

# LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

## POSITION PAPER

(ADOPTED BY THE GENERAL PRESBYTERY IN SESSION JULY 30, 2019)

### Introduction

The apostle Paul, teaching the Corinthians about the true nature of the Church, affirmed that “no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).<sup>1</sup> Any discussion of leadership and governance in the local church must both begin and conclude with this declaration of revealed truth. The church in every generation must consider how it might best build upon the foundation of Christ. This consideration includes the ways by which leadership is chosen, equipped, and mobilized, and then the forms and methodology by which it carries out its God-given work and mission.

Leadership that conforms to New Testament qualifications and expresses itself in concert with proper models of governance will provide for the local church a pathway of progress that will build the kingdom of God and exalt Jesus Christ, the foundation of the Church.

Governance models in the New Testament suggest a great deal of flexibility and fluidity. Patterns of governance in the Early Church are descriptive (what was) and not prescriptive (what should be). Structure and models of governance in the New Testament were consequential to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Early Church. As the Spirit moved in dramatic ways, organizational systems (appointment of deacons, elders, bishops, etc.) were put in place to support and sustain that work of the Spirit. Form followed function. The “work of ministry” held precedence over the “organization” of ministry.

The New Testament church exemplified shared and participatory leadership. The apostle Paul traveled with a team of coworkers. He organized elders (plural) in the churches he began. He corresponded with the churches he founded to assure the soundness of doctrine and the proper practice of the life of faith. Acts 15 records the actions of a deliberative body in setting forth guidelines and accepted practices in the Early Church. The apostles penned epistles and sent them as circular letters to the churches scattered across the then-known world. At every turn, leadership was not only “prophetic” and “apostolic,” but it was also shared and participatory.

Accountability is essential for any model of governance to be effective. No minister is an island unto himself/herself. No minister dare think that faithful ministry can be sustained and adequately expressed without appropriate patterns and systems of accountability. It is the responsibility of the minister to provide the kind of leadership that will establish an atmosphere and climate of accountability.

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical citations will be from the New International Version (NIV) (2011) unless otherwise noted.

## **Leadership in the Local Church**

### **Biblical Evidence of Leadership in the Local Church**

#### **Priesthood/Prophethood of Believers**

Priestly ministry was a significant part of Israel's history. During the time of the patriarchs, the heads of families and tribes performed priestly functions (Genesis 8:20; 26:25). Later a priestly class arose belonging to the family of Aaron. The role of the priests was that of mediators between God and the people. As such, they occupied a special and unique place in the life of ancient Israel.

The New Testament extends the priestly function to all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:5–6). During the Reformation, the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” became fundamental to Protestant theology. This truth is the theological and biblical foundation for shared governance. Since all believers are to function in a priestly role, it follows that plurality in leadership should be the norm. It is this understanding that gives credence to congregational involvement in church governance.

After the Spirit upon Moses was shared with the seventy elders gathered at the tent of meeting to equip them to assist in serving the people (Numbers 11:24–30), the Spirit impacted two men within the camp. Moses's response to that was “I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them” (Numbers 11:29). This prophetic statement began to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4) and continues to this day. Peter's sermon on Pentecost, based on Joel 2:28–32, affirmed that the Lord had poured His Spirit out on all people, enabling them to prophesy (Acts 2:17–21).

#### **New Testament Nomenclature for Leadership in the Local Church**

##### *Elder (presbyteros)*

The New Testament practice of appointing elders reaches back at least to the time of Moses (Exodus 3:16; 4:29; 17:5). They continued to fulfill administrative functions into the days of Israel's kings (Judges 21:16; Ruth 4:2; 1 Samuel 30:26; 2 Samuel 3:17), even into the period of captivity (Jeremiah 29:1; Ezekiel 14:1). In the Hasmonean period, elders are found among the emerging Sanhedrin and were thought to be a continuation of the Seventy appointed by Moses (Numbers 11:16–17). In the New Testament Gospels and Acts, elders are associated with the scribes and chief priests.

The first-century church found in the traditional office of the elder a convenient pattern for leadership in the church. Elders supported James in his pastoral work in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 21:17–19) and played a significant role in the decisions of the church at large (Acts 15:2). Peter addressed elders in his first epistle and seems to number himself among them (1 Peter 5:1). Paul enhanced the leadership of elders in the province of Asia by their appointment in every city where the church had been established (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

### Overseer/Bishop (*episkopos*)

The term, *episkopos*, “overseer,” sometimes translated “bishop,” is often used interchangeably with the term “elder” (compare Acts 20:17 and 20:28; Titus 1:5 and 1:7) and probably designates the leaders of local congregations. The term “elder” may refer more to title and office, and the designation “overseer” to the function and practice of that office. As the church multiplied and developed, so did the need for appropriate oversight and administration. The term “bishop” became increasingly popular over the first several centuries as the title for those who extended their leadership beyond local borders. It is important to note that the New Testament does not teach an “apostolic succession” or transfer of spiritual authority based on privileged birth or ecclesiastical status.

### Pastor/Teacher (*poimen/didaskalos*)

Paul, in Ephesians 4:11, identifies the pastors and teachers (one role) among the gifts of Christ for the equipping and building up of His Body. The pastor is responsible for the life of the believing community, and teaching is a vital aspect of this office. The use of *poimen*, shepherd, to describe this vital role in the Church evokes the image of sheep needing a shepherd. Jesus was/is the Good Shepherd (John 10:1–18), and He gives those with the same shepherding function to nurture the local congregation.

The congregation needs sound teaching from their “pastor/shepherd” that will lead them to “reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). Such teaching will prevent their being easily turned aside from the truth by every false teaching that comes along (Ephesians 4:14).

The apostle Paul, addressing the elders of the church at Ephesus, whom he also called overseers (Acts 20:17, 28), described their function as shepherding “the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” He charged the elders to keep watch over themselves and the congregation, protecting them from the incursions of those who would try to divert them from the truth of the gospel message.

### Deacon (*diakonos*)

The term *diakonos* denotes service such as that of waiting on tables. A deacon by definition is a “servant.” The apostle Paul referred to himself as a servant or a “deacon” (1 Corinthians 3:5; Ephesians 3:7), a description also used of Jesus (Romans 15:8–9).

From Philippians 1:1, the term “servant” (*diakonos*) was commonly used to describe leadership in the apostolic church. A household attendant was referred to as a *diakonos* (Matthew 22:13). The apostle Paul spoke of Timothy as a good “minister”—the word is *diakonos* (1 Timothy 4:6). Some suggest that the seven who were chosen to “wait on tables” in Acts 6 form the first “diaconate.” While these seven served in more extensive roles, their appointment nonetheless prefigures what has become a common practice in the church over the centuries. The New Testament does present a clear, though general, description of this office in the church.

## Qualifications for Leadership in the Local Church

### Servant Leadership from Jesus

Jesus embodied and taught that the central aspect of leadership in the Christian community is servanthood. In John 13 Jesus exemplified the lesson by washing the feet of the disciples,

concluding the object lesson with, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him” (John 13:15–16).

On another occasion, Jesus denied a request from the mother of Zebedee’s sons that they be given special recognition in the Kingdom. The indignation among the other disciples at the request led Jesus to teach “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26–28).

### **Full of the Holy Spirit**

As the Early Church faced the problem of distributing food equally, the apostles found seven men “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” to whom this challenge could be delegated (Acts 6:3). Leadership in the church is a spiritual calling, demanding the fullness of the Spirit for its successful realization. This fullness of the Spirit will be evident in the expression of leadership giftings by the Spirit for the ministry (see Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) will also be abundantly growing in the leader who is full of the Holy Spirit.

### **Specific Lists of Qualifications**

The apostle Paul provides specific qualifications for two leadership positions in the Church, elders/overseers and deacons. In 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9, he gives a lengthy list of qualifications for elders/overseers. Volumes have been written explaining each of the specific aspects of these qualifications that Paul lists, so this paper will not engage each. It is very instructive, though, to observe the emphasis on the character and relational responsibilities of the elder/overseer. For instance, they should be “above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money” (1 Timothy 3:2–3). Faithfulness to the “faith” and the ability to communicate that to others are requirements, but Paul is concerned that the excellent character of the leader is evident and beyond question.

The other leadership position for which Paul gives a list of qualifications is the deacon (1 Timothy 3:8–13). The deacon, too, must exemplify the highest character, be deeply committed to the “faith,” be tested and experienced, and maintain a healthy family relationship. Paul is very concerned that the leadership of the church never be guilty of debilitating attacks on their character because they are to maintain themselves properly. The fullness of the Spirit, producing fruit and gifts, is crucial to achieving these goals.

## **Functions of Pastoral Leadership in the Local Church**

The tasks of pastoral leadership in the local church are numerous and varied. This paper addresses three essential areas of pastoral ministry.

### **Ministry of the Word**

The leadership of the Jerusalem church, faced with the need for ensuring that all widows received an equal distribution of food, enunciated their primary function, “the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2). The work of equipping the saints for works of service (Ephesians 4:12) includes preaching and teaching the truths of the faith, so they become ingrained in the hearts and minds of the congregation. Sound preaching and teaching will serve to increase biblical and theological literacy in the congregation. The effort to prepare sermons and lessons involves the use of all the skills gained through study and diligent application to the task of interpreting the Word of God. When those efforts are bathed in prayer and anointed by the Holy Spirit, the people are prepared for the service to which they are called.

### **Pastoral Care**

Using the image of the shepherd to compare to the functions of leadership in the local church emphasizes the need for pastoral care for the congregation (Acts 20:28–31; 1 Peter 5:2–3). Congregational members have issues and concerns that need spiritual help, which the leadership in the local church can provide. Counseling, prayer, encouragement, challenge, and correction when needed serve to strengthen the church as it grows into the image of Christ. The loving concern shown to believers as they pass through the difficulties of life can make all the difference in maintaining and having their faith strengthened. Leadership in the local church must include the pastoral care of the congregation.

### **Leading**

A crucial function of leadership in the local church is determining the direction and goals of the congregation. This includes the vital task of administration, but even more importantly hearing from God His will for the church and communicating that clearly to the people. Administration assists the church in getting to the goal, but leading announces the goal. The analysis of the situation, potential, skills and resources available, community need, and strengths of the church are important, but paramount is hearing from God. Leadership needs to spend the time required in His presence to hear His heartbeat for the local assembly so they can declare that to the people.

## **Considerations for Leadership in the Local Church**

Leadership in the local church faces numerous challenges and concerns, so there is little way they could all be addressed in this paper. However, these three will be considered: pastoral selection, women in leadership and ministry, and the ministry team.

## **Pastoral Selection**

The conservation and continuation of ministry direction and goals in the local church are critical. Too often changes in leadership cause redirection and loss of momentum. For this reason, it is good for the local church to have a plan for the time when leadership changes. There are numerous models, each with its values. Leadership in the local church should carefully analyze their situation and potential, and decide on the plan that will carry the church forward into the ongoing will of God. It is best if this is considered long before there is a leadership change. To wait until then may be to wait too long.

Gaining congregational participation and agreement with the pastoral selection process is necessary. The use of search committees, congregational surveys/meetings, private and public interviews, and a determined effort for openness in the process can be beneficial. Another possible scenario, especially if the present pastor senses the will of God for new pastoral leadership early, is to select the successor and allow a time of transition, leading up to the actual change.

## **Women in Leadership and Ministry**

Leadership in the local church is open to all whom God calls without limitation based on gender. The Assemblies of God Bylaws, Article VII, Section 2, paragraph I, states that “divinely called and qualified women may also serve the church in the ministry of the Word,” and “are eligible to serve in all levels of church ministry, and/or district and General Council leadership.” The call of God is determinative of the right and privilege of service in the local church. He pours His Spirit out on all flesh, equipping each for ministry in His kingdom (Acts 2:17–18, quoting Joel 2:28–29).<sup>2</sup>

## **Ministry Team**

A ministry team of both volunteer and paid members, assigned to various ministries and groups in the congregation, joins the senior leadership of the local church in important ministry roles. The constitution and bylaws of the assembly determine the procedures for selection, hiring, and the lines of accountability. Most often, congregational need, ministry opportunity, or a challenge or concern defines the precise ministries to be carried out by members of the ministry team.

The ministry team is an essential component of the pastoral leadership of the local church. The team should be representative of the demography of the congregation, be diverse, and be fully committed to the goals of the senior leadership. They should be encouraged to seek ministerial credentials as appropriate to their roles. Ministry assignments should be clear, the ministry team should be honored as ministers among the congregation, and they should not be subject to dismissal merely because a change has taken place in the senior leadership.

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete presentation of the position regarding women in leadership and ministry, see the Assemblies of God Position Paper, “The Role of Women in Ministry,” <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/The-Role-of-Women-in-Ministry>.

## **Governance in the Local Church**

### **Styles of Governance in the Local Church**

Structure and organization in the first-century church were elementary and developmental. Apostolic leadership concerned itself with the organizational structure only as it was needed to sustain and support the work of the Spirit. It is in this observation that a fundamental principle of governance emerges. Structure and organization are never ends in themselves; they provide basic “systems” by which the life of the Spirit in the church can be supported and encouraged. In this, we see flexibility and adaptability. In other words, all matters of governance in the Early Church were consequential to the work of the Spirit rather than a divinely revealed template to be imposed on every new congregation.

#### **New Testament Patterns**

Consistent with Old Testament patterns, the Early Church continued to set apart those designated as elders (*presbyteros*). Elders are associated with James in the administration of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 21:18). The role of elders is expressed more widely in the life of the church as seen in Acts 15:6, 23. The apostle Paul does not mention elders in his earlier epistles, possibly suggesting that “form” followed “function,” with the structure being put in place only as the need arose. However, Paul appointed elders in each of the churches that he founded (Acts 14:23). Appointments to leadership roles were singular in purpose: to support and sustain the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. As was noted earlier, the terms “elder” (*presbyteros*) and “overseer/bishop” (*episkopos*) are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5–9, and probably express the ministerial role of the pastor.

#### **Three Historical Models of Governance**

Three basic models of church government have emerged in the history of the church: episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational. While none of the three is sustained in its purest form, each having some characteristics of the others, they are nonetheless distinguishable by specific traits. In the episcopal model, authority flows from the top, and the lead ministers may be referred to as bishops, with presbyters and deacons serving in subordinate ways. In the presbyterian model, authority is vested in a group of elected leaders, often identified as ruling elders, who along with the teaching elder(s) oversee the governance of the local church. In the congregational model, the ultimate authority resides in the membership of the church. Again, each of the three models bears certain similarities to the others. All three have aspects of the others—oversight roles, committee functions, and congregational influence.

#### **The Assemblies of God Historical Model**

While new models of governance are emerging, the congregational model has, for the most part, held a place of prominence in the Assemblies of God. Consistent with this model, the congregation has the responsibility of providing oversight and direction for the church. It elects the lead pastor and the official board (referred to as deacons and/or trustees). While there are many variations to this model as described here, the essentials remain constant.

Issues impacting the church are brought before open meetings of the congregation for discussion and decision. The elected leadership roles are considered representatives of the entire congregation and subject to the local church. The constitution and bylaws of the assembly determine the lines and limits of authority both for the congregation and for the elected leadership.

## Contemporary Models

Each new generation brings with it a renewed commitment to creativity, innovation, and inspiration. While these qualities are admirable and should be encouraged, they should be accompanied by certain safeguards and cautions. Typically, the pendulum swings widely and exposes the critical need for balance. For example, impatience with a congregational model of governance can invite a consolidation of leadership that may ultimately lack the balance that will assure strong continuity and vitality. Conversely, the desire for strong congregational control can strip leadership of the flexibility it needs to govern effectively.

The following safeguards and cautions are given to promote the kind of healthy balance that will provide the best in the governance of the local church:

1. Any pursuit for control over the body of Christ that is not balanced with a spirit of true humility will thwart the progress of the local church. A spirit of unlimited power is a violation of servant leadership.
2. Leadership titles described in Scripture speak more to the function of ministry than to personal position. Titles are subservient and incidental to the work that emerges from an authentic call. That a minister may or may not be referred to as an “apostle” or “prophet” does not exclude the presence of “apostolic” and “prophetic” forms of ministry.
3. The church needs and must encourage an entrepreneurial and progressive attitude from leadership. However, those qualities must not be at the expense of the highest level of integrity.
4. The motivational energy for fruitful ministry is found in an unselfish and wholehearted commitment to the building of the kingdom of God. Territorialism and a spirit of jealousy will hinder and limit the effectiveness of ministry and will impede the work of God in its effort to reach its community. Recognition seeking is contrary to servant leadership.
5. Every minister needs the discipline of willing submission to the authorities that God has put in place. Sectional, district, and national leadership provide that much-needed presence of security and accountability.



## **Multisite Models**

Some congregations are finding a way to extend their ministry by opening additional sites for people to gather for worship and discipleship. In these multisite models, and they do vary, governance and responsibility reside on the main campus. Often each site will have a “pastor” who is part of the central campus ministry team assigned to serve the specific location. He/She is accountable to the main campus and is responsible for pastoral care and direction at the designated site.

The worship service from the main campus often is video-linked to each site, so there is a shared worship experience and sermon-teaching. This model, which is increasingly popular, does allow for the extension of ministry and accountability at each site.

## **Eldership Models**

Among the governance shifts is an “eldership model,” with a greater amount of authority vested in a group of elders, rather than solely in the congregation. The advantages of this model, or one of its many variations, is that it provides greater flexibility, encourages entrepreneurial leadership, and is said to be more consistent with an “apostolic” form of leadership.

Among the many variations of the “eldership” model will be found greater or lesser involvement of the congregation, specific definition of roles within the group of elders, and a wide variety of reporting and accountability systems. In this model of governance, there is a clear shift from congregational governance to designated or assigned governance.

Some advocates of the “eldership model” view it as more consistent with the patterns of leadership observable in the Early Church. They argue against a “democratic-electoral” approach to governance in favor of a more “apostolic” or “Spirit-directed” approach to governance. The evidence of the New Testament, however, shows both appointments and “election” to leadership in the church.

In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders” in the churches they founded. The apostle Paul states that Titus was “chosen by the churches to accompany us” (2 Corinthians 8:19). The word used in both instances is *cheirotoneo*, which etymologically is translated “choose, elect by raising hands.” Such practice suggests a participatory approach to the selection of leadership. The Early Church practiced a variety of methods by which leaders were selected for ministry and service. This speaks to a kind of fluid and flexible approach to governance practices and models in the New Testament church. This observation becomes instructive when the church today is considering biblical patterns and forms relative to church governance.

## **Relationship of the Local Church to the Assemblies of God**

The Constitution of the Assemblies of God, Article XI: Local Assemblies, identifies four kinds of local churches in their relationship to the Assemblies of God. The Constitution provides a detailed explanation of each; this paper summarizes that material.

## **General Council Affiliated Churches**

General Council affiliated churches are given a Certificate of Affiliation from The General Council of the Assemblies of God based on their acceptance of the tenets of faith, their adoption of membership standards, having at least twenty members, being incorporated, having enough qualified members to fill leadership roles, and being able to make provisions for a pastor. The General Council affiliated church has the right of self-government and is subordinate to the General Council in matters of doctrine and polity.

## **District Council Affiliated Churches**

District council affiliated churches are not yet able to meet the requirements for being General Council affiliated and are under the supervision of the district/network, according to the district/network's constitution and bylaws.

## **Parent Affiliated Churches**

Parent affiliated churches are under the supervision of the parenting church, according to the constitution and bylaws of the parent church. The relationship between the parenting church and the parent affiliated church varies widely. They generally fit the multisite governance model mentioned above. Geographical boundaries do not limit parent affiliated churches.

## **Cooperating Assemblies**

Cooperating assemblies are churches agreeing with the Assemblies of God's Statement of Fundamental Truths who enter into a cooperative status with a district/network. These churches have not, but may, officially affiliate with the district/network when they meet the expectations of the district/network.

## **Relationship of the Local Church to the Government**

The local church must be aware of and follow the laws governing nonprofit groups in their locale. Each local church should research the registration and reporting requirements of the local, state, and federal governments and implement processes to comply. The presentation of the local church should always evidence compassion and commitment to the needs of their community, which can be enhanced as the church is compliant with local regulations. Only in the extreme situation of a conflict with laws that would limit the clear enunciation of the gospel message should anything less be considered.

An essential aspect of compliance with legal expectations is incorporation. Some of the advantages of the church being incorporated are (1) the church is recognized by the state; (2) the church can own and transfer property in the name of the church; (3) members of the church are shielded from personal liability for acts of other members; (4) the church can enter into contracts or agreements as a corporation; and (5) the church has standing to sue and be sued.<sup>3</sup> Specific requirements may vary from state to state, so checking with the local courthouse and state offices is advised. Incorporation will add another layer of local leadership to the church, that of the trustee. In most cases, members of the official board of the church can also be designated as trustees.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John P. Joseph, "Church Incorporation: Right or Wrong?"

[http://www.enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201002/201002\\_036.incorporating.cfm](http://www.enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201002/201002_036.incorporating.cfm).

<sup>4</sup> For a more complete explanation of the relationship of the local church to the government, see Richard R. Hammar, *Pastor, Church & Law*, 3rd ed. (Matthews, NC: Christian Ministry Resources, 2000); Richard R. Hammar, *Church Governance: What*

## Conclusion

The apostle Peter provides a helpful and challenging statement that summarizes the topic of leadership and governance in the Church. “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2–3).

The implications of this portrait are profound. Spiritual leadership, which is caring for the congregation as a shepherd cares for the sheep, is based on the willingness to serve. Sadly, some have sought to rule more than to serve, to strive for title and prestige rather than to emulate the attributes of a servant. Servanthood should mark the attitude of the leader and determine the shape and implementation of the governing model for the local church.

Oversight is defined in terms of humility and service rather than appointment and recognition. It takes more to be a true leader than mere position and title. The governing model should emphasize, then, humility and service in its structure and contours. Willingness rather than constraint is the heart of authentic leadership. When constraint and control surface, Christ-honoring leadership is thwarted.

Greed has no place in the hearts of spiritual leaders. A spirit of covetousness violates in radical ways that to which Christ calls His servants. The desire for power and control, which can be evidenced in a governing structure, must not be the motivational force in leading the church. Being an example is the key to a quality of leadership that is effective and impactful.