

FORWARD

The motivation for setting forth these points and pointers, is the discovery in my own experience as Chairman and participant in Church Constitution Workshops, that few members of such a committee possess sufficient awareness of, or appreciation for the necessity for providing a system of “checks and balances”...of qualifying delegated authority with defined responsibility and accountability. And that these protections must be instituted at a time when the Church is happy with the performance of its Staff, not in reaction to unsatisfactory conditions.

It is my impression that a very few misguided but assertive individuals could, with little resistance, push forward a document best described as sloppy, risky and irresponsible.

It is my aim and hope herein to make the Constitution framer and/or editor sensitive to the nuances of the forces at play, and provide pointers on how to avoid being, or accommodating a hindrance to progress toward the project’s goal. That goal is to produce a document which will encourage and facilitate Spirit-led, innovative ministry by both clergy and laity, while protecting all against nonfeasance, misfeasance or malfeasance. The final document should provide a win/win environment where the legitimate concerns of all members are satisfactorily addressed.

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CONSTITUTIONAL CONCEPTS & CONSIDERATIONS

for the Autonomous Christian Church

- **1. Purpose of Constitution and By-Laws**

Why a Constitution and By-Laws? Is this being “legalistic”?

- A. The Constitution identifies the institution, and sets forth its purpose, structure and primary principles of governance.
- B. The By-Laws define, assign and limit delegated authority and responsibility, and prescribe the orderly manner in which these shall be exercised.
 - (1) By-Laws avoid crises, by assigning specific responsibilities to specific positions or offices, assuring that critical processes will not be overlooked.
 - a. This also avoids one person’s area of authority being trampled upon by another.
 - (2) By-Laws spread the burden of the Church’s ministry.
 - (3) Ministries, to be effective, must be carried out with passion, by those called to, and gifted in that capacity. Well-written By-Laws will provide flexibility and encouragement for innovative, Spirit-led ministry, yet all the while requiring accountability via reporting of agenda, methods and results.

We must always bear in mind that the local Church is responsible for the acts of its employees and agents. Church staff and members can move on whenever and to wherever the Spirit (or their spirit) moves them; but it is the local Church that continues to be affected by their actions....whether blessing, or burden...far into the future. And it is the local Church that must prayerfully decide the nature and extent of the authority and powers to be delegated to each office and entity.

- C. Who should serve on a Constitution Committee?

Because what is critical to one Church Member may be a non-issue with another, it is crucial that the Committee be representative of a broad sampling of the general Membership and Staff. And then the Committee must make every effort to accommodate the legitimate concerns of all Members. Although total agreement has proven to be elusive, a mutually-supportable consensus IS a reachable goal, if a climate of love and mutual respect is maintained throughout prayerful deliberations.

- **2. What are the roles of the Membership, and the Clergy?**

The answers to this question will evolve over time, dependent largely upon the size of the Church. However, in the body (the local Church) every member (Church Member) should have a function (ministry).

When the Church is small, with a single pastor, little or no other salaried staff, and most of the various duties are carried out by lay volunteers, there are few options. The “Board of Deacons”, “Board of Elders”, or “Session”, by whatever name it’s called, deliberates over church business affairs and makes recommendations to the Membership at periodic Business Meetings. Matters of business are discussed openly, and voted upon by the entire Membership.

The Pastor, who serves not only as Spiritual Leader and Preacher, but also as initiator of most items of business introduced to “The Board”, makes recommendations and states his case. (Obviously, if “The Board” does not demonstrate confidence in, and work in cooperation with the Pastor, the Church falls into dysfunction.) Laymen, if they have financial skills, are elected to the “Finance Committee”; and if handy with tools, are elected to the “Building Committee”, and show up at meetings with hammer and saw in hand.

As the Membership grows in number, some committee functions and positions such as Sunday School Superintendent and Church Treasurer become too demanding to be filled by part-time volunteers. And pastoral demands exceed the capacity of a single Pastor. Additional pastoral and support staff with specialized training and skills are added, and the By-Laws must be amended to reflect the new circumstances, positions and responsibilities.

And at each such modification of the Church By-Laws, certain questions must again be asked and answered:

A. How important is it that the Membership continue to perceive itself as a self-governing, autonomous body, and the caller and employer (at God’s direction) of the Church Staff?

(1) Is this perception, with its resultant individual awareness, presumed influence, responsibility and commitment, essential to the Church functioning within the biblical concept of “one mind”? In other words, does “being of one mind” imply a state resulting from persuasion and Spirit-led informed assent, or from blind trust in an individual or a few “leaders”?

(2) In the process of re-assigning administrative functions to salaried Staff, to what extent may the church’s self-governance infrastructure be dismantled and replaced without full disclosure, and a Membership discussion and vote?

(3) What priority shall we place on keeping the Membership involved, not “disenfranchised”; participants, not “spectators”?

- B. When these questions have been answered, we are ready to address what steps we will take to involve the Membership in church affairs and ministry, such as:
- (1) Deacon (and/or Elder) selection, Staff additions, salaries and other major commitments and expenditures.
 - (2) Information and reports to be provided the Membership, in what detail, and the means and timing of its communication.
 - (3) The criteria for withholding information from the Membership.
 - (4) Will we continue to hold Church Business Meetings? If so, how frequently? What business will be discussed, and in what format?
 - (5) If we must make the move to a representative form of governance, what matters will “The Board” decide for the Membership, and on what matters will the entire Membership vote?
 - a. What role will the Membership have in selecting these board members (i.e. Deacons, Elders) to represent their interests?
 - b. Who will select their officers?
 - c. Will less than a 75% affirmative vote be automatically “appealed” to the Membership?
 - d. Who will select Committee members and chairpersons?

• **3. What “checks & balances” are necessary and appropriate?**

Any time one entity delegates (or grants) authority and responsibility to another, a system must be established to monitor and verify the quality and appropriateness of the grantee’s actions. These systems include, on the national and state level, the Executive, the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Courts. On the municipal level, we have the Mayor and the City Council. On the corporate level, we have the Board of Directors. Within the autonomous Church, we have “The Board” by whatever name, and Committees.

All these institutions and positions work to protect, not only the citizens, stockholders or Members, but the officials themselves, from ill-begotten actions and/or unwarranted criticism from second-guessers after-the-fact. Think, for a moment, of some ventures by our national government, which would have been indefensible had not the other branches of government been “on board”. And think, too, of the numerous instances where, in sister churches, the “checkers” didn’t check and the system became out-of-“balance”; and as a result the Pastor was destroyed and the Gospel suffered reproach. We’re all familiar with the quote: “Absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Machiavelli).....and neither a traditional denominational Pastor, nor even the Pope possesses authority without accountability.

On the other hand, in the autonomous Church, where nearly all non-routine actions are initiated by the Pastor and the Pastoral Staff, the primary role of “The Board” and Committees is not to monitor performance, or to generate ministries and projects, but to refine and facilitate what has been proposed by the Pastor. However, these organizations cannot abandon their secondary role, which is to counsel the Pastor and affirm pastoral initiatives through knowledge and involvement, assuring the Membership of their soundness.

While we presume our Pastor to have God’s special anointing and direction, it is not outside God’s *modus operandi* to grant affirming inspiration to other affected participants. And in keeping with the concept of “the priesthood of the believer”, and the biblical charge to be “of one mind”, it is not unreasonable for us to seek and expect Spiritual insight in our lay leaders who have met the “filled with the Holy Spirit” prerequisite.

But why is lay counsel so important to the Pastor? We rarely think in these terms, but it is a condition of their employment that Staff Pastors support the Senior Pastor; a factor which compromises their ability to counsel. Add to this the cluster of sycophants continually clinging to the Pastor, telling him how wonderful he is, and you have the makings of the eventual destruction of one of God’s elect servants. “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” Proverbs 11:14

It follows, then, that there can be no “oversight” (or domination) of “The Board” or Committees by the Clergy. There must be, rather, constant communication and Christian cooperation.

• 4. What hinders unanimity in framing a Constitution and By-Laws?

There is, of course, always debate over form and sequence, and a tendency by some toward verbosity. These latter would include in the By-Laws details of function which, in practice, would actually impair innovation. These differences can be dealt with effectively by a Chairperson who has a working knowledge of contracts, and who persistently focuses on maintaining a group attitude of cooperation and mutual respect. The most serious challenges, however, are:

- A. The Senior Pastor’s agenda must be solicited and fully disclosed to the Committee in the very beginning, so his ideas can be discussed and incorporated into the fabric of the document. Frequent or large re-writes months into the process, due to lack of timely communication, are hugely frustrating and time-consuming.
- B. The fact that, during the interval between committee meetings the Pastoral Staff has occasion to discuss and refine its agenda in its own weekly meetings. Its representatives on the Committee then attend committee meetings with inflexible demands, and without authority to engage in give-and-take as the Committee works toward accommodation of all legitimate concerns. (The lay committee members have no such “caucus” meetings.)

- C. A difference in priorities between the Pastoral Staff, and lay committee members. The Pastoral Staff can be expected to focus on gaining universal authority to control and expedite administrative processes, while lay members are more inclined to prefer a voluntary, situational subordination to the Pastor's leadership, and the protection of "checks & balances".
- D. Pastoral reluctance to embrace accountability to a lay entity. Although the local autonomous Church is responsible for recruiting, selecting, calling, compensating and financing the ministry of its Pastor, and is legally responsible for his official acts, he can be expected to consider himself "called" not by the local church, but by God alone. You may find him resistant to any elements of accountability, and any sharing of governance with lay authority. In fact, the Southern Baptist Convention has encouraged an attitude of disdain toward lay involvement in church governance.

- **5. Suggestions to the Chairperson**

- A. Be diligent in obtaining and maintaining camaraderie among the Committee. Make certain that everyone's opinion gets a respectful, fair hearing.
- B. Be keenly aware of the difference between reasoned persuasion, and negotiating ploys. Respond to the former, and resist the latter.
 - (1) Persuasion seeks agreement. Negotiation seeks compromise.
 - a. Never resort to negotiation until persuasion has been exhausted.
 - b. Never allow another to force negotiation until he has attempted persuasion. Demands must never precede explanation.
- C. Be informed and courageous, but respectful of the merit of the opinions of others, and willing to accede to decisions of the Committee.
- D. Do not be naive.
 - (1) It is unrealistic to assume that all contributors will openly declare their agenda, and work toward a win/win accommodation. Some must be called out of a habit of surreptition, into open dialog.
 - (2) It is unrealistic to assume that By-Laws provisions will be heeded, unless compliance reporting is made the specific responsibility of a particular position.
- D. Volunteered time is Prime-Time.....Spend it frugally.
 - (1) Donated time is not time which would otherwise have been spent taking out the garbage, mowing the lawn or tending tedious business tasks. No, those chores will still demand their due. It is rather those precious few hours that remain after "fixed" claims on our time have been satisfied; those hours we could have spent one-on-one with a child, writing a letter or telephoning a distant friend or relative; the time a businessman could have spent in profitable sales activity, after putting out all the day's "fires".

Like donated money, donated time is that little discretionary time available to make a real difference in the donor's life. It is not "free". We dare not spend it carelessly.

- E. Designate one or more committee member(s) as "scribe(s)", to prepare proposed text incorporating each meeting's decisions affecting the current section(s). This text should then be distributed, well before the next meeting, to all committee members, the Senior Pastor and any Staff Pastors and/or Committee Chairmen directly affected by that section. Any necessary edits may then be accomplished at the following meeting.
- F. Publish cut-off dates for outside suggestions of content for each section, and for the final draft. These dates will have to be determined as the work progresses, but will serve to avoid endless regurgitation of deliberations past.
- G. In attempting to accommodate the concerns and priorities of all segments of the Membership and Staff, you can expect to encounter a variety of personal ethics standards, with which you find it difficult to relate.

"Be wise as a serpent, but harmless as a dove." Be quick to note failings of character, but slow to condemn the offender. He doubtless possesses qualities which would put you to shame by comparison.

- (1) If you have received misinformation or disinformation, be gracious but tenacious.
- (2) If your time has been stolen, be gracious but tenacious.
- (3) If it seems the Committee's work is being undermined, be gracious but tenacious.
- (4) If a negotiated covenant is violated, be gracious but tenacious.
- (5) If your reputation is being diminished, and your conscience is costing you cherished relationships, read Matthew 5:10-12.

Make your approval or disappointment known, and be thankful for your new-found knowledge of who stands tall, and whose integrity can be relied upon.

- H. Resist all attempts to introduce into the Church Covenant extra-biblical "convictions": prohibitions related to food, drink, dress or entertainment. There will be ample opportunity to teach our culture to converts, after we get them into the Kingdom and into the pews.
Ref: Matthew 23:←vs.23→, Acts 15:28-29
- J. Dismiss any suggestion that "The Board" be called by any other name which implies an exclusive social club, effectively diminishing its ministry and perceived function.