COMMON MODELS OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The first-century church was characterized by Luke as a loving family, sharing their possessions as they had need and earnestly seeking to be “one in heart and mind” through the unity of the Holy Spirit. Often this tight-knit fellowship was forged through the fire of persecution as believers stood back-to-back in defense against a hostile world.

Only a few centuries after the death of the apostles, things had changed drastically. The extended family of Christians started to look more like a multinational corporation with a central headquarters, regional field offices, multiple levels of management, and government contracts complete with their requisite lobbyists. This unprecedented shift was made possible by the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who gave the church abundant political and financial support. Soon the very church leaders who had once feared for their lives now enjoyed a level of power and privilege few in the world could ever attain. A highly organized bureaucracy of clerical church leaders quickly replaced the simple family structure of the early church. Christians across the Roman Empire were soon obligated to pledge their allegiance to a human institution rather than the Risen Lord.

For centuries, church leadership remained authoritarian and hierarchical. In the time of medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas, goodness was defined as obedience to church authority. According to Aquinas, man could only receive truth "through faith in God's revelation in the Bible as interpreted by the Fathers and councils." Centuries later, reformers such as Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin and their followers overturned much of the abusive and unscriptural theology of the medieval church, and in the case of Calvin even "openly expounded rule by elders in his Institutes of the Christian Religion."

These efforts to combat authoritarianism in the church, however, "suffered because

---

1 Acts 4:32 (New International Version)
2 Earle Cairns, Christianity Through the Centuries, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 258.
they could not fully break free from the hardened soil of ancient clerical traditions.” Churches with episcopal or presbyterian forms of government maintained the belief that the clergy are especially ordained by God to exercise ruling power. Even churches with congregational forms of government relied on a single pastor to set the agenda for the congregation.

**The Shepherd Model**

In the last century, many churches have attempted to break free from the institutional nature of the church, preferring instead to refocus on their role as the family of God. They spend much time and energy doing fellowship-building activities and planning social events. Presiding over all this warm fellowship is the Pastor, who acts as the shepherd of his flock by providing encouragement through his teaching and pastoral care.

In his book *Shepherdding the Church into the 21st Century* Joe Stowell sees this kind of shepherd as the most important component in the spiritual growth and holiness of the church. Stowell asks, “What could be more inspiring to a flock than to see their shepherd exhibit the dynamic love of Christ and project unswerving and non-negotiated faith in all that he is and does, and who at the very core of his being is unquestionably pure?” Stowell argues that the most important gift for a church leader to have is the gift of shepherding. Of all the gifts given to leaders, “this is the most relevant to the resident shepherd of the flock... If there had to be one gift in terms of local church leadership, certainly the most effective would be this one.”

**The CEO Model**

In recent decades, quantum shifts have been made in the structures, programs, and processes of the local church. Modern reformers of the church have brought social theory and business strategy into the life of the local church. Methods of Bible teaching are informed by educational theories of moral development. Evangelism is assisted by

---

4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 72.
principles of marketing. And church leadership is modified to include strategies of business management. In most of these new models of ministry, the senior leader continues to be the strong, central focus of the church. If the church is to grow and thrive, it is up to the senior pastor to be the visionary leader.

This concept is championed by such leaders as Bill Hybels, pastor of the fast-growing Willow Creek Community Church. Hybels is concerned about a perceived ineffectiveness of the American church to connect with the culture around it, and says "the crisis of mediocrity and stagnation in today’s churches is fundamentally a crisis of leadership." This crisis in leadership is centered in the ineffectiveness of senior pastors to lead. According to Hybels, "The senior leader in the church must retain the ultimate authority to draw a line in the sand and say, 'We in this church, on the basis of God's Word, are going to take that hill.' Other teachers can't give those clarion calls to action, because this is really the unique role of the senior pastor." According to Hybels, the most important gift for church leaders to have is not shepherding, but leadership.

This thinking is echoed by leadership consultant John Maxwell, who has authored books both on church leadership and corporate management. In Maxwell's mind, "If you want to know the temperature of your organization, put a thermometer in the leader's mouth. Leaders can never take their people farther than they have traveled." As a corporation will flourish under the leadership of a dynamic CEO, a church’s effectiveness will multiply with the visionary leadership of the senior pastor.

It cannot be doubted that a strong central leader will get much accomplished in a church. A cursory look at the biggest megachurches in America, South Korea, and South America will reveal a visionary leader at the top who presides over dozens of leaders and hundreds of ministries, all operating at peak efficiency. Is it possible, though, that the quantifiable successes of these leaders might mask a deficiency in each church that is less

---

7 Lynne and Bill Hybels, Rediscovering Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 193.
8 Ibid., 185.
9 John Maxwell, Developing the Leader Within You (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 144.
10 It is interesting to note that Maxwell’s comparison of church leadership and corporate leadership came to prominence during the bull-market days of celebrity CEO’s and runaway profits. Facing a sharp economic downturn and rising corporate scandals, the business world began to rethink its philosophies of leadership. In recent years, a new paradigm called Core Team Leadership has grown in popularity. Core Team companies downplay the importance of the chief executive officer and the hierarchy working under him or her. A core-team of 8-15 executives takes much greater responsibility for setting long-term vision and making short-term decisions, while the chief executive’s primary job is to facilitate communication between core-team members.
measurable? The words of a Japanese businessman visiting Australia frame the question clearly: “Whenever I meet a Buddhist leader, I meet a holy man. Whenever I meet a Christian leader, I meet a manager.”

**The Team Model**

Recently the idea of team-building in the local church has become a popular goal. Books and seminars train leaders in the secrets of “Doing Church as a Team.” The nature of the teams promoted, however, often does not approach the scriptural ideal that will be explored later in this paper. Jeffrey Moeller observes that "modern ministry teams tend to be orientated to individuals...Teams tend to have hierarchical layers, and members are managed directly or left alone and not coached or facilitated. Individual accountability is preferred to mutual or team accountability, creating an atmosphere of self-preservation." Moeller sees a biblical priority of shared leadership, but argues that this is not practiced by many churches today. He observes a general skepticism toward teamwork by senior pastors, and asserts that this is “based on a lack of confidence in a process that is a high risk and demands too much time.”

Truly, dispersing authority and responsibility takes an increased amount of work. It is much easier for a single leader to set the vision for a church and expect his subordinates to follow. In spite of this reality, Shreckhise argues that the church should be led by a wide variety of ministers “called by God to fulfill the task of sharing the love, presence, grace, forgiveness, acceptance, and invitation of Jesus Christ. This is not just a job for the pastor, but for all who would commit their lives to the lordship of Jesus Christ.”

---

13 Dave Jongeward, a teaching elder at Clear Creek Community Church, says leadership teams can work in one of three ways: as a track team, a wrestling team, or a basketball team. A track team competes separately in their own distinct specialties. A wrestling team has the same task and goal, but individuals still compete alone. A basketball team competes as an interdependent unit, sharing responsibility and success in all areas. His argument? The New Testament calls local church leaders to play basketball!
15 Richard Shreckhise, “New Church Development—A Team Ministry Approach,” *Brethren Life and Thought* V. 28:3 (Summer 1983), 188.
Before exploring the prescription for shared leadership evident throughout the Scriptures, it is necessary to first examine a few misguided claims made by proponents of the single-pastor-led church. First, some scholars argue (and most lay-people believe) that it is challenging to form a structural norm for the church from the blurry view we have of the New Testament church. They say we must take into account the fact that the church of Acts was a church in transition, barely beginning the progressive fulfillment of the new covenant. Noting that Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians all point to passages in Acts to legitimate their leadership structures, Ajith Fernando argues that many different structures of leadership are acceptable within the body of Christ.16 Donald Miller goes so far as to say that any form of church government “which the Holy Spirit can inhabit and to which He may impart the life of Christ, must be accepted as valid for the church. As all forms of life adapt themselves to their environment, so does the life of Christ by His Spirit in the church.”17

This kind of appeal to descriptions of seemingly different leadership structures in various parts of the New Testament, and especially in Acts, can be hermeneutically dangerous. Rather than isolating specific incidents in a narrative and interpreting them as normative for the church, Walt Russell encourages students of the Bible to weigh recurring themes of the narrative, saying, “It is in these recurring behaviors and events that narrative emphases are established and the main points of the story are communicated.”18 In fact, there is a plain pattern of church leadership presented in the New Testament, and according to Robert Saucy, it is seen in churches across cultural and geographical boundaries. “When one considers all of the evidence there is not as much diversity of structure as claimed. Moreover, there are no contradictions. That is, there are no forms that cannot be integrated into a total unified pattern,” says Saucy.19 This pattern is something unique to the Christian community, “based on the great commission to preach

---

the Gospel and to live according to it in the most inward of all societies…something new and distinctive, so that for the fulfillment of its mission new offices had to be created.”

Second, some claim that throughout the Scriptures God seems to work most powerfully through individuals he calls to lead his people. Leaders such as Moses, Peter, and Paul are given as illustrations of God’s use of particular individuals to represent him to his people, and his people to him. Therefore, the senior pastor is following in the tradition of such influential men as he guides his flock.

The Scriptures tell of great men and women who were used individually by God as powerful leaders. But it cannot be overlooked that whenever God called individual leaders it was for a specific place, time, and purpose. Moses’ leadership was limited to the journey between Egypt and the Promised Land. Peter’s leadership was limited to the early church’s transition from a small Jewish sect in Jerusalem to the international movement that arose on the Day of Pentecost. In every case where God established long-term leadership, however, it was to be shared.

The principle of shared leadership is one rooted in the very foundation of God’s relationship with his people. The Old and New Testaments provide prescriptive and descriptive instructions for multiple leaders guiding God’s people. By studying these passages together, it is possible to see very consistent theological and anthropological rationale behind the explicit instructions.

**Old Testament Precedent**

After Moses and Joshua had guided the Israelites to the Promised Land, the Israelites were to be led directly by God himself. Their human leadership would consist of local councils of elders (Numbers 11:16,24; Judges 11:4-8), a loose succession of judges (Judges 2:16-19), and the spiritual representation of the priestly family (Numbers 18). It was only after the Israelites rejected God as their one true king (1 Samuel 8:4-9) that God appointed a single human king to rule over them. Through Samuel, God warned his people of the dangers of a single leader (1 Samuel 8:11-18), but the people refused to listen. The kind of simple shared leadership exemplified by the Israelite elders represents an approach to leadership that Jesus himself espoused.

---

The Model of Jesus

Jesus notably instructed his disciples to avoid the model set by leaders who used their rank and authority to lord it over others, saying “Not so with you” (Matthew 20:26). He expected his followers to form a brotherhood of servants. When Jesus sent the seventy-two disciples out in ministry, he sent them as teams of two that reported only to him (Luke 10:1-17). When Jesus called his twelve disciples, he never set up an order or structure to rank them in importance or influence. While he spent more time with Peter and James and John, his best friends, he treated all twelve as equals. The twelve disciples, who jointly led and taught the first Christian community, provide us with a great example of unity, humble brotherly love, and shared leadership.

New Testament Descriptions of Church Leaders

The Scriptures clearly and consistently describe two offices of leadership in the church: presbyteros, or elder, and diakonos, or deacon. The office of elder is also referred to as episkopos, or overseer. In all but four cases, references to the office of elder in the New Testament are always plural.

Two of these exceptions are John’s references to himself as “the elder” in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1. In context, it seems John is using the word elder to refer to himself as “the old man” rather than “the church leader.” The other exceptions are in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7, when Paul uses a singular form of “overseer.” In context, it is clear that Paul is referring to an office rather than an individual, especially in light of Paul’s instructions a few verses earlier in Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5), meaning multiple elders in every church.

The plural form is maintained in Luke’s descriptions of the early church in Acts, in Paul’s greeting to the church in Philippi (Philippians 1:1) and his instructions to elders in his letters to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:17) and Titus (Titus 1:5), in Peter’s instructions to elders (1 Peter 5:1), and in James’ letter to believers (James 5:13).

There are many examples of individual leaders being used in unique ways in the New Testament church. But there is no instance of a single leader being given any position or title higher than any other leader. James is seen by some modern scholars as the senior pastor of the Jerusalem church. Indeed, he was a strong and prominent leader.
as we can see in Galatians 2:9, when Paul lists him along with Peter and John as one of “those reputed to be pillars.” But nowhere in the New Testament is he described as having any kind of authority greater than any other leader. In Acts 15, it can be seen that he spoke boldly and prophetically, but that his opinion was subject to the approval of the rest of the council. The concept of “first among equals” is what could appropriately describe James - a man who was unusually gifted and influential, but who held no titular status above anyone else.

Timothy and Epaphras are other godly men who are often assumed to be individual leaders of churches. In their cases as well, there is simply no evidence in the New Testament that they held any special title or position. Many scholars have referred to them as “apostolic delegates” who served as Paul’s partners and coworkers in spreading the gospel and strengthening the churches. Their status can best be summed up by Paul’s words in 1 Thessalonians 3:2, when he says, “We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith.”

The Practice and Instructions of Paul

Paul, the most inexhaustible church planter of the early church, always worked with a team of partners in his ministry. Luke records in Acts 13 that the Holy Spirit specifically commissioned Paul and Barnabas together to a joint ministry of church planting, starting in Cyprus and Pisidian Antioch. Paul and Barnabas ministered faithfully together until their disagreement over John Mark led them to pursue separate plans. Still, Paul recruited new partners Silas and Timothy to join him in his ministry, displaying his commitment to team leadership.

There was a brief period in Paul’s ministry when he worked alone. Acts 17 tells us that in order to escape from the agitated crowds in Berea, Paul was forced to depart alone while Silas and Timothy stayed behind. He made his way to Athens, but his solo work in evangelism and apologetics there resulted in only “a few” people becoming believers (Acts 17:34). Paul was never able to establish a church in Athens. Discouraged, he went on to Corinth, where he faced even more rejection. He reasoned in the synagogue every week with the Jews and Greeks, evidently finding no success. It was not until his
teammates Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth from Macedonia that Paul began to see fruit in Corinth, beginning with the conversion of a God-fearing Gentile.

Wherever Paul established churches, he had an unvaried practice of appointing a group of leaders to guide the church after his departure. In Acts 14:23, we’re told that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. In Acts 20:17, Paul sends for the elders of the church in Ephesus. In Titus 1:5, Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every town (meaning every church) on Crete.

While some may rightfully observe that these elders may have been singular leaders over their own house churches, the New Testament clearly reveals that in each city, the Christians were so unified as one body under one group of leaders that they could be simply referred to as “the church.” The tendency of some modern believers to differentiate between the church (little c) from the Church (Big C) has no basis in Scripture. The local church is the Church. Paul makes no distinction between a unified, local body of believers and some theoretical, mystical worldwide union of saints. Banks observes that the language Paul uses “indicates that the local gatherings are not... part of any alleged universal church. Paul uniformly speaks of them as *the* church which assembles in a particular place.”

In Acts 20:28, Paul refers to “the flock” in Ephesus, not the “flocks.” Paul addresses his letter in Philippians 1:1 to a single group of Christians, calling them “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.” These citywide churches could be compared to many modern local churches which include various small-groups, ministries, and ministry leaders.

In his instructions to elders and overseers in 1 Timothy, Paul refers to the plurality of leaders who led and taught the church in Ephesus, saying that “the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”

**The Instructions in Hebrews**

A number of scholars including F.F. Bruce, William Lane, Paul Ellingworth, and Thomas Hewitt agree that this letter was written to a single house-church in Rome. Bruce

---

believes the author was addressing a “small conservative enclave” of Christians who clung to Judaistic beliefs and practices. Therefore, when the author instructs the church in Hebrews 13:17 to “obey your leaders and submit to their authority,” he implies that it was common for a group of leaders to guide even a small house church.

The Instructions of James

Writing between 45 and 48 AD, James provides the earliest biblical mention of Christian elders when he exhorts believers who are sick to “call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.” (James 5:13) James clearly assumes that each church has a recognized body of elders ready to provide pastoral leadership.

The Instructions of Peter

It is noteworthy that when writing to the church leaders, Peter refers to himself simply as a “fellow elder,” rather than appealing to his status as an apostle or even “the first.” In his instructions, he exhorts the collective elders to pastor the unified flock under their care (1 Peter 5:1-4).

The Warnings of John

The only New Testament example of a single leader exerting influence over a local church is Diotrephes, who receives scathing denouncement from John. In 3 John 9, John says, “I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.” Diotrephes, a dictatorial pastor who towered his authority over others, is cited by John as a striking example of the kind of leadership the church should avoid.

---

22 F.F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 14.
The New Testament Idea of Christ’s Lordship in Each Church

The New Testament repeatedly teaches that Jesus Christ is the one true Lord of the church, the “head of the body” (Colossians 1:18-20). This is not symbolic, figurehead leadership from afar. It is assumed by New Testament writers that Christ will be active in governing and protecting his church.

In Hebrews 4:14, we learn that Christ is the "great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God." This idea of Christ's singular priesthood is echoed in Paul's letter to Timothy, when he argues that "there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5). It is plain that we have no need for any human intermediary representing God to his people and his people to God. Every believer has equal access to God and his wisdom. In fact, the only senior pastor ever mentioned in the New Testament is Christ himself, the “Chief Shepherd” Peter sees leading each church in 1 Peter 5:4.

The Consensus

The overwhelming evidence indicates “oversight by a plurality of church leaders throughout the New Testament church in virtually every known area and acknowledged or commended by virtually every New Testament writer who writes about church leadership.”

Indeed, the consensus of many scholars is that “the New Testament knows nothing about a senior pastor.” In Moreland's view, if we truly believe Christ to be our high priest and great shepherd, as the Scriptures proclaim, then "our church structures ought to reflect that fact, and a group of undershepherds, not a senior pastor, should collectively seek His guidance in leading the congregation.”

Lawrence Richards supports this assessment of Scripture, observing, "When the New Testament speaks of ministry in a local church, it is a ministry of all believers to each other...We are not to look to any one person for the kind of help we need to grow in Christ, or to suppose that grace and guidance for the church will flow through the pastor.

---

25 Ibid., 191.
alone.” It seems unrealistic and unfair to expect one man to shoulder the burden of leading, feeding, and equipping a congregation of any size. According to Moreland, “No one person has enough gifts, perspective, and maturity to be given the opportunity to disproportionately shape the personality and texture of the local church.”

Like Moreland, Saucy argues that the sinfulness of man and the incomplete knowledge of God’s revelation provide scriptural and practical reasons why singular leadership can be dangerous. He contends that no person can have a perfect knowledge of God’s revelation through the Holy Spirit, and thus a church is better served having a multiplicity of individuals praying and thinking together than having one individual setting his unique vision before an entire church body, no matter how big or small.

### THE DISTINCTIVE MARKS OF TEAM-PLANTED CHURCHES

Just as important as a commitment to shared leadership is a solid strategy for its implementation. Without a well-marked road to follow, churches can fall into the ruts of laissez-faire inaction and apathy on one side, or oligarchic rule by an “old-boys” network of leaders on the other.

With this in mind, seven churches were studied that have prospered under shared leadership. These churches include Fellowship Bible Church (Little Rock, AR), Peninsula Bible Church (Palo Alto, CA), Grace Evangelical Free Church (La Mirada, CA), Good Shepherd Community Church (Multnomah, OR), Clear Creek Community Church (Gresham, OR), Community Bible Church (Fresno, CA), and Fellowship Bible Church (Memphis, TN). With the exception of Grace Evangelical Free Church, all churches studied are independent, non-denominational churches and were planted by a team of leaders. Grace Evangelical Free Church was planted with a traditional senior pastor and elder board structure. Until a few years ago, the church was struggling to survive. It recently transitioned to leadership by a plurality of elders, in essence being “replanted.” While

---

26 Lawrence O. Richards, A New Face for the Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 98.
27 Moreland, Love, 191.
these churches vary widely in size, they have many key areas of commonality in their leadership structures.

**Ultimate Leadership Is Held by a Team of Leaders**

This leadership team is composed of mature men who have been carefully evaluated and usually mentored before becoming an elder. The team often includes both paid staff and lay elders, although in larger churches not all paid pastoral staff are part of the elder team. Paid and non-paid elders are considered equal in position and voice. This team makes most of the critical decisions in the church and provides joint oversight of the ministries and ministry leaders of the church.

While there is always a designated facilitator-leader (discussed below), the structure of this team is strictly horizontal. No man can claim any authority higher than another. As Peninsula Bible Church explains, “There is no upward mobility, so competition is eliminated. It is only the force of one’s ideas (in the church hopefully this is from the Word of God), the degree of helpfulness and cooperation, or the ability to get things done that gives one any authority or distinguishes one in an organization such as this.”

**There is a Designated Team Leader/Facilitator,**

**But No “Senior Pastor”**

While affirming the equal authority and responsibility shared by all leaders, most team-led churches recognize the fact that not all leaders will have the same giftedness, wisdom, biblical knowledge, experience, or dedication. Thus, some who are particularly gifted leaders will naturally stand out.

One of these men is designated to lead the team by facilitating meetings and discussions, following through on decisions, and ensuring effective communication within the team. This leader does not do all the thinking or decision-making for the group, but often is trusted to make many immediate decisions that do not need to be brought to the entire team. As Dave Talley, staff elder at Grace Evangelical Free Church describes this role, “We need to trust this person as if he were a ‘senior pastor’ but one who would not

---

aspire to assume such a role. It needs to be one we could completely trust in every situation as if we were there ourselves, one who knows the heart and soul of the church and yet is committed to our central commitments [of shared leadership]. It is a delicate position.\(^{30}\)

Fellowship Little Rock calls this man the “directional leader,” and it is he who initiates many of the new ideas and major changes that the church will pursue. Ultimately, though, he is only one voice among many. At Fellowship, this leader must convince 35 other elders that he is following the Lord’s will rather than his own. Other elders will then take his blue-sky ideas and tweak them until they are realistic and appropriate. According to Bill Parkinson, teaching pastor at Fellowship, “Usually about 50% of the directional leader’s original plan will be implemented. It’s been improved by the work of many gifted elders.”\(^{31}\)

George Barna identifies five major responsibilities for such a directional leader: being a cheerleader for the priorities of the team, facilitating positive and productive relationships between team members, identifying opportunities for individual growth, ensuring the team has all necessary resources, and modeling faithfulness and productivity. According to Barna, this leader’s primary role “is to be the chief servant of the team.”\(^{32}\)

**Each Leader Has a Designated Role in the Team**

The New Testament lays out specific responsibilities for the elders of a church. Each leader is expected to fulfill each of these responsibilities in one way or another. They are to lead the flock by overseeing the life of the body and evaluating new opportunities for ministry (Acts 15:4, 1 Thess. 5:12, Hebrews 13:7). They are to feed the flock by teaching, discipling, and rebuking (1 Tim. 5:17, Titus 1:9, 1 Thess. 5:12). They are to protect the flock by guarding against false teaching and refuting false teachers (Acts 20:28-31, Titus 1:13-14, 1 Tim. 1:3-4). They are to model a godly lifestyle to the flock in prayer, Bible study, hospitality, and assistance to the weak (James 5:14, 1 Tim. 4:6-7, Titus 1:8, Acts 20:35).

---

\(^{30}\) Dave Talley, Interview by author, 18 October 2002. Email.

\(^{31}\) Bill Parkinson, “Team Leadership,” Personal notes from conference (Little Rock AR: Fellowship Bible Church, 14 May 2003).

While each leader in a team-led church is expected to fulfill each of these responsibilities, the way in which each leader will fulfill them is certain to be different. One member of the team may teach at large gatherings while another leads a small-group Bible study, while another leader might disciple younger believers in a more informal setting. One leader might model prayer by meeting regularly with individuals to pray, while another might organize a prayer-chain. In addition, each leader on the team is given specific responsibilities and areas of ministry to oversee. One might oversee the youth ministries of the church while another oversees the worship and music. One leader might take the lead in planning preaching series even though he might not preach the majority of the time. Having clearly designated roles of responsibility ensures that leaders avoid stepping on each others’ toes.

Even in the process of decision-making and vision-casting, each leader will likely fill a different role. According to Barna, every leader in every organization displays one of four leadership aptitudes, and the most effective teams will have at least one leader who fits each aptitude:

1. *Directional leader* (discussed above). These individuals “excel at conveying a compelling vision but do not invest their energy in the details of the process.” These leaders tend to make decisions and pursue initiatives based on intuition and a “gut-feeling” rather than in-depth evaluation of pros and cons.

2. *Strategic leader*. These people are “content to remain in the background and evaluate the options that lie before the organization, eventually developing detailed plans of action.” Their primary goal is to understand all the facts before they make a decision.

3. *Team-building leader*. These leaders’ primary strength is “their ability to interact with a wide variety of people and leave everyone feeling that they have been heard, understood, and loved.” They work relationally to bring together individuals with a common purpose and goals.

---

34 Ibid., 103.
35 Ibid., 104.
4. *Operational leader.* These individuals “provide a degree of stability, predictability, and consistency to the activity of the ministry.” They are adept at creating routines and procedures that will accomplish the vision of the team.

**The Preaching and Teaching Is Shared by Multiple Leaders**

Recognizing the limitations of an individual man and the inherent dangers of a single perspective, most team-led churches are committed to having multiple teachers interpret and apply God’s word from the pulpit. As Moreland explains, “No one who preaches week after week can do adequate study for a message or deeply process and internalize the sermon topic spiritually. Unfortunately, I have been in this situation myself, and after several weeks of preaching I started giving talks instead of preaching my passions and feeding others the fruits of my own deep study.” By sharing the responsibilities of the pulpit, a preacher can be assured he will have adequate time for study and reflection. While one leader who is a particularly gifted teacher might take more responsibility than others for preaching, he usually will not be in the pulpit more than half the time. In fact, most multiple-leader churches strive to have no single person preach more than a third of the Sundays in a year.

In smaller churches, where the pool of gifted teachers is smaller, there is a strong commitment to training and equipping new teachers to share the responsibility. This might include informal instruction or even encouragement and financial support toward seminary training. In larger churches, where more elders are paid staff members, a conscious effort is made to hire leaders who can share the preaching load in addition to their other responsibilities.

---

36 Ibid., 105.
37 Moreland, Love, 194.
In the team-led churches I studied, every decision made by the leadership team is required to be unanimous. In a pragmatic age where we have learned to “agree to disagree,” this principle may seem naively optimistic at best, hopelessly miring at worst. Yet churches committed to team leadership believe that if Christ as the chief shepherd is truly leading his church, he will be leading each undershepherd’s heart. Therefore, if all leaders on the team are not unanimous in their support of a decision, the issue is tabled for further reflection and prayer. No decision can be made until every single leader is in full agreement. As Grace elder Kenny Clark observes, “We have had issues from time to time where there has not been unanimity among the nine of us and we have been committed to spending time to pray and reflect and wait on the Lord. In each of these situations, I have been amazed at how God worked to bring about a unity of conviction and mind. We have not made a decision yet that all nine elders were not able and willing to submit to joyfully and in full support.”

While this commitment to unanimity is rooted in a desire for spiritual unity, it is possible to use decidedly unspiritual means to gain unanimous consent. Leaders can be argued and coerced into conformity. Leaders who silently disagree with a decision might try to sabotage it later, or passively wait for the result to fail. The pressure of time-sensitive decisions can crush valid biblical or philosophical objections. To avoid these kinds of situations, Peninsula Bible Church has three rules for decision-making: 1) No arm-twisting allowed. The force of an argument must come from its truth, not from the stubbornness of its most vocal proponent. 2) Every elder must speak to the issue. When each leader speaks honestly about each issue, it is impossible for a dissenting view to go unheard. 3) Allow adequate time for a decision, regardless of the consequences of delay. God has the situation under his sovereign control and will, in time, bring all of his undershepherds to recognize his leading.

In every issue, big or small, multiple-leader churches are committed to bathing their decisions in the Word and in prayer, both collectively and individually. They recognize that unity and unanimity in the Spirit is much more difficult when the Spirit is not in control of each man’s individual heart and motives.

38 Kenny Clark, Interview by author, 18 October 2002. Email.
THE PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF TEAM LEADERSHIP IN CHURCH PLANTS

Emphasizes the Role of Jesus Christ as the One True Senior Pastor of the New Church

In Peter’s encouragement to elders in churches across Asia Minor, he calls them to collectively act as shepherds of God’s flock that has been placed under their care. If they are faithful stewards of God’s property, they can look forward to the coming reward of an unfading crown of glory “when the Chief Shepherd [or “Senior Pastor”] appears.”40 Many Christians assume that Jesus is far away, uninvolved in the day-to-day life of his flock. But according to Ray Stedman,

Jesus left the church with a far different vision of church leadership when He assured the disciples in the Great Commission, “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” And in Matthew 18:20, He reiterated, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Clearly this indicates that He is present not only in the church as a whole, but in every local church as well.41

If Jesus truly is the sole Chief Shepherd of each church, how could any person dare to usurp his role?

Perhaps a better question is why would anyone want to take that role? Sole senior pastors in established churches already struggle with the unrealistic expectations placed on them by their congregations. In new church plants, where the pool of leadership is smaller, the pressure is even more intense for the senior leader to perform most, if not all, of the church’s most critical tasks. The senior pastor is quickly burned out and the young church quickly develops an unhealthy dependence on one man, leaving little need for

40 1 Peter 5:4 (NIV)
41 Ray Stedman, Body Life (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1972), 28.
dependence on Jesus. As one young church planter describes his experience attempting to lead his church with his own efforts and abilities, “I had fallen into the trap of trying to run things so efficiently that it was almost as though Jesus need not attend. We would ask Jesus for help [in prayer] and then leave him out of the rest.”

Many team-led churches, recognizing the constant need for a reminder of Christ’s active leadership in their church, practice an interesting habit. At every leadership meeting they deliberately leave one chair empty, reserving it for Jesus. Throughout the meeting, the empty chair reminds them of Jesus’ faithful presence and his deep interest in every facet of the church’s life.

**Overcomes the Distinction Between “Clergy” and “Lay-People”**

Church leaders continually grieve about being unable to involve the lay-people. Much of the problem lies in hierarchical leadership structures which divide Christians into two classes: professional pastors and lay people. This division can be seen in the attitudes and common vernacular of the average church. Pastors are *called* into their ministries while lay people simply volunteer. Pastors *preach* to the flock while lay people merely teach their Sunday school classes (in some cases better than the senior pastor, to the consternation of their leaders!). Pastors *counsel* their parishioners in times of need, while lay people feel they can do little more than offer a shoulder to cry on. Even in the most congregational-minded church, the work of the pastor is often sacramentalized as a holy duty that only the ordained can perform.

The New Testament knows no such distinction between two classes of Christians. In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter challenges *all* believers to live up to the truth that “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” When a new congregation sees its leaders sharing the work of ministry equally with no regard to rank or position, they will be much more likely to follow suit.

**Encourages the Exercise of All Spiritual Gifts, and**

---

42 Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 238.
Brings Greater Balance to the Ministry of the Church

Expecting his followers to model their lives after his, Jesus explains in Luke 6:40 that “everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.” Unfortunately, many churches look more like their pastor than their Savior, reflecting their temporal leader’s giftedness and passion (or lack thereof) in the purpose and priorities of the church. In a new church, it’s common for the senior pastor’s gifts, talents, and concerns to dominate the church, neglecting the areas of ministry where he has little giftedness or interest. If he is a fruitful evangelist but a weak teacher, it is likely that the church will never develop a commitment to solid teaching. If he is a gifted administrator but lacks a shepherd’s heart, chances are that church will never develop an effective ministry of care and concern.

In Romans 12:4-8, Paul observes, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.” When a church is planted with a co-equal team of leaders where each member “belongs to all the others” there will be a strong commitment to a much wider diversity of gifts, talents, and priorities at the highest level of leadership. Vital areas of ministry that one leader might have ignored will likely be championed by one of his teammates.

While some might say that the dispersed responsibility and accountability of a team leadership model would stifle individual initiative, in reality if it is structured correctly the team will actually enhance individual enterprise by ensuring that each member’s area of responsibility matches his gifts, talents, and ministry passions. Each individual will be entrusted with the freedom to take initiative in that ministry role with the support of his teammates. By contrast, in a hierarchical leadership structure he would need to seek permission from his supervising pastor, who might not share the same ministry passions as his subordinate and would therefore be hesitant to enthusiastically support initiatives that do not match his own priorities.

Provides Planters With Richer Fellowship and Fulfillment in Ministry

Hierarchical power structures have the inevitable effect of stifling relationships. The completion of goals and objectives often takes priority over interpersonal contact.
Oversight and accountability tend to gravitate toward performance issues rather than personal growth and maturity. As Robert Greenleaf observes, "When someone is moved atop a pyramid, that person no longer has colleagues, only subordinates. Even the frankest and bravest of subordinates do not talk with their boss in the same way that they talk with colleagues who are equals, and normal communication patterns become warped."\(^{43}\)

While this might be necessary and even preferable in a corporate management or military command environment, it does not match the ideal Jesus set for his followers when he commanded them the night before he was crucified, “You are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven” (Matthew 23:8-9). Jesus obviously desired the future leaders of his church to operate as a fellowship of brothers rather than a chain of command. When church planters minister with others who are working alongside them as teammates rather than working underneath them as subordinates, they are likely to have the kind of fellowship, accountability, and encouragement inside the church family that most pastors are forced to seek outside the church walls.

Paul understood the vital importance of fellowship in ministry when he found himself ministering alone for the first time in Athens and Corinth. He freely admits that when he came to Corinth alone, he came “in weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3). Paul felt virtually helpless without the support of his teammates Silas and Timothy, and it showed in the fruitlessness of his weekly ministry in the synagogue. Similarly, Peter had a tendency to display his pride and impatience when speaking on his own, but “when surrounded by eleven other apostles who were his equals, Peter became stronger, more balanced, and was protected from his impetuous nature and his fears.”\(^{44}\)

---

**Provides Stronger Protection Against Doctrinal Error**

**During the Vulnerable Period of the New Church’s Life**


\(^{44}\) Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 56.
In Titus 1:9, Paul charges that an elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” A recurring theme in Paul’s letters is his insistence on the preservation of sound doctrine in the young churches he exhorted. Paul recognized that false teaching would come from outside the church, cautioning the Ephesian elders that “savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock” (Acts 20:29). He also knew that attacks would come from within the body of believers, warning the elders in his next breath, “Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw disciples after them” (Acts 20:30).

It is all too common for the primary source of false teaching within many new church plants to be the senior pastor himself! On a trip to China in 1997 I visited a fairly new house-church that had, for a period of time, only prayed while standing on their heads. They did this because their young pastor had been walking one day and fell into a well, lodging himself upside-down. He yelled for someone to come rescue him, but no one heard. Finally he decided to pray about it and a man came right away, tied a rope to his foot and pulled him out. The next Sunday he told his church that God would only answer their prayers if they prayed upside-down. Every person in the church practiced this habit for months until an older pastor visiting from the city told them they were being foolish.

Such unscriptural instruction can come from pastors who are uneducated and unconnected, but it can also come from pastors with years of seminary training. With little or no accountability from scripturally grounded peers, the pastor can easily slide into laziness in his study of the Bible. With so many priorities competing for his time and energy, a senior pastor often finds that he only has a few hours to spend preparing for his sermons each week. Doctrinal errors slowly creep into his teaching, unchecked by the spiritually immature flock he guides.

When a team of leaders guides the new church, each leader is expected to be constantly strengthening his grasp of God’s word. This commitment to biblical depth ensures that there will always be accountability for the things that are taught and modeled to the young and undiscerning congregation.
Helps to Eliminate Competition and Conflict Between Leaders

Unlike the hierarchical pyramid model of leadership, there is no upward mobility in a horizontal leadership structure. Once a leader joins the team, he is an equal member and has an equal voice in all decisions. He has the same opportunity as any other leader to use his gifts and take initiative in ministry. He receives the same amount of credit as any other leader for every success. Therefore there is little room for covetousness among leaders because there is little for them to covet. There is little need for leaders to jockey for position because there is no position that can be jockeyed for!

In Luke 9:48, Jesus responds to an argument between his disciples about which of them would be greatest by saying, “He who is least among you all – he is the greatest.” With this mentality, a leader is not operating “from any authority given by the organization, one’s position, or anything that resides in oneself.” Instead, each leader on the team derives authority in the church only from his commitment to service and sacrifice.

Provides Continuity of Leadership, Especially When Leaders Move On

It is natural for people to identify more closely with certain leaders over others when their personalities, interests, and priorities closely match. This tendency becomes unhealthy, however, when a person’s commitment to that leader overshadows his commitment to Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:12-17, Paul confronts this all-too-human propensity with his dismayed observation, “One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?”

A church that is planted by a single pastor will naturally draw people who identify strongly with that leader. This can be a great benefit if the pastor plans to stay at the church for a long period of time. But if he leaves the church, conventional wisdom says that the pastor who follows him will fail. A common phrase used to describe the pastor who is called to a church after the founding pastor leaves is the “sacrificial lamb.” This

---

45 Peninsula Bible Church, “Servant Leadership,” section 1.
leader has no hope of thriving in the church; he merely clears the way (often by clearing out the church!) for the pastor who follows him.

A team-leadership structure ensures that when one leader moves on from the church, the congregation will have established trust and affinity with the leadership team as a whole rather than just one person, and they will be free to seek a new leader to complement the body's existing gifts and talents. This allows the church to avert the turmoil and anguish that almost always accompany the departure of a senior pastor. They are not forced to endure an interim period between leaders, during which they feel directionless and powerless. Leaders and ministries continue on as usual during the transition, trusting that God will provide just the right person to complement the team.

**Does Not Preclude the Possibility of a “First Among Equals” Rising Naturally Within the Team**

A commitment to team leadership does not ignore the different gifting, abilities, and availability of different leaders, and does not preclude the possibility of what the Romans called *primus inter pares*, meaning “first among equals.” This principle can be seen in the New Testament descriptions of the early church. While Peter was never given any official rank or title above the other disciples, it is plain that he was the prominent figure among the twelve, as can be seen in Matthew 10:2, “These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew, James son of Zebedee and his brother John…” Peter was used as the primary spokesman for Christ on Pentecost in Acts 2:14-36, but it is important to note that the crowd responded to his grand sermon by asking “Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” Similarly, Paul and Barnabas labored together as equal partners, but Paul acted as the “chief speaker” (Acts 14:12) because he had greater gifts in communication.

The advantage of the principle of first among equals, according to Strauch, is that it allows for functional, gift-based diversity within the leadership team without creating an official, superior office over fellow leaders. The person who naturally rises into this role might function similarly to a senior pastor by coordinating communication within the team and the church, following up on team decisions to ensure they are carried out, and

---

**46 Strauch, Biblical Eldership, 58.**
taking a greater share of administrative tasks. This leader might be more gifted in
communication and thus take a more visible role as a “chief speaker” among many equal
teachers in the church.

While a first among equals might outwardly appear to be like a senior pastor, it is
important to recognize the differences between this role and a traditional senior pastor. In
most churches, the senior pastor is thought of as the capstone of an organizational
pyramid. In a team-led church, the first among equals can instead be conceptualized as
the hub of an organizational wheel. The other leaders on the team can be thought of as
spokes radiating out from the hub toward their individual areas of ministry
responsibility. The person at the center works to ensure that each spoke is functioning
well and is connected to every other spoke, so the wheel can run smoothly.

This role of first among equals can be flexible enough to be occupied by different
leaders at different times, depending on the needs of the church during different seasons
of its life. For example, if God brings an unusual number of evangelistic opportunities for a
time, causing the church to experience great fruit in the harvest, a leader who has strong
skills and passion for evangelism might gravitate to the center of the hub during this
exciting period of growth. After all those new believers come to the church they will need
to mature in their faith, so a leader who is gifted in discipleship and equipping of saints
might naturally be drawn to a more prominent role of leadership in the center of the
organizational hub for the next season of the church’s life. The fluid nature of this role can
be seen in the early church, as different leaders seemed to move in and out of primary
leadership as circumstances warranted. Peter acted as the chief spokesman of the
Jerusalem church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), but then James rose to prominence
when the church needed resolution on the issue of the requirements that would be
placed on Gentile converts (Acts 15).

Fellowship Memphis, a church with core values of ethnic diversity and racial
reconciliation, was planted by a team of leaders, all of varying ethnicities. When the
church was launched, an absolute equality was enforced rigorously among all its leaders.
The preaching schedule was divided among three leaders so that each man would be in

---

47 To extend the geometrical metaphor even further, the wheel can be thought of as the base of a three-
dimensional conical pyramid which is capped at the top by Jesus Christ, the chief shepherd of the organization
and the church.
the pulpit exactly one third of the time. Yet a year after its launch, as the leadership team became increasingly troubled by the fact that the church was still 95% white, the leaders decided to appoint one leader to be the point man who would be more visible in the church than the others. Bryan Loritts, an African-American, was given sixty percent of the preaching schedule in order to put his teaching gifts to use and also to help make African-American visitors to the church feel more comfortable. It is understood that Bryan’s position as first among equals probably isn’t permanent, and he expects that another leader might rise in prominence once the church is more racially balanced and other concerns confront the church body.48

**Fits Natural Leadership Style of Many Younger Leaders**

It has been widely observed that members of Generation X and Y place much more emphasis on relationships than on accomplishments or recognition. This generational trend could be seen every Thursday night on the hit Gen-X TV show *Friends*. “Before *Friends*, there had never been a sitcom that showcased an ensemble of co-equals both in billing and by narrative design, and maintained that equilibrium throughout the show’s run. *Friends* did it for 10 hit seasons. ‘A show with six people given equal weight, all equally involved in story lines - that was a key part of the show’s conception,’ says David Crane, who created *Friends* with fellow executive producer Marta Kauffman.”49 Equality in relationships is a major priority for postmodern Americans, whether they are Christian or not.

In his book *The Emerging Church*, Dan Kimball observes that the postmodern members of Generation X and later are turned off by the hierarchical style of leadership so popular in the boomer churches their parents created. While a modern leader would see himself as a CEO, a postmodern leader would see himself as a spiritual guide and fellow-journeyer. While a modern leader would strive to concentrate power with a central group, a postmodern leader would seek to diffuse power among many different people. While a modern leader would lead by talking, a postmodern leader would lead by listening. According to Kimball, “Leadership teams will have to be much more intentional about

49 Frazier Moore, “Friends to the End,” *Honolulu Advertiser* (Honolulu HI, 6 May 2004).
being relational with one another, regardless of who earns more, knows more, or has more responsibility." 

### Reduces Strain on Church Planters’ Families

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Too many church-planting pastors have taken this hyperbolic command of Jesus to its literal end in their zeal to build a new church. It is not uncommon to overhear a senior pastor’s wife complaining that she doesn’t need to worry about her husband having any extramarital affairs – the church already serves as his mistress. The incredible amount of work and stress that comes with a church-planting project inevitably takes a sole planter’s time, attention, and affection away from his first ministry priority: his family. But when a team of leaders shares the overwhelming workload of the new church, each man is freed to spend much-needed time and energy with his wife and children at home.

In addition, a sole church planter’s family can face daunting pressure to be a perfect model of family life. Mature Christians in the church expect the pastor to prove his spiritual leadership qualities by producing a flawless family. Brand-new Christians who come into the church often have no other examples of godly husbands, wives, parents, and children to follow, so they depend on the senior pastor’s family to show them the way. These unrealistic expectations can drive relational wedges between the pastor and his family, often leaving wives and children bitter because they feel they can never live up to the standard. When a young church has a group of mature Christian families to look to, however, there is reduced pressure on each leader’s family to appear flawless. The humility and vulnerability that characterizes the leadership team allows their families to openly display their shortcomings and imperfections. In Loritts’ experience, the work of planting a church has not impacted his family any more negatively than any other ministry he has served in, and he says this is only possible because the church was planted by a team. 

### Presents the World With a Compelling Difference

50 Kimball, Emerging Church, 238.
In the intimate setting of the Upper Room, Jesus described to his closest disciples the most powerful way they could bring the light and life of the gospel to a dark world: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). The best way these future church leaders could represent Christ to the world was by loving each other sacrificially as they led the church he had established. This meant they would need to set aside power-plays and politics. They would need to overcome personal preferences, settle theological disagreements, and resolve practical incongruities by collectively seeking God’s will rather than campaigning for their own way or pulling rank over other leaders.

What an intriguing sight this must have presented to people so familiar with the accepted models of leadership of the day! The Jews were well-acquainted with rabbis and teachers of the law who loved “the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues” (Matthew 23:6). The Gentiles were accustomed to rulers who would “lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them” (Matthew 20:25). When these people first saw the brotherhood of leaders guiding the early church, they must have immediately sensed something in that renegade sect that transcended the normal order of life.

After two millennia, people still seek the transcendent in the church, but they are often disappointed in what they find. Too often, they see no discernible difference between the church and the world. For some non-Christian visitors, even modern worship music that reflects the influence of secular love songs is a turnoff: “After a second or two you realize that they’re singing about Jesus, not some girl named Mandy, and the whole thing seems, well, creepy.” For many others, the authoritarian leadership they see in the church seems no different than the demanding bosses they work for. The political maneuvering they intuitively sense among church leaders seems all too reminiscent of the battles for position and power they experience in the workplace or even in the Rotary Club.

But when a church has loving and compassionate co-leaders who willingly share the spotlight, who give away the credit for successes, and who humbly share the responsibility for failures, there is no possible way the church can be mistaken for any

---

other institution in the world. Visitors will naturally be led to ask, “What makes the difference?” The conclusion they will inevitably be drawn to is the redemptive and sanctifying work of God.

THE PRACTICAL CHALLENGES OF TEAM LEADERSHIP IN CHURCH PLANTS

Slows Down Decision-Making and Vision-Casting Process

While the vast majority of decisions in the church do not need to go before the leadership team, there will be a number of decisions that will require the consensus of all leaders in order to proceed. This takes time. While this delay might be viewed negatively by some, it can actually be a healthy process of discerning God’s will.

In the words of Ray Stedman, “On spiritual matters and matters of essential policy within the church their job is to determine the mind of the Lord. They are not to determine their own will, or the will of the people, but the will of the Lord. Sometimes we must wait quite a while before the Lord gets some of the lions and the bears around to the place where they agree, but it has always been accomplished. When there is unanimity, we believe the mind of the Lord is made manifest.”

Brings Confusion in the Congregation Over “Where the Buck Stops”

In most mature churches, the buck stops in many different places. For most matters of facilities, the buck stops with the deacon of buildings and grounds. For most matters of church discipline, the buck stops with the elder board. For most matters of biblical interpretation and clarification, the buck stops with the leaders who have biblical training.

When some people speak of “where the buck stops,” what they really mean is “who to blame when things go wrong.” They want to have a single person to confront for any

---

53 Stedman, “The Lord and His Church”, section 1
problems they have with any other people or leaders in the church. But Christ has given us a much different model than this in Matthew 18 for how to handle problems in the church: first by confronting a person individually, then confronting that person together with a few other witnesses, then by confronting that person along with the church and its leadership. A team of leaders can often facilitate this process of confrontation and reconciliation much better than a single leader because they can bring greater perspective to the problem.

**Requires Greater Financial Resources**

In some church plants, shared leadership requires less financial resources because all the leaders have full-time jobs outside their ministry roles. In most cases, though, a greater number of leaders taking greater responsibility and contributing greater amounts of time and energy to the new church will need to be freed from outside work and will require greater financial support. Many times, this problem solves itself because the greater number of leaders have a greater number of contacts to churches and organizations where they can solicit financial support for the new church. Fellowship Memphis was planted by five leaders coming from many different locations across the country, so the team had a wide variety of contacts to approach as they were requesting funding for the new church.

This kind of financial support often comes with a sunset clause, so it is imperative for a new church to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. For this reason, churches planted by teams often target locations with high population density or projections of imminent population growth, ensuring that the church is more likely to grow quickly. Fellowship Little Rock is currently sending teams to plant churches around the country, with a focus on population centers that will enable the new churches to quickly expand.

**Can be Immobilized by Conflict**

While conflict is inevitable in any relationship, the nature of team leadership makes it especially vulnerable to the effects of conflict in hindering the work of ministry. Steffen
outlines the process of conflict most teams go through in their normal life-cycle. In the first phase, *discovery*, team members try to avoid friction while they formulate their professional and personal relationships with each other. The second phase, *disagreement*, is marked by differences in methodological preferences and attack on personalities. In the third phase, *development*, team members establish procedures for resolving conflict. Finally in *delivery*, the team is able to quickly resolve conflict and remain united in their main purpose, actively seeking to serve each other. Steffen believes that conflict can actually help build greater unity once decisions are made, and can also develop creativity on the team.54

If a team is truly committed to the principle of unanimity, however, a lone dissenter on the team can easily kill the momentum of an entire church. Once he has expressed disagreement on a particular issue or initiative, it may become an issue of pride for him to resist backing down from his initial opinion. To avoid this possibility, it is vital for teams to carefully select potential members based on their authentic humility and their devotion to God’s will rather than their own agenda. In addition, ongoing accountability among the team members will help to discern whether a specific member is not contributing to the overall priorities of the team, and might need a temporary or permanent break from his duties.

---

**KEYS FOR SUCCESSFUL TEAM LEADERSHIP IN CHURCH PLANTING**

**Team Commitment to a Prayerful Process of Discerning the Will of God Rather Than Promoting Personal Agendas**

While every Christian leader would say he is ultimately seeking to do the Lord’s will above all else, his actions often betray the opposite. Sometimes his pride leads him to pursue ministry initiatives that will mainly serve to polish his image in the congregation.

Sometimes his fears will keep him from taking up risky but worthwhile projects. In a team setting, each leader must set aside his personal preferences and predilections and be absolutely open to the input of every other leader, knowing that the voice of God might be speaking through any one of them. Ray Stedman describes how this works at Peninsula:

We have a man on the board who is like a lion -- bold and powerful and very confrontational. People are a little afraid of him at times. We have another one who is like a bear. He is very powerful; he seems to engulf you. We have another one who is like a wolf; We have one who is like a leopard -- slinky -- he pounces on you suddenly. And here I am, an innocent lamb in the midst of all these! Only the Lord can make the lion lie down with the lamb and the cow and the bear feed together. This happens in a wonderful way. As we share, talk, pray, think, study, and observe together what God is doing, and evaluate it according to his Word, we discover a quiet unanimity appearing, as the Lord leads us together.\(^55\)

Humble prayer is the key to this style of leadership, as the team is absolutely dependent on the leading of the Spirit to provide guidance, encouragement, and correction. At one time or another each leader will be eager to launch a new ministry or make a radical overhaul of an existing ministry. If there are concerns voiced by his teammates, the leader must be willing to patiently and joyfully work through the process of determining God’s will in the matter.

**Team Commitment to Proactive Communication Within the Team**

**Along With the Priority of Frequent and In-Depth Team Meetings**

In the traditional hierarchical pyramid of leadership, only one man needs to have in-depth knowledge of all areas of the church. In a team leadership structure, all team members need the same information in order to make wise decisions. This necessitates a much higher level of intercommunication than the norm. Members of the team need to be quickly apprised of needs or problems in the church, new ministry initiatives, and concerns expressed by the body. Highly effective teams have made use of technological

---

advances such as email and instant messaging to make their communication more efficient. Many simple decisions can be made quickly with a simple email to the leadership team. If any member of the team has concerns that must be discussed, however, there will always be a meeting scheduled soon enough for those concerns to be discussed, prayed over, and resolved.

In the average church, the board meets once a month to conduct the business of the church. Recognizing their roles to be much more than administrative rubber-stampers, however, multiple-leader teams commit to meeting much more regularly for prayer, discussion, accountability, and fellowship. While they may have one or two meetings per month dedicated to business and administrative concerns, they will often have an additional weekly or biweekly meeting dedicated to spiritual concerns. At Grace Evangelical Free, the elder board meets for an hour every Sunday before the morning services to pray for the church and keep up-to-date on anything happening in the church that requires their attention.

**Team Commitment to Aggressive Accountability**

*Among All Team Members in All Areas of Life*

To prevent spiritual and organizational stagnation, leadership teams place a high priority on evaluation and accountability. Since the leaders do not report to a superior, they are accountable to the rest of the team for their spiritual life, ministry life, and personal life. At Grace Evangelical Free, the weekly elders’ prayer meeting also includes a time devoted to accountability. Each week, a different elder is asked three direct questions: [1] How is your time in the Word and what are you reading/learning? [2] How is your walk with God personally and in your family? [3] What issues can we pray for specifically related to your walk and growth? As staff elder Kenny Clark states, “I have found this to be an amazing time, and I am blown away by the honesty, love, and strong desire to be involved in each others’ lives, and by the battles for holiness that our elders model.”

---

56 Clark, Interview.
In addition to this ongoing accountability, an annual in-depth evaluation of each leader is carried out. At Community Bible Church, the elders gather each January for a time of reflection and evaluation. In advance of the retreat, the congregation is asked to be praying for the men, and inform the elders of particular concerns they may have. At this retreat each man's work and life is candidly discussed. It is decided by unanimous agreement whether each elder is qualified to serve for another year in the office of elder, if he requires any modification to his responsibilities as life circumstances warrant, or if he is in need of a season of rest from the office of elder. Any changes within the eldership are then clearly communicated to the congregation.

At Peninsula Bible Church, a yearly evaluation of each elder is carried out by selecting two elders to assess him. They initially meet for a meal with the elder being evaluated, then at some later date the entire elder board meets together with the evaluatee for a discussion led by the two evaluating elders. After this question and answer time, the elder is excused while the rest of the team decides what God wants changed in his life and ministry. It is required that this decision be unanimous. As Stedman says, “Individually knowing the biases of each elder would make it difficult to submit to only one brother’s assessments. However, a unanimous evaluation is taken as coming from the Lord. This is what keeps everyone humble as brothers before the Lord.”

CONCLUSION

In the words of one wise seminary professor, “If you ever find the perfect church, don’t go there. You’ll ruin it.”

The utopian church of our dreams will never exist, and a passing glance through the New Testament at the immature and conflict-prone churches led by the apostles themselves confirms that it never has. Still, it seems clear that a new church is more likely to come close to the scriptural ideal of a family of believers committed to glorifying God

---

58 Stedman, “The Lord and His Church,” section 2.
by loving each other and the surrounding community when the church is led by a strong and humble team of leaders.
SOURCES CONSULTED


Frees, Mark. “Is the One-Pastor System Scriptural?”
 http://users.bigpond.net.au/joeflorence/onepastor.htm


_________. “Forms of Church Government.” Course Materials for Theology IV Class. La Mirada: Talbot School of Theology, 2000.


