Local Church Governance

This paper is prepared by the AG Theological Commission to clarify the local church governance model practised by the Assemblies of God Malaysia. It is meant to be a resource for AG Malaysia pastors to facilitate the discussion on this topic. This is not a position paper or instructions from the executive council.

How should a local church be governed? There are generally four types of church governance:

1. Episcopal

   The leadership is appointed with many levels of hierarchy. There are bishops to overseas multiple congregations. The clergy is differentiated from the laity. Authority is centralized and top-down. Bishops are given significant authority in decision-making. Examples include Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican Churches.

2. Presbyterian

   The congregation elects the elders or Deacons. The elected body (The Board of Elders or Deacons) shares the congregation's leadership. Decisions are made collectively by the elected body. The elected body of each local congregation will form a higher body (such as synods or general assembly). The higher body has authority over the local congregations. Examples include Presbyterian, Reformed, and Lutheran Churches.

3. Congregational

   Each local congregation is autonomous and makes its own decisions. There is no central authority and multiple levels of hierarchy in governance. There are four types of congregational churches:

   1) Congregation led by a single pastor/elder.
   2) Congregation led by more than one pastor/elder.
   3) Congregation led by a board with pastors.
   4) Congregation led by any elected members.

   Examples include Baptist, Free, and Assemblies of God churches.

4. Nongovernment

    There is no formal structure of governance. The whole congregation makes every decision through the guidance of the Spirit of God. Example includes the Quakers, some early Pentecostal groups, and postmodern (emerging) churches.

Does the Bible provide endorsement for any model of governance? Each of these models of governance may find Scriptural ground. However, no one model is definitive or normative for every congregation. The following section will summarize Biblical teachings concerning local church governance.

Biblical Data of Local Church Governance

1. The Church is founded upon the foundation of Christ. He is the head of the Church. The local church governance must reflect this fundamental truth of the Church.

2. The Bible does not provide prescriptive ("what should be") instructions on how a Church should strictly be governed. Jesus did not lay down a blueprint for managing the church. The New Testament Church is not instructed to adopt a particular form of church order.

3. The Bible provides instructions on basic qualifications for leadership offices that already exist in the local church (1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

4. The New Testament qualifications for leadership affirm the need for local church governance, which supports the role of the Church as a gathering of God's people and as witnesses of Christ to the world.

5. The descriptive ("what was") passages in the New Testament reveal diverse governmental elements. There is no unitary pattern. Church governance was flexible and fluid.

    - Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they founded (Acts 14:23)
    - the churches chose Titus to accompany Paul (2 Corinthians 8:19)
    - Apostles are recognized by the Church to be chosen by the Spirit to lead the Church (Acts 1:2)

6. The New Testament churches did not have the same environment as modern-day churches. Leadership is contextual.

    - Most churches in the New Testament were established by itinerant missionaries (Apostles).
    - They only had the Old Testament as Scriptures while the New Testament was still developing.

- The local churches were influenced by the Jewish synagogue model (among Jewish believers) and the Greek religion model (among Gentiles)

7. As the Holy Spirit directs the growth of the Church, organizational structures were put in place to support and sustain the work of the Spirit. Form followed functions.

   - Paul instructs the leaders in the church of Corinth to establish order in their church services. 1 Corinthians 14:40 (ESV) [40] But all things should be done decently and in order.
   - Seven men were appointed to distribute charity to the widows in Acts 6.

8. Every church member is a priest of God (1 Peter 2:9). All believers are given access to God directly through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1-5). No other intermediary is needed (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:14-16). The event on the Day of Pentecost affirmed that the Lord has poured His Spirit on all believers (Acts 2:17-21). The church leader does not function as an intermediary figure.

9. Every member of the Church is expected to serve the body of Christ through the diverse spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11)). Local church leaders to manage and encourage the operation of the charismatic gifts.

10. The New Testament church exemplified shared and participatory leadership.

    - The Apostle Paul travelled with a team of co-workers.
    - He organized elders (plural) in the local churches.
    - The Apostles wrote to the leaders in the local churches, who would carry out their duty to care for the congregations.

The AG Malaysia Model of Governance

The Assemblies of God historically have followed the Congregational Model. The established churches would have the congregation elect the lead pastor and the board (sometimes called the Board of Deacons or Board of Trustees).

The elected leadership is considered representative of the congregation. They are accountable to the local congregation. The assembly's constitution determines the scope of authority for the congregation and the elected leadership.

Usually, significant decisions are brought to the congregation for discussion, and decisions can be made via a vote. Each local congregation retains the right of self-government within the fellowship of the Assemblies of God fellowship. The General Council provides accountability supervision in matters of doctrine and polity.

The AG Churches in Malaysia currently follow this governance model with a stronger emphasis on pastoral leadership. The lead/senior pastor may be elected or appointed by the congregation. Subsequently, the pastor may appoint the Board members, or the congregation may elect them. The senior/lead pastor will serve as the chair of the board.

This governance model emphasized the importance of the lead/senior pastor being the head of the flock to provide spiritual leadership for the local congregation. The lead/senior pastor is expected to undergo theological training to meet the competencies of proclaiming the ministry of the Word, pastoral care, and leadership.

Although the lead/senior pastor is responsible for being the main leader of the congregation, the leadership responsibilities are shared with the board. Team leadership and accountability in governance are still required.

This governance model complies with the New Testament's teaching of church governance. It upholds the integrity of the Word, maintains the accountability of leadership, and encourages congregation participation. It has shown to be appropriate and effective for the current context in Malaysia.

Elder (*Presbyteros*)

The lack of successors in pastoral leadership has caused some congregations to find alternative governance models. Some advocate a move to the "eldership" model, where authority is vested in a group of elders to lead the congregation. The following is a summary of "eldership" in the Bible.

1. The practice of appointing elders may be found in the earliest history of Israel, where the elders (older men) of the major families became leaders of the clans and formed councils to lead the tribes.

2. The elders served under the appointed leaders such as Moses.
   - Exodus 3:16 (ESV) [16] Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt,

3. The elders in the Old Testament served on local councils, met at the gate of their city (Deut 21:19; 22:15), settle legal disputes (Deut 22:15), discuss property settlements (Ruth 4:2), and try judicial cases (Deut 19:12; 21:1-4).

4. During the exile, the monarchy and the tribal structure of Israel collapsed. This gives rise to elders gaining more political authority. Certain aristocratic elders became the Sanhedrin in the Hasmonean period.

5. In the synagogue, a council of elders serves as the community's governing board. One of the elders would be selected to run the daily affairs of the synagogue. The duty of the Council of Elders includes general supervision over religious and civic matters:

   - Disciplinary decisions
   - Congregational properties
   - Charities
   - Schools
   - Care of the sick
   - Burials
   - Gathering contributions for the temple

6. The earliest church was mainly Jewish believers, and they adopted the synagogue governance model in appointing elders to the church. It is the most common form of governance of local congregations.

   - Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in the churches they start and commend them to the Lord with prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23).
   - Paul tells the elders in Ephesus that the Holy Spirit has appointed them to be overseers and shepherds for the church (Acts 20:28).

- Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every town of Crete with a list of qualifications (Titus 1:5-9; see also 1 Tim 3:2-7).
- James instructs those who are sick to be prayed over by the church elders (James 5:14).
- Peter exhorts the elders to tend the flock of God (1 Peter 5:1-2).

7. The elders mentioned in the New Testament usually serve as a team of elders. The New Testament constantly refers to elders (plural).

8. Elders and bishops (*episkopos*) are used interchangeably in the New Testament (compare Acts 20:17 and 20:28; Titus 1:5 and 1:7). The former term is the title of the office, while the latter is the function of the office.

9. Pastors (*poimen*) and teachers (*didaskalos*) are considered gifts of Christ to build up the Church (Eph 4:11). Elders are charged to shepherd and teach the congregation (1 Tim 3:2; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).

10. Elders are different from Deacons (*diakonos*). The term "deacon" means "servant". Paul also speaks of himself and Timothy as diakonos (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 4:6). However, Paul provides a separate set of qualifications for deacons (1 Tim 3:8-13) after addressing the qualifications of elders. Perhaps deacons are those who serve like the seven men in Acts 6:1-6, who were appointed to provide administrative and logistic support to the congregation. At the same time, the apostles and elders can focus on preaching and teaching.

11. The functions of elders in the New Testament include:

- Lead the congregation (1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pet 5:1-4)
- Take care of the local assembly (1 Tim 3:5).
- Pray for the sick (James 5:14)
- Preach and teach sound doctrines; correct false teachings (Titus 1:9; 1 Tim 5:17)
- They provide administration and pastoral care.

12. Paul provides a general list of qualifications for elders. The list mainly concerned with the characters and attitudes of the person (1 Tim 3:2-7; Titus 1:5-9).

13. The method of selection of elders may vary:

- Some are appointed by other church leaders (Acts 14:21-23; Titus 1:5).
- Some might offer themselves as elders. Paul noted some who aspire to be elders (1 Tim 3:1)
- Some are chosen by the congregation. Later Christians writing such as Didache 15:1 expected the church to choose overseers for themselves.

14. Wayne A. Grudem provides reasons why the selection of elders is best to involve the whole congregation:

- In the New Testament, several examples of church officers were chosen by the whole congregation (Acts 6:3; Acts 15:22; 2 Cor 8:19)
- In the New Testament, final governing authority rests with the whole congregation (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4)
- If the entire congregation selects the elders, there is more accountability to the congregation. The local congregations provide checks and balances to the elected leaders.
- Governance works best when it has the consent of those governed.

In the context of Assemblies of God, the role of a "pastor" is equivalent to the elders of the New Testament. The title "pastor" is preferred in the AG context, given the emphasis on the role of preaching and teaching God's Words. Moreover, the designation "elder" may convey unnecessary confusion with the Presbyterian model of governance that is not aligned with the AG's congregational model.

Updated 16 November 2023.

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