Restructuring the Church: Congregational Government That Works in the 21st Century

By
Kent R. Hunter
Leader
www.churchdoctor.org

Restructuring a church is one of the most challenging and rewarding activities that can help a church move more effectively toward fulfilling the Great Commission. I am frequently asked to give advice and direction concerning how that process can be established so that a church can be “reinvented” in a way that is more biblical and powerful for what God wants to accomplish. The truth is that many churches are organized on an American dream concept. The American dream originated in the idea of a democracy. But as the country matured, it became apparent that it works best as a republic form of government. That means that certain leaders are democratically elected or chosen, and they are allowed to represent the people. Everyone has an opportunity in the choosing process and everyone, theoretically, has an opportunity to be chosen—that is, to run for office.

Some churches have taken democracy to an extreme and tried to perpetuate a system in which everyone decides everything about everything. This is an attempt at pure democracy and in church circles is called a congregational form of government. It is neither biblical nor practical. Even in my family of four, we cannot operate on a purely democratic format. Nor should we. There are two of us—my wife and I—who have more knowledge, wisdom, and experience in this world than the other two—our children. While few people would debate that my wife and I should take some leadership when it comes to certain decisions, they would, in turn, take an idiosyncratic view of church life that would allow immature Christians to be deluged by difficult, challenging, and somewhat controversial decisions that they are not ready to make in their present level of spiritual depth. Many young Christians attend their first congregational meeting and leave disillusioned about how Christians not only disagree, but often appear somewhat disagreeable.

To get more practical, the process of reorganizing a church is a long and challenging one. Reinventing the structure is not an easy task, but it certainly can and should be accomplished. You should take as much care to change church government as you would consider relocating your church. If you want success, you should use outside intervention, like a Church Doctor consultant who can protect you and guide you through
the process.

**PHILOSOPHICAL STEP**

The process begins philosophically. It is my perception that you need to begin with a very clear understanding of who you are, what you do, and where you are going. To develop who you are is to provide a philosophy of ministry statement. Two resources can help: Harold J. Westing, *Create and Celebrate Your Church's Uniqueness: Designing a Church Philosophy of Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Resources, 1993) and Kent R. Hunter, *Your Church Has Personality: Find Your Focus—Maximize Your Mission* (Lima, OH: Fairway Press, 1997). The philosophy of ministry statement will reflect the personality or the uniqueness of your church and answers the question, “Who are we?” It is essential that you begin by being very clear in this area. It should be about 10 to 20 paragraphs long.

**MISSION STATEMENT**

Developing a mission statement is a second philosophical step. In my use of this term, the mission statement is short (2-3 sentences) and it describes what you do. Obviously, you shouldn’t create that statement until you have developed a philosophy of ministry statement. Your mission statement answers the question, “What do we do?”

**Motto**

From that mission statement, you should develop a motto. The motto is a one-sentence statement everyone can remember. It is a distillation of your mission statement. This is the statement that should appear on stationery, Web sites, signs, business cards, the lobby wall, etc.

**Vision Statement**

Once this previous work has been done, develop a vision statement. I use this term to describe where you believe God is calling your church to go in the future, perhaps over the next 5-10 years or more. It basically describes what your church will look like down the road, historically speaking. For developing a vision, I recommend two books by George Barna: *The Power of Vision* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992) and *Turning Vision into Action* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 1996). Your vision statement answers the question, “Where are we going?”

At this point, I would urge you to stop and, if you haven’t done so already, read the book by Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 1995). I especially like the concept Rick has expanded from Henry Blackaby’s *Experiencing God*. Rick talks about how we should not pray for God to bless what we are doing, but instead, ask God to
show us and lead us to do what He is blessing. That is an extremely important concept, theologically speaking.

After having read through Warren’s book, I urge you to go back and refine (or fine-tune) your philosophy of ministry, mission statement, motto, and vision statement. I expect that you would do this in a season of prayer and submission to God’s leading.


**Worldview Issues**

One of the more recent discoveries about what shapes “the way we do church” is the impact of worldviews. A worldview is the way you understand the world and the way the world works. Everybody has a worldview. It is shaped by your experiences, knowledge, and those who have influenced you. Technically, every Christian should have a biblical worldview. However, we live in a strongly secular culture. Instead of being salt and light to the world, often the world—bombarding us with TV commercials, ads, films, stories, etc.—has flavored the thinking of those in the church. Worldviews are important because, even though they are subconscious, they drive behavior more than anything else. Most churches spend a good portion of their time symptom solving because they don’t get to the issues behind the issues. The core issues are subconsciously-held worldviews.

If you read *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren and found it had impact, it’s because it challenges your worldview. My book *Discover Your Windows: Lining Up With God’s Vision* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press,
2002) provides research on the ten worldviews of active Christians that impact the health and vitality of the local church. For example, we show that 57% of active and involved Christians subconsciously think of their church as a “country club” (our terminology) because they feel its purpose is to “share God’s love with one another” rather than to make disciples.

Many churches use Discover Your Windows in small groups accompanied by a weekly message preached by the pastor on each of the worldviews. This is all organized in a campaign called the 70 Days of Vision. There is a complete campaign kit available to help your church launch this campaign. Call Church Doctor Ministries at (800) 626-8515 to place your order.

Biblical worldview is always at a subconscious level, but it drives our behavior more than anything else. Over the years, Church Doctor Ministries has developed the only consultation process that diagnoses the worldviews of individuals within the congregation. We have done this because, in our Diagnostic Consultation, our goal is transformational change for the effectiveness of the church toward the Great Commission. If churches are going to be transformed, then people need to become transformed in the way they understand the world (of the church) and the way the world works. That means recapturing biblical worldviews. We have also designed a questionnaire called the Discover Your Windows Questionnaire (Corunna, IN: Church Doctor Ministries, 2003). This is available for a church to duplicate and distribute to the entire congregation for the purpose of allowing members to self-score their worldviews in ten key areas that impact the life of the church. It is also included as part of the 70 Days of Vision Campaign Resource Kit mentioned above.

The Discover Your Windows Questionnaire is a good way to start the 70 Days of Vision Campaign. This has had dramatic impact on congregations that have participated in the campaign and has reshaped the way people think about the world of the church. It is a great foundation for realigning the way we do church, or do the business of church, which relates to our subject of church government. The 70 Days of Vision Campaign can be conducted before, during, or after the Church Government Consultation process.

**Equip the People**

If you don’t do so already, begin to equip the lay people through
a ministry of spiritual gifts. To initiate this process, I suggest a training event on spiritual gifts similar to the workshop provided by Church Doctor Ministries, “I’m Special: A Workshop Designed to Help the Members of Your Church Discover Their Spiritual Gifts.” The Church Growth Institute in Lynchburg, Virginia, also provides seminars on spiritual gifts.

Another option is to have one of your staff or leaders teach a seminar on spiritual gifts—but it really works better if you can get someone from the outside and make it a “special” event in the life of your church. The key is ultimately to get as many people out for that event as possible. At the same time, you want to be looking for an individual in the congregation whom God will raise up, who has a passion for a spiritual gifts ministry and a gift mix that will provide dominant or subordinate gifts in leadership, administration, and faith. This should be a person who has good people skills and is in concert with the philosophy of ministry, mission statement, and vision statement of the church. This person can start a spiritual gifts team to follow through on what is learned about peoples’ gifts—and plug them into ministries. This person should develop a leadership team in the area of spiritual gifts. I recommend they listen to and discuss the CD, Activating Members for Ministry (Corunna, IN: Church Doctor Ministries). Following this spiritual gifts workshop, I urge you to help the people in a follow-up process. Two resources are especially helpful in this regard: Peter Wagner’s Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow: How to Find Your Gift and Use It (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994) and Kent R. Hunter’s Gifted for Growth: An Implementation Guide for Mobilizing the Laity (Corunna, IN: Church Doctor Ministries, 1985).

Once you have established this foundation, I urge that the leaders of the church prepare a leadership team to begin the nuts and bolts activity of restructuring the church. In order to do this, I recommend the leadership team obtain copies of William Easum’s classic book, Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

Begin this book by reading the first paragraph at the top of page 158, then turn to page 162 and read the first two full sentences, then read the first full sentence of the second paragraph on page 162, then read chapters 7 through 11, then read the entire book.

Six Forms of Church Government

In all of history, across denominational, cultural, geographic,
and theological lines, there are basically six forms of church government. As they are described below, you will see clearly that we identify the last one, a theocracy, as the one that recaptures the thrust of New Testament church government.

As a strategic approach, we recommend this document be read by key leaders in the congregation. However, to effectively implement the restructuring of the church, the most productive, cost-effective, and timely way to implement church government change is to let an outside expert come into the congregation and conduct a two-day Coaching Consultation (this was mentioned above). This service, which has been developed by Church Doctor Ministries, is called “Church Government That Works in the 21st Century.”

For the six forms of church government, we have heavily borrowed from material in the booklet by Rodney G. Lensch Theocratic Church Government: Ephesians 2:19-22 (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 1995).

Here are the six forms of government:

**HIERARCHY**

1. **Hierarchy.** This is based on the Old Testament model of a priest and the High Priest. This is seen in congregations in which the pastor is a dictator, often a benevolent dictator. This is also the type of government expressed in congregations where the property is owned by the pastor or the pastor and his wife.

In some regions of Africa, for example, the hierarchy model works quite well because of the cultural expression of the “tribal chief.” People in tribal cultures are accustomed to a very strong and dominating leader. This allows for this type of ministry to work quite well in those settings. This is also true for many parts of Asia, where respect for authority is very high.

The hierarchy model is not a full or mature expression of the New Testament church when it frequently overlooks the priesthood of all believers. The “royal priesthood” teaching from the New Testament shows that all believers have access to God and do not have to go through a priest or someone designated with a priestly function. The New Testament also teaches that all Christians are open to God’s wisdom and direction and have impact from the power of the Holy
Spirit.

2. **Democracy.** This form of church government is the most common form in the United States. It is an American phenomenon and is not practiced, to a great extent, anywhere else around the world (except where exported by Western missionaries). As mentioned above, the democratic form of government is most commonly identified as congregational government. The origins of this are connected to the reaction that early Christian settlers in the United States carried with them from the aggressive and somewhat abusive and oppressive hierarchies of the State churches in Europe. The Puritans recognized their new freedom in America and superimposed a congregational form of government within the church. In this type of government, the entire congregation has the authority. The vast majority of Christians in the United States today have grown up in a congregational form of government, although this is changing in the 21st Century. However, for many, it is the only form of government they have known and it is often a surprise to people to realize that this is not a biblical form of government. Further, it is not practical or effective for the church.

3. **Republic.** Congregational governments have, by necessity, taken a twist toward a republican form of government, simply because a pure democracy does not work with more than one person. In the republican form of government, the structure is adjusted from a pure democracy (where everyone has a say about everything) to the republic, which provides leaders. With the development of leaders, the church has the emergence of boards, committees, and institutional structures. This has also led to elections by popular vote, which most often ignores the one way Scripture clearly identifies people for ministry: spiritual gifts. It also means that, with a vote, there is a winner and a loser. It is our understanding that, in Christianity, no one “loses.” Many churches have evolved with layers of bureaucratic permission giving (and denying), representing the republican form of the government. Congregations with a republican form of congregational government frequently follow Robert’s Rules of Order. (Interestingly, Robert, who wrote the Rules of Order, identified a couple of exceptions in which issues like a quorum were not appropriate. One of those areas was the Christian church!)
One of the challenges of democracy, or a congregational form of government, is that the pastor can be diminished to the position of an “employee.” Another issue is that when everyone has a say about everything, congregational meetings can become quite unruly. In the first place, younger Christians are allowed to participate in the decision-making process. They may or may not have a clear understanding of the Scripture, connect with the philosophy of ministry of the church, or have biblical worldviews that allow meaningful participation. This is why congregational meetings are mentioned by many as the low point of their Christian experience. Furthermore, in many congregations with pure democracy-type meetings, they are attended by traditionalists on the one hand or inactive Christians on the other. It is difficult for them to discern God’s will, and this leads to decisions that are not in concert with what God would want the congregation to do. Another challenge with the congregational form of government occurs when pastors (who have a biblical worldview for the Great Commission) initiate changes and a new direction. Those who may not be mature members, or those who may be traditionalists or have an unbiblical worldview, have the authority to shut down the direction of the church and, ultimately, remove the pastor from office (directly or indirectly by continued discouragement).

Since America has become a mission field, most local churches are under dramatic pressure to make major changes from maintenance to mission. Without becoming “missionary-oriented,” congregations have no future. Those that do not become mission-minded and mission-directed will lose their viability and, ultimately, go out of business. This is why approximately six churches close their doors every day in the United States, a trend that has continued for several decades. Unwillingness to change is at the heart of most of these closures. The foundation of that difficulty toward change often lies in a form of government that disallows opportunity to take on new directions, which represent change and, therefore, discomfort. In a congregational form of government, the majority always makes the decisions. But it is a known fact that large groups always vote the status quo. They will never make the tough decisions. Groups of people are only led in difficult and challenging directions by leaders who are allowed to lead. Consequently, in an environment such as
the United States, which has dramatically changed to a secularized nation—and requires changed congregations with different strategies and approaches—a congregational form of government is self-defeating.

4. **Oligarchy.** This is a prominent form of church government in the United States, second only to democracy—or, congregational form of government. Surprisingly, however, this form of government is not official. It does not appear in any church constitution or bylaws. An oligarchy is a self-propelled power block that emerges as a dictatorship by intimidating the rest of the congregation. This is most often represented by a few individuals or families who are dominant within a congregation and influence (by intimidation) the rest of the church. This is most common in smaller congregations and in rural churches where generations of families dominate. The oligarchy form of government, though not constitutional, is superimposed in many churches.

When congregations are small, a few families or individuals can exercise enormous influence. This actually begins as a blessing to the congregation. However, these people become used to that influence and the power of control. Then, as the congregation grows, they continue to exert that power. This is an issue frequently challenged in congregations that are involved in breaking the “200 Barrier,” when a congregation approaches about 200 people in worship.

A power struggle often takes place as the few families or individuals who self-impose power upon the congregation begin to feel as if they are losing control. This happens as a congregation grows. It is especially acute in what is called the “pioneer/homesteader” scenario. This is where a congregation, dormant for many years, has numerous pioneers who have long membership tenure within the church. As the church begins to grow, new people enter with new ideas and enthusiasm. These are the homesteaders. This can lead to a “pioneer/homesteader range war,” which is really a power struggle based on control and is often most intense around those who form the oligarchy. The key element that makes the strategic difference between chaos and conflict on the one hand, and tapping the unique strengths of both pioneers and homesteaders on the other, is the
unified and clearly articulated philosophy of ministry and mission of the congregation. In other words, when a church has a clear vision of mission, with a compelling vision cast by leadership, then, instead of a “range war,” there is a combination of the wisdom of the pioneers and the enthusiasm of the homesteaders, which really supplies the best of both worlds. Clarity of mission and focus on direction through a common philosophy of ministry make all the difference.

**Coequal Plural Eldership**

5. *Coequal Plural Eldership.* In this form of government, instead of one pastor (the hierarchical model) having sole authority, the authority is given to a group of equal leaders who comprise a “corporate pastor.” (They can be called elders, deacons, a church council, executive board, etc.) However, this type of leadership tends to demote the professional and theological level of the call to full-time ministry that is upon the pastor (or senior pastor) of the church.

Any small business owner knows what it is like to be a leader. Likewise, this is the role of being the pastor of a church. When you are the person who is ultimately responsible—in the case of the pastor, ultimately responsible to God—you eat, sleep, dream, vacation, and think about your “business” (the ministry) 24 hours a day. Most pastors take very seriously their responsibility to the members of the church and to God. This is a reflection of their calling. However, when churches water down their authority, this leads to a high level of frustration and dysfunction. It is unethical and cruel to require someone to be responsible for the direction of an organization, but not have the authority to do anything about it. The position of pastor is a full-time role in most congregations whereas elders are part-time volunteers. Consequently, to share the authority in a form of government of *coequal plural eldership* dilutes the ability of the leader to lead.

An added complication is the fact that many seminaries and Bible colleges train pastors to be shepherds rather than leaders. Our research, conducted with George Barna Research, Ltd., shows that pastors are not often trained to be leaders. Many who are attracted to ministry are not leaders but pastoral shepherds. According to Barna, this whole system needs to be changed, and those who are developed for pastoral ministry ought to be almost entirely recruited
from among those who have the spiritual gift of leader.

Further, coequal plural eldership waters down the five-fold ministry in Ephesians 4: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. While this form of government is generally an improvement from a democracy or a hierarchy, it should be understood that in every successful congregation there seems to be a clearly identified lead pastor. In other words, the “buck” has to stop with an individual, not a group. As someone once said, “John 3:16: ‘For God so loved the world that He did not send a committee.’”

6. Theocracy. The word “theocracy” simply means “the rule of God.” The key motivational factor for this type of church government is driven by the strong and overarching desire to identify the will of God. It recognizes that Jesus is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18). Furthermore, the primary decision-making responsibility is shifted from the congregation to what is perceived (by the people) to be a God-ordained group of leaders, without violating or denying the priesthood of all believers. This means that leaders are chosen based on their visible and public testimony before the congregation—as those who are spiritually mature, those who are seen as having the most knowledge of God’s Word. They are directed by the Holy Spirit. This is evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit, as it is described in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, humility, self-control, etc. Some churches call these leaders “elders.” For 21st Century churches, reaching people who are not familiar with words such as “elders,” I recommend this group be called “The Leadership Team.”

Typical characteristics of those who would be chosen as leaders would include an active and visible ongoing lifestyle in structured Bible study, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and a discernment that is defined by seeking God’s will or direction. Those who are chosen as leaders would demonstrate wisdom that reflects a strong relationship with Jesus Christ and a significant experience base of life within the church. They would demonstrate that their self-esteem is defined by Christ and reflect a strong level of humility. Obviously, they would be in concert with the philosophy of ministry of the church, committed to its mission and inspired by the vision. They would recognize and remain subordinate to the authority of the senior pastor. They would have a biblical respect for authority. They
would also fit the “3 Cs” that Bill Hybels uses to describe those who are compatible for team ministry: 1) competency, 2) character, and 3) chemistry (with the senior pastor and one another).

This form of government is most effective, for 21st Century Christians, when it is operated as a flat organization. This means the leaders see their position not as superior to the rest of the congregation, but as characterized by servant leadership. This is defined as a role given to those with the gifts of leadership, discernment, wisdom, etc. However, they operate out of a worldview of high appreciation for other members of the Body who also can receive revelation from God, wisdom, and input to the direction of the congregation. They are predisposed by their character and activity to be open to what God is doing through the Body and resist an “aloof” posture as some “special” group of leaders.

**In the theocracy, the pastor serves in the position of leadership of the leaders (Moses, Numbers 11:16-17).** In this type of church government, there are no votes. There is no quorum or simple majority. Decisions are made by unanimous consensus. This prevents the pastor from forcing his or her will on the congregation. It also protects an individual or group of leaders from doing the same. As decisions are discussed, the practice is not to vote, but to pray and seek God’s direction. It is not to debate or argue, but to discuss, pray, and read Scripture. This group would come to a decision and be able to say, like the apostolic leaders of the New Testament, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to...” (Acts 15:28).

**Discipleship**

**It is perceived, in the theocracy, that leaders are divinely called.** This means they are not elected or fixed by term limits. This type of church government operates best when a lifestyle of discipleship permeates a congregation. This means that, in every area of ministry, including the leaders, Christians understand that one of their primary purposes is to equip and train others for the work of ministry, as they are involved in ministry. This means everyone in the congregation who is involved in ministry has a “project.” This “project” is a person who they are training and equipping. This equipping is considered to be as important as the ministry they are
performing. This type of discipling lifestyle is modeled by the pastor(s) and staff. The leaders are not simply volunteers or in temporary positions. In some congregations, they are ratified on an annual basis, giving some input from the congregation. This is not a vote, but it is the opportunity for anyone to object. That objection is best handled through written or personal dialogue with the leadership of the congregation.

In churches that operate from a theocracy, the role of the congregation includes praying for the leaders. There is a strong recognition that there is a gift of leadership and leaders do lead. In addition, there is an “open system” in which members of the congregation are allowed to share insights privately with leaders.

**Modern Apostles**

As an additional check and balance for the theocracy system, the New Testament practice of utilizing apostles is common within this model. Apostles are outside counselors. Their role is not meddling or a dictatorial hierarchy; rather, they are wise counselors who have a special calling and gift. That gift of apostle is characterized by humility. It is demonstrated by a God-given authority to impart influence upon the congregation, leaders, and pastor. Like the New Testament apostles, modern day apostles do not exercise authority from a position of an office or a title. They are not part of a bureaucratic superstructure, like a denomination or judicatory. Their structure for influence is not a position designed by a political or institutional framework. It is entirely by relationships. The modern apostle, who is outside the “system” of the local church, provides objective insight and brings an expanded experience base reflective of work with numerous congregations.

Often a congregation will provide a portion of the budget toward the apostle. This provides a covenant relationship in which the apostle is supported. It also provides access to the apostle by mail, e-mail, and telephone. This is a third-party support mechanism for pastors and leaders. The apostle often visits a congregation at least once a year and spends significant time with the leadership and some of the membership. As an outside, unbiased person who is not emotionally involved, the apostle is one who can intervene at the request of the congregation or the leadership when divisions are imminent or when there are tensions between the leaders and pastor, leadership and
congregation, or a division within the congregation itself. The apostle is available for information, resources, and a second opinion. The apostle only provides recommendations and suggestions. It is up to the congregation to “test the Spirit” regarding those recommendations. The apostle is not politically tied to the congregation, so there is no room for ulterior motives or subjective ties, like being reelected or even receiving a stipend. The relationship between the church and the apostle can be terminated at any time the church or the apostle determines. The best exercise of this relationship is through ongoing contact between the apostle and the congregation.

If you haven’t already engaged your leadership in a Coaching Consultation: “Church Government That Works in the 21st Century,” an apostolic relationship, spiritual gifts seminar, or any of the resources mentioned in this material, contact Church Doctor Ministries at (800) 626-8515 or by e-mailing info@churchdoctor.org.

**Changing church government is a process. It challenges entrenched traditions and structures.** Changing church government often removes one of the largest roadblocks that hinders church health and growth. **Outside intervention through a trained consultant guides the process, objectifies emotional subjects, and insulates the leaders from the risks of promoting the changes.**
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- Spiritual Gifts Consultation
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- Worship Audit Consultation
- Worship Consultation


Worship Beyond the Stained Glass Barrier (CD). Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1991.

How to Design and Develop Fellowship Groups (CD). Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1994.

Twenty Things Every Greeter Should Know (CD). Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1994.

How to Design and Develop Fellowship Groups (CD). Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1994.


There Must Be 50 Ways to Improve Your Bulletin (CD). Corunna, IN: Church Growth Center, 1994.

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