

Church Governance

Mark Connor (Sept 07)

In many ways, churches tend to rise and fall based on the quality of their leaders. Strong godly leadership is important, as is good governance, clear decision-making processes, and appropriate accountability.

When it comes to the subjects of leadership and governance, the New Testament presents a fairly fluid and emerging model for local churches. That's why there are so many different views on what church leadership should look like today. [For a detailed look at the subject of leadership as portrayed in the New Testament, click here to download a paper I wrote on this topic as part of my Master's Degree at Ridley College back in 2001 - [A New Testament Pattern for Church Leadership](#)]

Last year, we completed a governance review of [CityLife Church](#) and its ministries. As churches grow they need to occasionally review their structures and processes to ensure that they are conducive to creating a healthy environment. As a result of our review, we made the following decisions:

1. To simply our Constitution. *[Our Constitution now contains just our Statement of Purposes, our Statement of Faith, and our Core Values. It then outlines the required Rules for: Membership, General Meetings, Governance, and Administration. Now that these things are clearly established, they will most likely not need to be changed again]*
2. To establish a single Board of Elders as the primary governance group of the church. *[Prior to this time we had two governance groups - Elders and Board members]*
3. To create an internal Policy Governance Manual that further outlines the specific role of the Senior Minister and the Board of Elders, and how they relate to each other. *[It is important to know what decisions a Senior Minister can make by themselves and what decisions require the involvement of the Elders. This document is a working document and will be updated as necessary. Our goal was to create an environment with a high degree of empowerment for the Senior Minister but also with an accompanying high degree of accountability]*
4. To require that no more than 1/3 of the members of the Board of Elders be employed by the church or its ministries. *[This is in order for there to be proper accountability and genuine 'independent review', which requires separation of the creation of ideas from the review or approval of those ideas. Both the Staff and the Eldership leadership roles are crucial in the life of the church but there must be adequate differentiation between them. As a large church, our desire is to be 'staff-led' and 'Elder-protected' - a phrase I first heard from Bill Hybels]*
5. To have an Elder other than the Senior Minister Chair the Board of Elders. *[This enables the Senior Minister to report and be accountable to the Elders. It also enables the Senior Minister not have to perform a neutral facilitation role that may be best filled by a different person]*
6. To consider an appropriate 'length of term' for members of the Board of Elders so as to balance continuity and connection with the past while providing opportunity for new members to bring fresh ideas and perspective to a particular group. *[Prior to this time, Elders remained in this role indefinitely or until they resigned or were disqualified]*

These changes were implemented at the beginning of this year, at which time we also formed a new Board of Elders' team. So far these changes have served us very well.

For those who would like to do further study or who want to obtain some more extensive advice, I'd recommend the following resources related to church governance:

- [Leading Leaders - Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence](#) by Aubrey Malphurs. *[This is the best practical book I have read on church governance. It includes sample governance policies]*
- [Perspectives on Church Government - Five Views on Church Polity](#) by Daniel Akin [Editor]. *[This book takes a look at five different views on church government with each contributor responding to the other views]*
- [Who Runs the Church?: Four Views on Church Government](#) by Steven B. Cowan [Editor]. *[This is a similar book to the one mentioned above, exploring different perspectives on church government]*
- [Board that Make a Difference](#) by John Carver. *[Carver is the guru of governance for corporate and non-profit organisations. He is one of the few people to have created a comprehensive model of governance]*
- [Reinventing Your Board](#) by John Carver. *[This is more of a practical implementation book, to be read after the book mentioned above]*
- [The Policy Governance Fieldbook](#) by Caroline Oliver [Editor]. *[This is a practical guide written by people who have implemented Carver's model of governance within their organisations]*

It is important to realize that from a spiritual perspective, Jesus Christ is the 'Head' and therefore the 'owner' of any local church. The Bible is to be each church's 'constitution', providing a clear mission, as well as kingdom values. God directs and then empowers a church planter to start a church congregation. The initial Senior Minister usually forms an Eldership or leadership team and establishes involvement of members from the congregation as appropriate. Over time, wise church leaders articulate clear 'mission and values' so that the church can last beyond them and influence succeeding generations. The team of Elders then become the primary guardians of the 'mission and values' of the church entrusted to its care by Jesus Christ and together they take responsibility for its ongoing health, growth and well-being.

In contrast, from a legal perspective, most local churches here in Australia are set up as an incorporated association, especially if they own land and employ staff. An incorporated association belongs to its 'members' who are the real 'owners' of the organization. They appoint, or cause to be appointed, a Board (or 'Board of Elders') to govern the organization on their behalf. The Board of Elders then appoints and holds accountable a Senior Minister to give leadership to the church as it seeks to achieve its mission and live out its values. The legal constitution of an incorporated association essentially creates an 'artificial person', describes why it exists ('statement of purpose'), and how it governs itself within society.

The church is a living organism (a spiritual entity) and yet it also has organisational aspects, and more so as it grows larger. These two differing but related aspects of church governance need to be held in delicate tension. God has designed the church to be like a 'body' - a body that is very much alive and carrying out the mission of its Head, Jesus Christ, yet also realising that a body requires a structure and processes to facilitate that very life.