

EFFECTIVE CHURCH GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

Theology and Practice

Several years ago now, at our annual January conference, I realised how many ministers were leaving the conference on a Wednesday afternoon and heading home, often with apprehension and fear, to face the first church business meeting of the year. A minister in my own (former) church confessed that he often felt physically sick before such meetings. But the minister is obliged to be there; many members resolutely refuse to attend, so fearful are they of confrontation and conflict. I can only reflect that it is probably just as well they weren't at the church meeting where Paul 'opposed Peter publicly, to his face, because he was wrong' (Galatians 2:11).

So a common discussion among ministers is about how leaders should be allowed to lead. Various strategies are drawn up to manipulate or bypass church meetings. And just when some feel they have found a working compromise, along comes charitable status and constitutions have to be drawn up that satisfy the Charity Commission – and, some would say, the very narrow understanding of congregational governance prescribed by the Baptist Union.

This is not a simple situation. I have been in a church where the membership was consistently abused by the minister; I have also seen enough ministers in despair after a narrow vote has put back a cherished programme or appointment; I know of churches paralysed by the difficulty of recovering after the leadership have been rejected by the membership.

It is not made easier by any call to go back to Scripture. There are no prescriptions for church governance in the New Testament – attempts to deduce modern practice from the various Greek words used to describe leaders also founder, not least because the evidence is that the early church adopted and adapted 'secular' terms and gave them new meaning in practice – but a practice that is barely hinted at rather than fully explained.

But I do think there is one important area of clarity in the New Testament: **the early church took decisions when they were gathered together**. This is one half of an important equation: it is also clear to me that **they did not take decisions at church business meetings**.

This would be my first principle for effective church governance and leadership: **scrap church business meetings. Always take decisions together, but always in the context of worship, praise and prayer**.

This practice is based on very clear theological principles. First, it recognises the truth that is encapsulated in the phrase 'the priesthood of all believers'. Why do Baptists espouse this in principle, and end up being, in my experience, so minister-focused in practice? (That's another essay!)

Second, it recognises a truth that is not emphasised enough: we often hear the voice of God and discover the guidance of God when in the context of being in his presence we listen to the wisdom and views of our fellow-Christians. I have been deeply frustrated when churches have gathered to hear from God, and then sit in silence for what seems an age, until someone has the boldness or temerity to claim that in the silence they have heard from God.

Let's start teaching our congregations a little more about how, together, we can hear from God, and let's start managing our discussions a little more intelligently when we gather so that people are encouraged and taught how to discern the mind of God.

I suspect early Baptist churches had no problem with this. Somewhere along the way the little radical underground groups became institutionalised, and the great Victorian principles of business and democracy took hold in the theology and practice of Baptist churches. And of course there were important elements of truth in the approach: things should be done decently and in order; democracy is rooted in the belief that all people are created equal and are of equal value. But those principles should never have been applied in such a way that agendas, quorums, constitutions, points of order and majority voting usurped a prayerful understanding and mutual acceptance of the leading of God's Spirit.

So let's get practical. If we agree that I'm right, and churches should always take decisions together in the context of worship, praise and prayer – then the first question that arises is who is eligible to come to such a meeting? And so we come to the issue of membership.

Membership

My conviction is that like so much in our Christian theology and practice, the outward should be a sign of the inner reality. I do not believe that you become a member by the vote of the church meeting; neither do I believe that you remain a member until you decide to relinquish that membership. Membership of the church should be a recognition of ongoing commitment to that church – and ends when that commitment is removed. How absurd it is that people who no longer involve themselves in the life of a church in any meaningful way can still expect to turn up and vote at a church business meeting.

When I produced a new constitution for the church I was helping to lead, we agreed that members would be those willing to make an annual renewal of commitment to Christ and to the church – and we did this at our annual church weekend, which was attended by about 90% of the church. So the commitment was made in the context of time together in praise and prayer.

We also took a calculated risk. We judged that the traditional concept and formalities of membership – the idea that somehow you had to be checked out and recommended – was a very definite barrier to some, particularly those from a non-Baptist background. So we made membership entirely self-selecting – by which I mean, if someone was willing to sign a slip of paper committing themselves to Christ and to the church (the values of the church were presented on the same piece of paper) then we would take them at their word. They would be members – unless they ceased to demonstrate those commitments – for the year, until the next annual commitment moment came round.

Positively, everyone who was involved was involved; none of those horrid moments when congregations are told that members are being asked to stay behind for something important, or to collect some secret information. And at a stroke we removed the nonsense of chasing people now living on the other side of the world for their resignations. We still had opportunity to hear newcomers tell their story of faith; but we no longer voted to say we found it acceptable.

The principle for membership in the context of church decision-making must be to do everything possible to ensure decisions are taken by those who are regularly and deeply committed to and involved in the ongoing life of the church.

Leadership

Think of the time spent discussing the principles and practicalities of elders, deacons, leadership teams. Consider the anguish of wondering if the 'right' people would be elected. Reflect on the pastoral impact of being rejected in a secret ballot when nominated for leadership.

So first, **there has to be a better way of choosing leaders**. I remain convinced that there are two principles that need to be harmonised for this to be effective. On the one hand, one of the responsibilities of leadership is to identify, encourage and release the gifts of others – and one of those gifts is leadership. This is particularly true in the case of women and young people – in the sense that experience suggests that leaders have to lead in encouraging churches to recognise leadership in these two 'categories'. So **leaders must be free to positively influence the choice of leaders – but it must be done openly, on agreed and understood principles**. I do not believe there is any place for the surreptitious visit to 'persuade' someone they should not stand.

On the other hand, the congregation should also have a role to play in this selection process. They must understand that this process is intended to *recognise* leaders, not appoint them. Too many churches have a set of appointed leaders, when the real leadership is being exercised by unappointed people who in the best case scenario are gifted and effective – and in the worst case are wielding power in a way that undermines the appointed leaders and hamstring the church.

So how can leaders influence the choice of leaders while congregations genuinely participate? My attempted solution failed in one church because it was too much of a culture shock to the traditional methods; it worked better in another, because the average age was lower and no-one was wedded to a narrow view of what was acceptable Baptist practice.

Stage one was to invite every member of the congregation to write down the names of anyone in the church – including the current leadership team – who they felt to be gifted as a leader and showing signs of exercising leadership. They could put down as many or as few names as they wished. Ideally this was done as part of a gathering for prayer and praise.

Stage two was that the existing leadership then reviewed the aggregated list of 'suggestions'. Some might have been named by 20 or 30 people; some by only one. Immediately there is an indication of those the majority of the church regard as leaders.

Stage three was for every person mentioned in any of these lists to be visited by one of the current leadership team. This conversation was an opportunity to explore and encourage. After all these conversations had taken place, the leadership team met, prayed and discussed the make-up of the leadership team to be proposed to the church.

Stage four was to present the names of the proposed leadership team to the church. Everyone was given permission to express any concern or ask any question in private – it was quite possible that someone had a concern that could not and should not be voiced at a church gathering but absolutely had to be raised before that person could be recognised as a leader.

Stage five was the vote. My preference was for the vote to be for the whole team as a whole, not for individuals. That seemed to me to be right in principle, not least because it recognised that they were a team, and because it removed all possibility of individual rejection; but it was a bridge too far for some. The key point was that everyone knew that the names on the list had come from the suggestions made by the members being given prayerful and consultative consideration by the leadership team. They also knew that the list recognised the indications of the majority of the members while also allowing the leadership team to identify and encourage those with particular

qualifications and/or gifting. The vote was therefore one of recognising that whole process and choosing a team, rather than simply voting for individuals.

Second, **we must be clear about how leadership can and should be exercised**. Christian leadership is not about power, it is about service. To adapt Paul's words: "Leadership is patient, leadership is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Leadership does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

Communication

If we aspire to that kind of loving, serving leadership, then the interaction of the leaders with the church when the church gathers is absolutely crucial. It is a vital opportunity for communication – informing, explaining, listening to God and each other.

Many tensions surface at church business meetings because members become suspicious that the leaders are up to something. And sometimes leaders *are* up to something! My rule was to send the whole congregation an email with the agenda headings of leadership team meetings before the meeting took place. It was an opportunity to ask for prayer and to allow anyone to express views and concerns.

After the meeting we sent out an edited set of minutes. Sometimes there were just headings – but every member knew they were free to ask questions about any item on the agenda. I think this is an important way to build trust between members and leadership. Work hard to appear open and to be open.

Organising church meetings

You may have noticed I have not yet said anything about the role of the minister. There's a reason: I am a firm believer in team leadership. In fact, I would argue that one of the key roles for a minister is to develop and release the gift of leadership in others.

I don't believe the minister has to chair the church meeting. I believe the person most gifted in chairing meetings should chair the meeting – and hopefully that isn't the minister. It is much easier for the minister to make helpful contributions to discussion if they are not the chair.

Make church gatherings fellowship gatherings – make them special occasions. See if you can eat, worship, pray and decide together: anything to make them less like business and more like a group of friends together in the presence of God. So begin with tea and coffee even if you can't eat together – we don't give enough attention to the theology of food and fellowship (*koinonia* is rooted in the practice of eating together). This makes it easier to arrange the room so that small groups are gathered around tables (read on).

Move on to praise and worship. Then interweave prayer with information, news of church groups and activities. Encourage people to share what God is doing in their area of responsibility.

Then, if you have an issue requiring discussion and debate, allow people to discuss it first in their small groups. Make sure a member of the leadership team is with each group, if possible. This will encourage people who are reluctant to speak in front of everyone to express their thoughts and know they have been heard.

This format also avoids a major drawback of traditional church meetings. The leadership put forward a proposal; the loudest and probably most extreme opponent will speak in response – if you agree and are supportive, why would you say anything? So the public debate immediately becomes adversarial – and can take on a tone that makes many members wish they weren't there.

But if you are in a small group round a table, the loud-voiced opponent is heard by a few – and may well rapidly discover that no-one else share their concern. So when the discussion is reported back to the whole meeting, the objections can be reported briefly, as can the fact that most people were in agreement.

The other way I arranged to take the potential heat out of discussions was to publish proposals in advance (best with really controversial ones to flag them at one meeting and promise discussion at the next – and if necessary a decision at a third. Take time to keep people together.) and to ask those who had concerns they wanted to air at the meeting to let the leadership team know in advance they wished to speak and summarise their concern. This meant there was a possibility of dealing with the issue before the meeting, or at least being ready for it. It also meant that the individual could be assured they were going to have an opportunity to speak, and would be invited to do so by the chair at the most helpful time.

I do not think that either of these methods are manipulative. They are ways in which many more voices can be heard, and genuine concerns can be aired. As members see that this is how business will be done, they should develop higher levels of trust in the leadership.

And if a major disagreement breaks out at a meeting – have the courage to recognise it; stop and pray. If necessary postpone the ongoing discussion to the next meeting. This will be easier if people understand this is the way the church does business; it is less effective if it is seen as a panic reaction.

This is one reason why there should be teaching given to the church about how the church does business and takes decisions. Any authentic biblical teaching will indicate that Christians do not always agree, but that there is also a biblical Spirit-filled way of handling disagreements.

Apostolic input

I've been involved in Fresh Streams long enough to know that even the appearance of this heading will send shivers down some spines! I have included it because many churches find spiritual insight and prophetic input from outside the church enormously helpful; some would argue it is a vital dimension for a growing and maturing church.

My only plea would be that ministers and leaders should be completely open about such input, so there can be no suspicion that there are any hidden agendas or pulling strings behind the scenes. And apostolic input is like prophetic words – subject to testing and endorsement by the church. In fact, this brings us back to a principle I stated earlier – just as appointing leaders is the recognition of calling and gifting, so with apostolic input.

In my (limited) experience, an example of how this works is when someone regularly (2-3 times a year?) comes and speaks at a Sunday service and/or a church weekend. People get to know the person and invite and look for further input. An apostolic gift is being recognised and welcomed, not imposed. When this happens, it can enrich the life of the church and facilitate really effective decision-making.

Because the apostolic gift is bound up with mission, it neatly leads me to my conclusion: effective church governance is not determined by how good church meetings are or even how well-run the church is, or the happiness levels of the members. **The biblical benchmark for church governance is how effectively it releases and encourages individuals, groups, the whole church to grow as disciples and be fully engaged in the missional task.**

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