its government, maintaining the purity of the church's membership becomes crucial."⁶⁰ However, though this is a wise approach, I tend to agree with Garland, who states,

Apparently, the New Testament did not have a formal church membership or inauguration into the fellowship of the congregation... It would seem biblical that those wishing to fellowship in a church would be admitted based on their profession of faith only. The apostles do not give any specific criteria for joining the group. That there is no biblical basis for such practices. The only requirement for membership is a confession of faith.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Reid, *Polity And Proclamation*, 170.

⁶⁰ Toon and Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?* 216.

⁶¹ Garland, *Authority Inversion*, 165.



The commitment to following Christ implies a commitment to the body of Christ, the church. The other danger of this approach is the possibility of excluding true believers from membership because they have not fulfilled the man-made requirements. Sometimes, people may be voted in as members because they have completed the membership process but with no genuine saving faith. The key question remains whether membership classes are a reliable way to maintain church purity. Additionally, whether a public confession, baptism, or an hour-long interview with an elder is sufficient to confirm the genuineness of someone's salvation. The answer to these questions is no. Though we can know from their fruits (Matt 7:15–20), only God knows perfectly (1 Sam 16:7).

Fourth, ignoring New Testament teaching about the place of elders. It is the view of some that the congregational model overlooks the prerogative and responsibility given to elders in the New Testament. Respect is due to elders because they labor in the Lord on behalf of the congregation (1 Thess 5:12–13). They are to be imitated, obeyed, and submitted to because they are keeping watch over the souls (Heb 13:7, 17), leading and shepherding God's flock (1 Tim 5:17–21).⁶² This might not be the case for each congregation, but for some, yes, where the elders function as an implementing body with no authority over the members.

Applicability of the Congregational Model to the African Rural Context

A simple 'yes' or 'no' would not be an appropriate answer to the question of the applicability of the congregational model. A question such as, "Is the congregational model applicable in a rural context?" deserves a thoughtful answer. The reality of each local congregation informs this answer, as each church has its own unique dynamics. Therefore, my view on this topic may not be applicable in every context.

It is essential to note that I am not advocating for a system of governance to be chosen solely based on the local church's context. However, I also think that its application should thoughtfully consider the local context and the nature of the congregation. In addition, Anderson asserts, "There are many kinds of rural contexts, congregations, and faith leaders serving them."⁶³ The reality about rural areas, as highlighted below, is not universal in every rural area in Africa, but rather in some, from which I hope this work will benefit.

Therefore, considering the analysis of the model above and the dynamic nature of local churches, it is evident that the model cannot be simply replicated. It should not be

⁶² MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 770.

⁶³ Jon V Bishop Anderson, 'Ministry in Rural and Small Town Settings,' *Word & World* 44, no. 3 (31 December 2024): 306.



applied uniformly in all areas. For this model to work, a congregation should have mature members in the majority, which is not always the case for most churches in rural areas, where churches are often filled with unlearned members who cannot read the Bible on their own. Sometimes, members lack access to God’s Word in their local language. These factors can significantly impact the local church in numerous ways. First, elders may struggle to play their persuasive and directive roles within such a congregation. A certain level of maturity is needed to engage in various discussions concerning the life of a local church. Second, the discipleship process may be compromised by limited engagement with God’s Word, relying solely on oral teaching, which can be hazardous if the pastor or Bible study leader errs, as there is no way to verify the accuracy. A lot of time and effort will be required before such congregations reach a level of spiritual maturity that supports shared leadership and meaningful participation in church decisions. The pastor will likely be bound to give his congregation ‘spiritual milk’ for many years rather than solid food because of their limited capacity to engage with deep material.

Additionally, most evangelical churches include a clause in their doctrinal statements affirming Scripture as the final authority in matters of faith and conduct. Delegating such authority to a congregation without sufficient grounding in Scripture would likely be unfruitful, as the counsel of God’s Word should continually shape the church’s leadership and decisions.

The lack of trained elders is another factor that renders the model unsuitable for some rural churches in Africa. This situation is also evident in rural churches in the United States, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.⁶⁴ Commenting on this scarcity, Anderson noted, “Our global companion congregations in Africa often are showing growth, in many ways, in their congregations using catechists, self-supporting pastors, and multi-vocational ministers.”⁶⁵ This observation is accurate; significant efforts have been made to develop and distribute materials to assist church ministries and local pastors in rural African churches, where many cannot afford formal theological training. However, more effort is needed to provide training that adequately equips elders with the skills necessary to shepherd their congregations.

Also, the scarcity of trained elders hinders the possibility of having a plurality of elders in one congregation. This leaves room for abuse of power by any influential elder who may stand out above others. This may be the visionary, the initiator of the church plan,

⁶⁴ Ibid., 308.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 308.



sometimes the one with theological training, or the wealthier individual. The kind of people who think they know everything and everything should go as they have resolved. A culture of accountability in such a context is challenging to establish, and there is a high risk of embracing false teaching, as the sole elder may be prone to error. This is particularly problematic in a context where members are limited in their doctrinal knowledge and, therefore, not in a position to question the sole elder.

Having said this, Congregationalists involved in church planting, in such a context, should consider starting with the elder-rule approach, where a group of equipped individuals from the planting church leads the congregation, and authority is vested in them as they humbly surrender to the Lordship of Christ, and under an oversight of the sending church. It has been observed that a church ruled by a plurality of elders may still maintain the congregational aspects of church governance.⁶⁶ Where members are involved in the decision-making process to some extent but do not have final authority, which should be vested in the elders at this early stage. Elders who are committed to running the church according to God's Word have the final authority in matters of faith and conduct.

Such a church may later transition to the pure congregational model (authority vested in the members) when the church is sure of having most of its members as mature believers and when enough men have been trained to take over the leadership (elder-led approach). This practice of shifting from one approach to another, or its variants, is not a new phenomenon. Some congregations have done so in the past for practical reasons, such as narrowing the number of people involved in decision-making to avoid lengthy meetings that, in most cases, do not focus on eternal matters.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The congregational model, grounded in biblical and theological principles of church leadership, authority, and governance, highlights Christ as the head of the church and emphasizes the priesthood of all believers, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This model promotes collective responsibility in decision-making, with elders providing spiritual leadership alongside the congregation in a shared leadership framework, as affirmed by the New Testament's portrayal of elder plurality and local church autonomy. Historically, it reflects the commitment of reformers, dissenters, and Puritans to reclaim a participatory, Scripture-based church life, free from hierarchical abuses, and has roots in early Christian

⁶⁶ Decker, *Polity and the Elder Issue*, 227.

⁶⁷ Reid, *Polity And Proclamation*, 171.



writings, with renewed emphasis during the English Reformation. While modern expressions of this model may vary, especially in global contexts like Africa, the core vision remains a congregation of believers governed under Christ's lordship and biblically qualified elders. This model offers advantages such as accountability, doctrinal safeguards, and respect for the priesthood of all believers. At the same time, it poses challenges, including the potential for division, manipulation, and the risk of diminishing the role of elders if not carefully implemented. Therefore, applying this model, particularly in rural African contexts, requires discernment, adaptability, and a phased approach. It should begin with elder-rule structures and gradually progress toward full congregational governance as spiritual maturity and leadership capacity develop, ensuring that church governance is faithful to Scripture and responsive to local needs, grounded in God's Word, and guided by the Spirit.

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