

### III

## Leading a Church

*The Old Testament describes in great detail how the tabernacle was to be built, priests and Levites organized and rituals conducted. Similar regulations about the church are nowhere to be found. Apparently God wants us to prayerfully use our creativity and intelligence to adapt Biblical principles to our own situations. Here are some options and ideas to help all your ministries and administrative functions work together to fulfill God's three-fold purpose in your particular church.*



## AUTHORITY AND DECISION MAKING

**It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements.** – *Acts 15:28*

All true churches recognize God as the ultimate authority. They don't all agree on the best way to hear and do what God is saying. Who has authority to state God's direction? Who decides what to do about it? Who actually does the work, and how? Our understanding of how God speaks to his people, and how we work to carry out his will, largely determines how we organize our churches.

Every church faces two basic questions, which can be expressed in different ways. **Where does God want us to go, and how does he want us to get there?** What does God want us to be, and what does God want us to do? What is God's strategy for our church, and what are his tactics for implementing that strategy? I call the first of these questions directional, and the second operational.

### Directional Authority

Every church can't excel at every ministry. Not even the largest church has enough people and resources to do everything that can be done. And some things are mutually exclusive. For instance, you can keep all your people in

one congregation, or you can send some of your people out to plant new congregations. Who decides which you will do? Who has the authority to tell your congregation what direction God wants it to take at a given time?

**Some churches believe God gives direction through an authority outside the local congregation.** It might be an individual such as a bishop or an apostle, or it might be a group such as a denominational body. Perhaps all the pastors in a region get together and pray for God's direction for their area.

**Some churches believe God's direction should come from the pastor, with no other input.** Certainly pastors should always be praying for God's guidance. But if the pastor is the only person in the church who knows how to hear from God, it seems to me the pastor is failing and the church is in trouble! No individual, including the pastor, has all knowledge (1 Corinthians 13:9). *There is safety in having many advisors* (Proverbs 11:14). 1 Corinthians 14:29 says that when someone believes they have a word from God, the others who are experienced in hearing God's direction should weigh what is said. We see this in action with the Jerusalem council in Acts 15.

**In congregational churches, final authority rests in the whole church meeting together.** Some restrict their voting membership to exclude new Christians who may still be largely influenced by worldly values and ways of thinking. Between congregational meetings, a group of leaders work with the pastor to keep things running.

**Regardless of the specific model, most churches depend on a group of mature leaders to join the pastor in discerning God's direction.** In some the pastor has the final decision, advised by the leadership team. In others the leadership team decides, advised by the pastor. Sometimes authority is split, with the pastor ruling in areas such as worship, and the leadership team in things like finances.

Often the form of church government seems to reflect the dominant political philosophy and culture more than theological considerations. Churches that originated in cultures ruled by kings tend to be comfortable with centralized authority. Churches that started in democracies, such as America, tend toward a congregational model. **All kinds of churches can**

**do good ministry.**

## Vision and Mission

Somebody said, “If you keep on doing what you’ve always done, you’ll keep on getting what you’ve always gotten.” Or, in words attributed to Albert Einstein, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.”

Whether directional authority rests in an outside person or body, the pastor, a group, or the whole congregation, it’s important to **periodically step back and take a fresh look at your church’s direction, and whether that is still where God is calling you.** Otherwise you may keep doing the same things over and over again, even if they stopped working years ago.

What do you think God wants your church to look like five or ten years from now? What does he want you to be known for? What does he want you to be doing? What kind of people does he want you becoming? To put it in the language of the business world, what is your vision?

What do you think God wants your church to accomplish? What specific part of “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” has God assigned to you? In other words, what is your mission?

Your vision describes what God wants your church to be. Your mission is what God wants your church to do. When these are clear they give your church direction. You can simply **look at every program and idea and ask, “How will this move us toward our vision? How will this help us accomplish our mission?”** If you don’t have a good answer, why do it?

## Strategic Planning

Clear visions and missions don’t just happen. Every year or two you need to get your church leaders together to seek God’s direction for your church.

Don’t call it a meeting. Call it a vision retreat or a time of discernment, to indicate that this is special and important. Include your official leaders, but don’t stop there. **Include informal influencers,** the ones other people listen

to before they form opinions. And try to include one or two representatives of the people you hope will form the future of your church, such as new Christians or young adults. Make your group big enough to include the voices you need to hear, and small enough to have good discussions.

If possible, meet somewhere other than your church or usual meeting place. A park or a restaurant or even a room in another church offers a change of scenery that can really make a difference in how people see and think about things.

Many pastors find it helpful to have an outside person, such as a neighboring pastor, lead the process. They may say exactly what you would have said, but a different voice makes it sound fresh. Your people may think, “This expert is saying the same thing our pastor said. Our pastor must be really smart!” And it’s good for you to sit back and let somebody else take the lead for a change.

**Start with prayer and Bible study.** Focus on God’s purpose for the church, or how to discern God’s leading.

Ask the group to **list the strengths** of your church. Focusing on strengths rather than problems builds faith and new ideas.

**Talk about the community** where God has placed you. Ask God to reveal, through prayer and discussion, why he put your congregation there. What can your church, with its specific people, strengths and resources, offer your community, with its specific people, needs and opportunities?

**Develop a simple sentence** that gives a picture of what God wants you to become in the next few years. This is your vision statement. Develop another simple sentence that describes what God wants you to do for the next few years. This is your mission statement. If your time away accomplishes nothing more than these two statements it will be well worth it. Publicize those statements in the church, and keep them before the people. They’ll give your leaders and people a sense of direction that will bring unity and teamwork.

## Action Steps

Now that you know where you are going, **how will you get there?** Some leaders find it helpful to make a list of goals. Others find such a list artificial and constraining, preferring a more spontaneous approach. God can provide direction and guidance either way. Choose what works for your personality and leadership style. Just be sure you can communicate it all to those who do things the other way.

If you choose to list goals, make them as helpful as possible. A good church goal has seven characteristics, answering seven questions. Every goal should be:

1. **Prayer-based** – Did God inspire or approve this idea?
2. **Specific** – What exactly are we planning to do?
3. **Targeted** – How will it advance our vision and mission?
4. **Defined** – How will we know when we have achieved it?
5. **Supported** – Are the people we expect to do this excited about it?
6. **Timed** – When will we evaluate and adjust, and what is our final deadline?
7. **Worthwhile** – Will the benefits, tangible and intangible, be worth the cost in time, energy, resources, and the lost opportunity to do other things?

Even if you prefer not to write down a list of goals, keep these questions in mind. Use them to evaluate projects and ideas. They will keep the more spontaneous personalities from going off in the wrong direction, and they will help reassure and motivate those who like to see plans.

## Operational Authority

It's important to dream dreams and plan plans, but somebody has to keep things running day to day. Directional authority decides the big picture, like the general style of your worship service. Operational authority decides the details, like what songs you will sing this week.

**Operational decisions should be made by those doing the work.** As long as they stay within your directional guidelines and policies, let your

people use their initiative and creativity. As pastor, you don't need to be involved in every detail. Let whoever handles church money decide what bank to use. Let whoever cleans your meeting space decide what kind of broom to buy. Let whoever is in charge of the children set up the rotation of child-care workers. Once general direction and guidelines are set, the pastor and church leaders should only get involved if there is a problem.

Some pastors have trouble delegating. But **it's important to let others do the work**, even if you know you can do it better or more efficiently yourself. People learn and grow by doing things, and you free up your time to do the things that only you can do. If somebody does something differently than you would have, stop before you correct them. Prayerfully ask yourself if the difference between their way and your way is worth the negative effect your criticism will have on that leader's confidence and motivation. Most of the time it won't be. If it really is important, correct gently and in love.

## Meetings

If a decision involves more than one person, you need to communicate. In very simple cases email or a quick phone conversation may be enough. Often, though, it takes a meeting. When more than one person is working on a task, or when what one person does affects another person's area of responsibility, there's no substitute for face to face conversation.

### Vision Meetings

There are basically two kinds of meetings. The first are where you discern God's vision and guidance and prayerfully seek new ideas. I call those vision meetings.

Vision meetings can be about a big question like the direction of the church, or a specific issue like new ways to involve children in worship. The vision question should be the only agenda item. Formal parliamentary procedure has no place here. Instead, **encourage anything that generates new ideas**.

Ask God to guide you, then start brainstorming, mind mapping, journaling,



doodling, all together or in smaller groups – whatever works for you and your people. Don't stop to evaluate or discuss any one thing until you have a good long list of ideas. This can be hard, because as soon as an idea is mentioned, most people start thinking about how it might or might not work and how much it will cost. The problem is, if you deal with ideas as they come up, you may choose one idea and move on before a better idea has a chance to be considered. God is a creator, and he made us in his image. This is a time to let your people explore their creativity. Evaluate, prioritize and plan only after you have given yourself a lot of options to consider.

## Management Meetings

Vision meetings are exciting, but they don't actually make anything happen. That takes management meetings, where people share information, make plans, assign tasks, and attend to the many details of implementing the vision.

In thirty-four years of ministry **I've never had good success trying to combine management and vision meetings.** They involve different ways of thinking, different processes, and often different people. Visionaries are impatient with the details of management meetings, and hands-on people can feel like visioning meetings are unrealistic nonsense. Know which kind of meeting you need, and structure it accordingly.

## Elements of a Successful Meeting

### Notice

Before any meeting people need to know five things:

1. Who is invited
2. When and where to show up
3. What will be decided
4. What they will be expected to contribute
5. What to do if they can't be there

Find a consistent and effective way to get this information out.

## Attendance

Be clear about who is expected at the meeting. Announce whether others may attend and how they may be involved. May they speak in the discussions? May they participate in decision making?

Most pastors are glad to have any interested people attend church meetings, and usually it's a great way to learn and get involved. However, in some cases this may not be a good idea. Confidential issues should always be discussed in a closed meeting with only those who need to be involved. And sometimes people want to attend a meeting so they can push their own agenda. As with all policies, it's best to settle these points before a specific issue arises that may influence your judgment, or appear to.

## Leadership

As pastor, you don't need to be the one leading every meeting. In fact, as your people grow in Christian maturity and leadership skills, you don't even need to attend every meeting. Encourage your people to take leadership. It helps them grow and frees up your time.

## God-presence

Every church meeting should start by inviting God's presence and guidance. After all, it's his church, his people, his money, his ministry. When problems arise, as Pastor Kenneth Hagin used to tell his leaders, God is not up in heaven wringing his hands and saying, "Oh no, what are we going to do?" Make sure you do something right at the beginning that reminds everyone that this meeting is a God thing. Help people set aside worldly distractions and ways of doing things, and personally invite God to come and guide you.

Here's a quick and effective way to do this:

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1. Read aloud a short passage of Scripture
2. Read it again, perhaps from a different translation
3. Allow 30 seconds of silence for everyone to identify a word, idea or image that stood out to them
4. Take a minute for everyone to share that with the person next to them
5. Have several volunteers share what their partner said
6. Have one or more people pray, incorporating some of those thoughts as they invite God to join you, ask his guidance, and offer yourselves for his purposes

### Agenda

Management meetings need an agenda listing everything you need to accomplish. (If you don't know what you need to accomplish, don't have the meeting.) As the meeting goes along, the agenda reminds everyone how much you still need to cover. Every group has some people who just like to talk. When one of these folks starts telling stories or going off on a rabbit trail, the leader can gently call attention to the agenda to get the meeting back on track.

### Structure

There is no one right way to structure a meeting. Vision meetings should allow a lot of room for creativity. Management meetings need a way to keep people focused. Some meetings start with everyone reporting on their area of responsibility, followed by any old or new business that was not covered in the reports. Sometimes you may want to deal with an important issue first, so the decision is not rushed. Other times you may prefer to get small things out of way before dealing with a big issue. Make sure your agenda reflects the structure you want.

## Decision making

Where the pastor makes all the decisions, meetings are for providing information and, when asked for, advice or recommendations. At the other extreme, some systems require unanimous consensus for any decision to be final. In the middle are churches where decisions are made by voting, either among the leadership team or by the whole congregation.

All three of these methods have their strengths and weaknesses. The first allows for fast decisions, and may be necessary in churches where the pastor may be the only spiritually mature, experienced or informed person. However, this can be very draining for the pastor, and it may not allow much opportunity for others to grow. It can also create a lot of temptation for the pastor to become autocratic and even self-serving. As the saying goes, “power corrupts.”

Consensus sounds very humble and spiritual, but I believe it is based on two fallacies. First, it assumes that *unity in our faith* (Ephesians 4:13) requires unity in our opinions. Second, it assumes that all present in a meeting are sufficiently mature Christians that they are consistently led by the Spirit and never give in to their own biases or desires. Even Jesus didn’t have that among his own twelve chosen apostles. A requirement of unanimous consensus allows one person with a different opinion or motivation to block the entire church.

That leaves voting. Some say voting promotes divisiveness, but I think it just reveals it. As the deacon said to the pastor in the hospital, “Pastor, the church board hopes you get well soon, by a vote of five to four.”

Many churches say they make decisions by voting, especially in historically democratic cultures. In my experience, even in these churches a formal, counted and recorded vote is rarely taken. Instead, the right answer becomes clear as the issue is being discussed. As pastor, if you let it be known that you feel strongly about an issue, your reasoning and your respect will usually prevail. In other cases, as facts are presented and questions answered, a *de facto* consensus emerges. As things become clear, someone says something like, “It seems like what I’m hearing is this. Everybody in favor?” If someone

objects, they discuss it some more. If no one objects, they consider it a vote. And it is, in the sense that everyone had an opportunity to talk, and the opinion of the majority became clear. But this way people who don't feel strongly one way or another are not forced to take sides, and no one has to go on record as opposing the leader or the majority.

I believe this is the decision-making model used in the first Church Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). Everyone spoke, then James summed it up and put the conclusion into an official statement. Smart leaders listen to King Solomon: *Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers* (Proverbs 11:14).

If people seem to be evenly divided on a major issue, find a way to delay the decision if possible, or decide ahead of time that this decision will require a two-thirds or three-quarters majority. You don't want to make a decision that requires the whole church to be on board, only to have half of them walk away and leave you hanging.

Some churches recognize prophets who are known for their ability to hear from God. In many cases, if they say God has spoken to them about an issue, that settles it. A word from God can guide the pastor, create consensus, or sway a vote. The apostle Paul tells us to eagerly seek this gift (1 Corinthians 14:1), as it can be a real blessing. But it must be handled carefully. 1 Corinthians 14:29 tells us not to blindly accept prophetic words. Instead, a group of mature Christians should weigh every word that claims to come from God, because 1 Corinthians 13:9 says *we know in part and we prophesy in part* (ESV). A true prophet will humbly welcome this scriptural caution.

Prophets need to understand that their responsibility ends with accurately delivering the word to the appropriate person, usually you as pastor. It's not up to the prophet to make sure that you do what they think you should do about their word, or to denounce you as unspiritual if you don't (see Acts 21:7-14). But with these cautions, you should urge and train every person in leadership, and indeed in your church, to follow 1 Corinthians 14:1 *Let love be your highest goal! But you should also desire the special abilities the Spirit gives—especially the ability to prophesy.*

## Record keeping

Make sure someone is making an official record of your decisions. I don't know how many times I've had church folks ask me, "What did we decide about this? Who was supposed to do that? What date did we set? How did we do it last year?" My answer was usually, "I don't remember. Did anybody write it down?"

There's a lot of power in taking official minutes. If there's a dispute about what happened in the last meeting, people will go by whatever is written. That's why one of the first actions of many meetings is to review and approve the minutes of the previous one. That way if the secretary made a mistake it can be corrected. A review also reminds people of unfinished business, and if someone missed the previous meeting it helps them catch up.

## Assignments

One of the most frustrating things that can happen in any organization is when some important thing doesn't get done, because everybody thought someone else was going to do it. Whenever you make a decision make sure you also clearly decide who is responsible for doing whatever needs to be done to make it happen. If there's a deadline or a need to report back to someone, be sure that's clear as well.

## Next steps planning

Make a habit of asking, "What's next?" If an activity brings new people into contact with your church, how will you follow up with them? If a Bible study gets people excited about studying scripture, how will you capitalize on that excitement before it dies away? Always be thinking at least one step ahead.

## Approval and oversight

Some operational decisions made at the working level may need to be approved by someone with a larger view of the church's situation. Your money and volunteers are limited. Be sure everyone knows which ideas can be done immediately, and which ones need some kind of approval.

Especially with new workers, there may be a need for oversight. They may have the best intentions in the world, but if they misunderstood what they were supposed to do, or other obligations arose, or they just didn't have the ability, you might be very glad you made a progress check.

## Reporting

When an important decision has been made or an event has been planned or carried out, don't keep it a secret. Let your people know. Celebrate.

We tend to think, "I know about it, so everyone else must, too." But everyone else wasn't in the meeting. Everyone else may not have been part of the program. People get excited about their church when they feel like it's making a difference. But if they don't know what you are doing, they won't know the difference you are making.

Even better, when it's appropriate, publicize your activities to the community. The only thing better than your church folks feeling good about your church is for the community to feel that way.

## Evaluation

Once your event or activity has happened, don't just move on. Evaluate. How did it go? Were the results worth the trouble and expense? What worked well? What could be done better next time? Should there be a next time? How will you follow up?

## Points to Remember

- Be clear about who has the authority to make various kinds of decisions for your church.
- Be clear about what God wants your church to be and do, and support only what leads to that.
- Re-evaluate regularly.
- Work toward only doing what only you can do; delegating lets others grow.
- Do visioning and managing in separate meetings.
- Make meetings effective.
- Keep clear records of decisions and responsibilities.