



# Overview of Common Forms of Church Government

Most churches agree with the following statement: “With Christ as our Chief Shepherd, we desire the leadership in our church family to be under the direction of the Holy Spirit and in conformity to the Word of God.”

With the above statement in view, this series will review the New Testament basis for church leadership and will also examine practical implications of a first century church leadership model in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world. [*This Church Leadership series is under “Church” on WordTruth.net at <http://www.wordtruth.org/index.php>*]

- Part 1 describes various church leadership structures (models) that exist in churches today and presents key strengths and weaknesses of each model.
- Part 2 will describe church leaders—their ministry purpose, preparation, and perspective.
- Part 3 will describe the leadership structure of churches in New Testament times and highlight potential blessings and perceived detriments if this model is followed today.
- Part 4 will examine singular leaders in the Bible and the origin of a singular leader over a church.
- Part 5 will focus on the headship of Jesus Christ and how church leadership reflects that reality.
- Part 6 will feature key ministry characteristics of Christ-honoring church leadership.
- Part 7 will detail scriptural qualifications of leaders providing spiritual oversight to a church.
- Part 8 will deal with leadership models and adaptations related to one’s definition of “church.”

Various leadership structures are evident in today’s churches. All of these leadership models have elements of scriptural truth within them although tradition, cultural practices, and natural wisdom can dominate their application.

## CONGREGATIONAL MODEL

One type of church leadership is the “congregational” model. In an effort to have everyone involved, the entire congregation votes on all important matters and usually elects a board (sometimes comprised of males and females) to supervise and/or oversee church ministries. This type of leadership typically has a senior pastor who teaches regularly yet may or may not have responsibility for specific areas of ministry or staff. The “final word” in a congregational church is the congregation (the “members”). The congregation can replace any board member through the voting process, and the board can usually fire the senior pastor if he doesn’t live up to board or congregational expectations.

The strength of a congregational form of leadership is found in its effort to have every person in a church family join together in ministry, with an emphasis on each adult Christian being a voting church member. However, that is also its weakness. The possibility of immature believers “voting” on vital aspects of church life and ministry can lead to “personal voting preferences” instead of biblically based decisions. A detriment of a congregational form of church government is that board members are often elected on the basis of popularity or business acumen. This structure can foster selfish, political maneuvering since the person or group with the most votes “wins,” potentially fostering divisiveness and factions within the church.

## PRESBYTERIAN MODEL

The presbyterian form of church leadership has a “presbytery” (leadership board) in charge of church matters. The local presbytery is comprised of male (and sometimes female) members of the church family who, like the congregational pattern, are usually elected to office. Generally, the members of the presbytery are selected based on their leadership qualities and perceived ministry effectiveness.

In the congregational model all members have an equal vote, and decisions requiring a vote involve the entire congregation. In the Presbyterian model, however, members give up some of their autonomy to the presbytery, a group that is granted authority to make decisions for the church family. In most instances, the local presbytery is under the

jurisdiction of a denominational presbytery (an ecclesiastical board) which has the final word, even in local church matters. A senior pastor in this leadership structure is assigned ministry responsibilities by the local and/or denominational presbytery. He can be removed by the local presbytery, but he can appeal to the higher presbytery in an effort to overturn local decisions that affect him or the church family.

An element of scriptural truth in a presbyterian form of leadership is found in its recognition that there are to be leaders in the church who exercise spiritual oversight (for example, Hebrews 13:17, Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. NASB).

Like the congregational model, a member of the presbytery may be one who is highly visible, popular or financially successful, yet not necessarily spiritually mature. There is often an emphasis on “what the presbytery decides” instead of what Scripture says, and majority voting still rules the day. As a result, political maneuvering can still direct church matters, since the group on the presbytery with the most votes prevails. In addition, the final word on a local church matter may not be decided by those in the local church but, instead, by a higher presbytery.

### **ELDER BOARD MODEL**

This leadership model uses the spiritual qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 to determine the men (not women) who are to lead. Elders are usually appointed by other elders and publicly ordained. Sometimes, however, a few elders are elected by the members of a church family from a larger group of qualified men.

In many elder-ruled churches, decisions are made by a majority vote among the elders. An elder led church may or may not have a senior pastor. Since every scripturally qualified elder can teach, the elders are responsible for biblical teaching in the church and may appoint one or more of their group to teach the whole church when it gathers. In some churches, each elder is responsible to provide spiritual oversight over a specific number of people in the church family.

Scripture supports the emphasis of biblically qualified men leading a church family. However, if decisions are determined by a majority vote, there is the possibility for the most persuasive or politically adept elder to “rule.” When voting is the method to make decisions, elders may concentrate more on getting “one vote more than 50%” instead of seeking God’s will on a matter. Also, if worldliness or unbiblical teaching is overlooked or condoned by the group of elders, then the church family can be weakened and led astray.

### **SENIOR PASTOR MODEL**

This leadership model has many variations, but all focus on the one person recognized as the “leader of the church.” The senior pastor concept is sometimes modeled after a “benevolent ruler” approach, although not usually described in this manner. In other words, a senior pastor decides what is beneficial for the church family, although a senior pastor sometimes has a board of advisors. Very few church family members, if any, can override decisions made by the senior pastor. A senior pastor is typically a gifted teacher or administrator and, more often than not, comes from outside a local church family.

A senior pastor often sets the vision for the church, determines all major decisions including significant financial matters, and is acknowledged as the church leader both in the church and in the community. Usually, a senior pastor is voted in by the membership after a selection process that is conducted by a committee set up for that purpose. Sometimes, the senior pastor is the founding pastor of the church and is seen as the sole leader from its inception.

Some denominations have a two-tiered senior pastor system that incorporates the concept of an area “bishop.” The bishop is the acknowledged head of many churches with a number of church families and senior pastors under the bishop’s authority.

A strength of the senior pastor model is that it typically requires that the pastor be committed to scriptural truth and be able to teach it clearly. A regrettable result of this model may occur, however, when individuals in the church family place their trust more in the pastor than in Christ and God’s Word. Furthermore, if a senior pastor wavers in biblical focus or personal integrity, the power to harm an entire church’s ministry is immense.

### **HOUSE CHURCH MODEL**

This leadership model features a group of believers who meet regularly in a home but often have no recognized leader. Everyone is deemed to be on equal ground before the Lord and one another. All decisions affecting the house church are decided upon by members of the house church. With regard to decision-making, this structure is somewhat like the congregational approach.

Some house churches, however, do have recognized leaders who often are gifted teachers or administrators. These leaders are seen to be “first among equals” but do not impose personal authority over group decisions or ministries. This leadership structure can have similar weaknesses already described in the congregational model in that immature believers (with strong personalities or significant resources) can sometimes impose their will on the group.

The element of scriptural truth most pronounced in this structure is the “one another” ministry that touches almost every aspect of daily life. Relationships are paramount in a house church, and gifted believers have many opportunities to serve as needs arise.

### **PROFESSIONAL CLERGY MODEL**

Some churches hire their leadership with the expectation that the clergy they employ will do the bulk of the ministry.

The professional clergy may preach on Sundays but he (or she) is also expected to chair major church committees, do all hospital visitations, handle all the counseling, and visit all the members in their homes at least once per year. This leadership model recognizes the need for ministry to be organized and accomplished but tends to overlook the biblical model of all Christians sharing in the work of the ministry.

### **PLURALITY OF ELDERS MODEL**

Because this leadership model has clear scriptural support and is often overlooked in local congregations, this series will focus on this leadership model. We will examine the term “plurality of elders” as well as the characteristics and purposes of those on this leadership team. The strengths and weaknesses of the plurality of elders structure for today’s churches will also be presented.

For now, the following comparison between other forms of church government and the plurality of elders model may be helpful. Even though the following is not a complete comparison, please note the common perspectives that a “plurality of elders” approach to church leadership has with the other forms of church government.

- The common perspective with the congregational approach is the commitment for every person in a church family to join together in ministry.
- The common perspective with the presbyterian model is its recognition that a group of qualified individuals are to provide spiritual oversight to a church family.
- The common perspective with an elder-ruled structure is an emphasis on the spiritual qualifications of elders before they are recognized as church leaders.
- The common perspective with the senior pastor model is that the public teaching is done by a gifted teacher (or by gifted teachers).
- The common perspective with the house church approach is an emphasis on relationships and practical ministry in the Body of Christ.
- The common perspective with the professional clergy structure is a recognition that there are ministries that must be organized and accomplished.

### **CONCLUSION TO PART 1**

As noted, there are many church leadership structures. Some models blend elements from other styles to fit their particular, often unique, leadership model. Different churches have different reasons for the model they currently follow, ranging simply from “it’s always been done that way” to a sincere effort to follow God’s Word.

The assumption behind this study is that believers desire to be completely aligned with Scripture in every aspect of body life and ministry. Hopefully, this mini-series on church leadership will be an impetus for believers to evaluate their church’s current leadership structure with the purpose of bringing God even greater glory through their life and ministry with one another.

### **LOOKING AHEAD**

Part 2: The New Testament Description of Church Leaders

There are numerous church leadership models in use today, but have you taken time to examine what the New Testament says about church leadership? Part 2 of this series will focus on the biblical description of church leaders, their “job description,” and perspective of ministry.