

EFFECTIVE CHURCH GOVERNANCE - John Sweetman

Systems of church governance have changed considerably in the last 50 years. In this article, John looks at how things have changed and reflects on what makes an effective system of church governance.

Church Governance in Recent History

When I was growing up, Queensland Baptist churches were all governed in basically the same way. The members' meeting made most significant decisions (and some insignificant ones as well) and the executive leadership was provided by a pastor (the elder) and deacons (lay leaders).

Some churches began to question whether only professionals (pastors) could be elders and there was a move in churches towards the appointment of elders as well as deacons. The elders generally took spiritual responsibility for the church's ministry and the deacons took practical responsibility. This change was mainly driven by biblical reflection, but I think pastors rightly wanted to share their "spiritual" responsibility.

The rapid growth in size of some churches and the increase in the number of decisions brought about by constant change drove further modifications in church governance. In many churches the executive leaders now make most significant decisions and the members focus on the appointment of the pastoral and leadership teams, the budget and property decisions, and possibly policy and vision.

Churches have also looked to secular governance models for more efficient structures. This is not a new thing. Many of us still use Robert's Rules of Order in our church meetings. An example is the way Carver's ideas on the role of Governance Boards are being studied and applied by executive leadership teams.

Reflections on Church Governance

As I have said before, I don't believe that the New Testament attempts to lay down a model for church governance. Structures evolved as they were needed and were appropriate for the context. Certainly, the NT emphasises the priesthood of all believers, the importance of leadership, and the qualities that spiritual leaders must display. These must be reflected in any governance structure.

I'm not sure that the demarcation between elders and deacons has worked well in all churches. I know many will disagree and I must admit that I have never pastored a church with this structure so I'm not really in a position to make a definitive statement. But I think the problem often lies in the separation of the practical and spiritual. Are finances practical or spiritual? Both. Is the future of the property practical or spiritual? Both. All major decisions are both spiritual and practical and must be made by those

most qualified to do so. So if the division is not between spiritual and practical, what could it be? Obviously executive leaders can't do everything and make all decisions.

I like what Carver and others are saying about a distinction between ends and means. Governance focuses on the "ends" (the purposes, direction and vision of the church) and ministry focuses on the "means" (the methods of achieving these ends). I suspect this is actually the issue in Acts 6 where the apostles chose the seven to look after the widows. The apostles took responsibility for the care of the whole church (the ends), but appointed "deacons" to deal with implementing this care for a particular needy group (the means). It wasn't a spiritual/practical division at all. Just look at the qualifications of the deacons - "men full of the Spirit and wisdom."

There needs to be a leadership group who actually takes responsibility for the "ends" of the church. This could be the members in a small church or it could be the pastoral team, but my preference in most situations is for a group of spiritual leaders (including the pastor) - "elders" if you like. They set the ends (under the guidance of the church meeting) and ensure that these ends are achieved. They support the pastor and hold the pastor accountable, but do not interfere in the means of implementation. So their focus is on policy, vision, resources, accountability, doctrine, discipling and prayer.

Issues to Consider

Here are some issues that I think need to be addressed in any church governance structure:

1. Who is responsible for the ministry of the church? Where does the buck stop? Who ensures that God's "ends" for the church are being achieved? Is this happening? Does everyone accept this?
2. To whom is the pastor(s) accountable? How does this work in practice?
3. Is the pastor(s) given freedom to implement the vision within the constraints of resources and policy set by the "elders"?

Having moved from pastoral ministry to the College, I have found a greatly increased degree of accountability and intentionality. I think this has been healthy and productive. It's probably easier to achieve in a parachurch, single-focus institution like the College than a church, but I think we should be trying.

I realise that any structure is only as strong as its leaders, and in many churches it's difficult to find leaders to make these good structures work. But leadership is so foundational to the effectiveness of the church that we have to work on finding and developing these leaders.

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