



Rural Ministries exists to help plant and grow churches in the countryside. We work with a wide range of partner evangelical churches. Each one is different and comes from a variety of church traditions.

Our primary focus is on the mission of the church but assistance is frequently sought regarding matters of church practice. At some point in establishing a new church, or reviewing the leadership structure in an existing one, some challenging questions are inevitable.

- What do we mean by leadership?
- Who should be a leader in the church?
- What leadership structure is most appropriate?
- Are all leadership positions open to both men and women?
- How should leaders be appointed and how long should they serve?

Christians will want to avoid the danger of seeking to establish patterns of spiritual leadership based on secular models. They will stress the importance of looking to the Bible for guidance, but why do many disagree on what they discover?

More questions than answers



Some questions cannot be answered with simple answers. The way to discover how leadership should operate in a particular church will require careful Bible study, discussion and prayer, followed by appropriate decision making. We should all be prepared to honestly acknowledge that many of our presuppositions may be influenced by our prejudices and possible previous church experiences.

When Christians disagree



Where people have different perspectives, tensions may surface and arguments commence. Healthy churches do not mind differences of opinion but find ways to resolve vital issues. This is possible where careful listening, patience, love and submission to one another, takes place out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21) Someone who holds a different point of view is not my enemy but my brother or sister in Christ.

Unity with diversity



This short paper does not seek to answer every difficult question or attempt to tell a church what leadership model they should adopt. It will identify different church leadership patterns and then point to the relevant Biblical material. There are questions along the way and some suggestions to help discover what may be appropriate in your situation.

1. Patterns of church leadership

Since the birth of the church, various models of church government have emerged. These are often one of the defining characteristics of an individual church or denomination. Each have interpreted Scripture in particular ways but also have been influenced by historical and cultural factors. Throughout church history patterns of church leadership have been described by various names. The three most identifiable forms are Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational. In addition there are a growing number of churches seeking to establish some new models of leadership. You will discover that there are some similarities and many differences both between and in each grouping.

Episcopal Form of Government



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

The Church of England, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox churches recognise a form of church government involving Bishops, Clergy and Laity.

They point to the New Testament use of the Greek word *episkopos*, meaning overseer or bishop. The primary leadership of the apostles especially Peter, John, and James provides the starting point for apostolic succession. Bishops today have responsibility over a diocese, an archbishop over bishops, and synods serve as advisory councils.

Methodists and Lutherans reflect aspects of this understanding of church government, although without the claim to apostolic succession.

Presbyterian Form of Government



Presbyterianism was formally established in 1692 in Scotland where it emerged as a response to both the Episcopal form of church government and to the interference in the church on the part of monarchs in England.

Presbyterianism refers to a church which is governed by *presbyters* (elders). Elders are collectively known as the "session" of a local congregation. The minister or "teaching elder," is also known as the moderator. The next level within the Presbyterian structure is the presbytery, which is composed of the ministers and the "ruling" elders of each

congregation within the presbytery's geographical region. Although ministers are chosen and called by a congregation, they are inducted by the presbytery. This presbytery has extensive power over congregations within its jurisdiction. It is, in turn, responsible to the general assembly which is the final authority for all matters. It is made up of equal numbers of ministers and elders who are Presbyterian representatives.

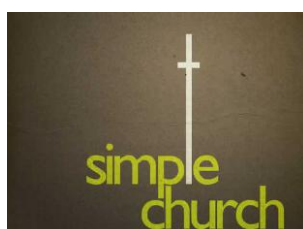
Congregational Form of Government



The Reformation in the 16th century marked a significant shift in power from clergy to laity. Congregational or independent groups of believers started to develop. They reacted against both Queen Elizabeth I's desire to enforce uniformity within the Church of England and those Puritans who wanted to see the national church reorganized on Presbyterian rather than Episcopalian lines.

The concept of a state church was rejected in favour of the "gathered church" principle. The church should consist only of those who have responded to the call of Christ and who have covenanted together to live as his disciples. As a result the local church should be independent and not be subject to bishops or magistrates. Authority and power, is placed in the hands of the whole church. Church members participate in church government and usually appoint their ministers and leaders.

Simple Church



New and reforming movements are a constant feature of church history. A growing number, of especially younger people, are departing from the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational models of church government. These may be spoken of as institutional or inherited church patterns.

Seeking simplicity and depth of relationships they point to the first Christians in Jerusalem. With very little structure they met in homes and in the temple courts, where those who believed the message concerning Jesus were baptized and committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers. (Acts 2:41-42) As churches were established throughout the Roman Empire they reason that they were very simple and flexible organizations.

Activity 1

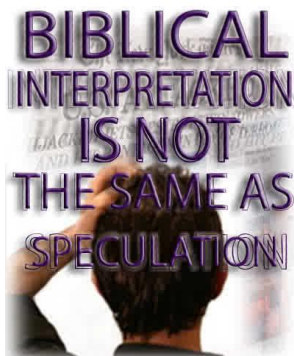


Review the four different approaches to church government.

1. What are their particular strengths and weaknesses?
2. Why do you think Christians have not adopted a uniform approach to church government?
3. Do you think it was the Lord's intention that they should?

2. New Testament Church Leadership

In order to accurately interpret the Bible, it is important to discover the purposes of the authors, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and the literary forms they used.



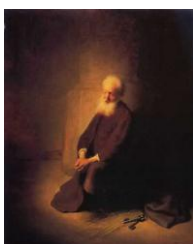
The book of Acts, tells in a narrative genre, the story of the church. It is described at a particular time and among identifiable cultures. The story is of people empowered by the Holy Spirit in a dynamic and changing environment. Luke is not setting out to establish a specific pattern of church leadership.

Paul in writing to churches is often dealing with specific issues that have surfaced and placed newly established churches in jeopardy. Strong words were often required to warn against false teaching and ungodly practices. What is certain is that he believed in church leaders, who could both teach and guard the gospel, as well as providing attractive models of the Christian faith.

Looking at different periods in the early days of the church will point to some key principles. It may not fully determine what the most appropriate church structure should be.

Jesus Church

The Lord who said that he would build his church (Matthew 16:18) had little to say about its long term leadership or organization. He warned against the leadership style of his day, where people exercised authority by lording it over others. Instead in his kingdom, service was the route to greatness. (Matthew 20:24-26) As the good shepherd he demonstrated the perfect model for any Christian leadership. It requires service, sacrifice, and selflessness.



The first apostles were the foundational leaders and established the early church community in Jerusalem, though their primary role was to bear witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:21).



The church in Jerusalem was inevitably influenced by Jewish culture and values. Synagogues were led by a “ruler” of the synagogue and a “servant” of the synagogue, both of whom were office bearers. Christian elders are very much seen as the counterpart of Jewish elders, a group of senior respected men given the general oversight of the Christian community. Deacons were the equivalent of the servant in the synagogue.

3. Growth and Development

As with all new movements, including the most simple, progression is evident. Different words are used and new patterns developed.

Early days

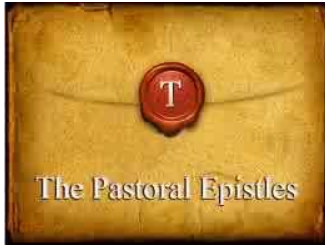


- As Jesus had said, Peter was the leader of the twelve apostles. (Matthew 16:18)
- Matthias who had been a witness to Jesus’ death and resurrection, was appointed to replace Judas following the casting of lots. (Acts 1:26)
- In Acts 6 the apostles were in danger of giving

inadequate time to the teaching of the word and prayer, so took steps to ensure practical matters received attention from those full of the Spirit and possessing good sense.

- Between AD 45 and AD49 there is evidence of Elders in Judea (Acts 11:30), exercising a prayer and healing ministry (James 5:13-16) and being appointed by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:21-23)
- Apostles and Elders are involved in the key decisions made at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. We hear very little more about the twelve apostles from this time on.
- The early letters of Paul indicate a high degree of informality and fluidity in the titles used of leaders. Writing to the church at Thessalonica, he simply refers to the “leaders” of the church. His letters to the church at Corinth also have no reference to any elders or other leadership titles. His emphasis was that all believers had a ministry, while some were leaders (1 Corinthians 12:1-31).
- In Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi he writes to the “overseers and deacons” (Philippians 1:1). We have no explanation as to who these leaders were or what they did.
- Writing to the church at Ephesus (60-62 A.D.) Paul emphasises the equipping nature of church leadership (Ephesians 4:11-15). Leaders are given by Christ to equip believers to do the work of the ministry so that the church may grow and become mature.

Later letters



In the Pastoral Epistles (AD 63-65) there appears to be a more settled leadership structure. The qualities required by an overseer or bishop and deacon are considered. (1 Timothy 3; 5:17 Titus 1:5). The word “Deacon” was an everyday word that referred to all believers, then later became a title for people appointed to ministries involving practical service.

A variety of other ministry and leadership titles are mentioned in the New Testament, including “apostles” (Ephesians 4:11), “prophets” (1 Corinthians 12:29; 14:29. Ephesians 4:11), “teachers” (1 Corinthians 12:29. Acts 13:1), “evangelists” (Ephesians 4:11. 2 Timothy 4:5) and “pastors and teachers”, or more literally, “shepherds” (Acts 20:28. Ephesians 4:11). The specific nature of their roles, how they were appointed or the way in which they related to each other is not described. There are divergent views on whether the ministry of apostles and prophets continue today and in what form.

Activity 2



1. Why do the Gospels say very little about the church and how it should be structured?
2. Do you think the Acts and Epistles indicate there may have been different patterns of church leaderships in different places?
3. How do you understand the following: “Our static, inflexible, self-centred structures are “heretical structures” because they embody a heretical doctrine of the church?” (John Stott)
4. Why is the character of a leader more important than style or technique?

4. Common Ground



Although matters of church government often lead to different perspectives, there is considerable agreement across a range of both old and new churches on the following:

Leadership is necessary



God gives some believers to be leaders in every church. They are people of influence whose life and character encourage others to follow the Lord. Church leadership is “servant leadership” and leaders are required to be of godly character (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Leaders are to serve the church by encouraging its health and growth.

One of the basic terms New Testament writers used to describe the function of elders was “to manage” (*proistemi*) or “direct the affairs of the church well”. (1 Timothy 5:17) They are also to “shepherd or tend the flock of God” (1 Peter 5:2). The ministry of preaching and teaching the word of God is vital to keeping the flock or church healthy. (1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 4:2)

There is some indication that someone in the church will be recognized as the primary or focal point leader. Jesus did not leave behind a “leaderless group.” We find mention of Peter and the other eleven apostles (Acts 2:14), then James and the elders (Acts 21:18). James emerged as the key leader among the elders in Jerusalem. Timothy and Titus were the primary leaders in Ephesus and Crete.

Where possible, financially supporting spiritual leaders who devote their time and energy to ministry is encouraged by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:14 and 1 Timothy 5:17.

Leaders will seek to provide vision and future direction for the church. Vision is what Michelangelo saw in the rock; he didn’t see the stone; he saw the statue complete and beautiful. Diligent work is required to turn a vision into reality and wise church leaders will encourage other gifted people to develop more detailed plans.

Everyone has a part to play



All Christians have a ministry. “Each one” is given at least one spiritual gift and will be held responsible for their faithful use of it for the benefit of others. The church is a “body” where everyone is to be valued and contributes (see 1 Corinthians 12:1-26. Romans 12:3-8. 1 Peter 4:7-11).

God has designed the church so that those with the spiritual gift of leadership should lead, those with a teaching gift should teach, those with a mercy gift should be the mercy showers, those with caring gifts should care, etc.

Church leadership is always plural



Nowhere in the New Testament is there any encouragement to a single, unaccountable, autocratic leadership. Virtually every time elders are spoken of in the Scriptures in connection with a church, the noun is plural. Paul appointed “elders” in every city (Acts 14:23). Just as God is a Trinity in community, so leadership in the church is best exercised in a team environment, where unity is sought among diverse people. Team players are essential.

Leaders should be recognised



As a community of Christians becomes more established the time will come to recognize those whom God has called and equipped to lead. There appears to be no set formula for this although the apostles legitimized specific leaders through the “laying on of hands” (Acts 6:6; 9:17. 1 Timothy 4:14)

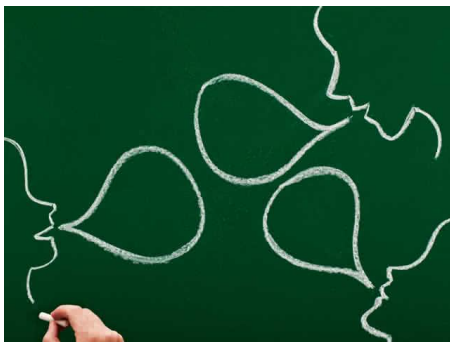
What’s in a name?



Many churches have adopted the exact terms used from the Bible for their leadership titles – “elder”, “bishop” or “deacon”. The use of these terms reflects the language of the day. The word “bishop” means “overseer”, so it was a title given to those who were overseeing or supervising the church. The word “deacon” means “servant”, so it was given to those who served in the church.

While some consider it important to continue to use these New Testament words, others will reason the words no longer convey the original intention, and church traditions have tainted their original meaning. Many churches are using the term “Leaders” or “Leadership Team” as they emphasize the functions of leaders and the necessary tasks of preaching, teaching, praying, motivating, caring, training and enabling others in their areas of service. This approach may also permit younger people and women to be involved in using leadership gifts, and leaves individual churches or denominations to decide whether they should be recognized as being primary leaders with preaching, teaching and overseeing responsibilities.

Activity 3



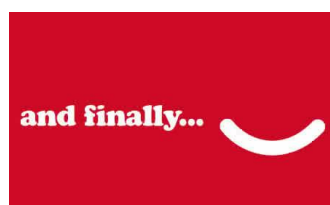
1. What happens in a church without recognizable leadership?
2. If you were part of a new church what leadership structure would you advocate?
3. Do you agree with the statement, “No particular structure of church life is divinely ordained?”
4. How do you think church leaders should be appointed?
5. Leadership in the church is never easy. How do you ensure that leaders find their work is a joy and not a burden? (See Hebrews 13:17)
6. What relationships with other churches, denominations or groupings are valuable? How can you both give and receive?
7. Would you agree that “the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.” (If you want to know what Jesus is like, look at the church.) Bishop Leslie Newbigin

CONCLUSIONS

1. Churches require visionary leadership where there are people who take the helm and steer the ship. Those leaders should display godly qualities of character that are recognised by others. Effective leaders concentrate on the big issues and do not get drawn into unhelpful controversy. They know how to involve others and properly delegate rather than “dump” responsibility.
2. Detailed study of the Biblical use of certain leadership terms and structures may reveal a set of important principles, rather than an exact blueprint. It is not possible to claim certain knowledge on how church leaders should be appointed or for how long they should serve. There appears to be the freedom for churches to determine their own practices.
3. Where someone is appointed as a primary leader, vicar, pastor or minister, they serve as a “first among equals.” A proper system of accountability is necessary. Effective teamwork and mutual support among all leaders strengthens churches.
4. Leadership patterns in smaller churches are likely to be less highly developed than in larger churches. A small group of people, committed to working together according to their gifts, may be more appropriate than having a structure that does not have the people to make it effective. Starting with what you have is a solid foundation for future growth.
5. It is important for a church to resolve “What leadership structure is both consistent with New Testament leadership principles and will be most effective in a specific situation, with a particular group of people?”
6. Agreed and stable leadership patterns enable the church to focus on Kingdom-matters rather than internal issues.

Summary

The way we “do church” is never static, therefore we need to establish the principles and then determine the practice. Respect is required for other churches and individuals who may see things differently.



“Church isn’t where you meet. Church isn’t a building. Church is what you do. Church is who you are. Church is the human outworking of the person of Jesus Christ. Let’s not go to Church, let’s be the Church.” Bidget Willard