

# H7

## STATEMENT ON CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The following instructional statement was prepared at the direction of the 1980 General Council (Hartford, Connecticut) and adopted at the 1981 General Council (Anaheim, California).

The early leaders of The Christian and Missionary Alliance sensed a minimal need for a thoroughly defined structure of government. However, through years of growth and God's blessing, The Christian and Missionary Alliance developed from a nonecclesiastical structure to that of an ecclesiastical one, from a missionary society or fraternal union of believers to that of a denomination.

This statement lays a foundation for strengthening the role of elders, allows for local adaptation in the midst of diversity that has always characterized The Christian and Missionary Alliance and assures the church of leadership that meets the biblical standard.

### AN INSTRUCTIONAL STATEMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN AND MISSIONARY ALLIANCE

It is recognized by all that one of the significant ways in which churches differ is in the area of church government. Differences of opinion are deep-rooted, and most systems of church government claim some support from Scripture while acknowledging the molding influence of customs and tradition.

In the midst of such diversity the following instructional statement seeks to develop a proper understanding of the biblical evidence regarding church government, what structures it requires, permits, or forbids, and to delineate its application in a Christian and Missionary Alliance form of government.

#### 1. **Biblical and Background Evidence**

- a. **Old Testament.** With the exception of the appointment of "able men out of all Israel" by Moses to be "rulers" (Exodus 18:25), the appointment of elders is not described in the Old Testament. Elders in the Old Testament bore office with diverse functions: representative (Leviticus 4:15, Exodus 3:16-18), judicial (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), pastoral (Deuteronomy 27:1, 31:9), and political (2 Samuel 5:3). Thus, they shared broad power with king (1 Kings 20:78) and priest (Deuteronomy 31:9). Deacons, on the other hand, are not found in the Old Testament, although functions normally associated with them are:

benevolence (Deuteronomy 14:28-29) and care of property (Numbers 4).

- b. **Synagogue.** In addition to the one Temple in Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile onward, the synagogue, as a house of prayer and religious instruction, became a widespread institution wherever Jews were dispersed with some cities having many synagogues. The synagogue was under the management of “elders” (Luke 7:1-5) who seem to have had disciplinary and administrative authority as well as religious.

The “ruler” of the synagogue (more than one in large congregations, Acts 13:15) had charge of the service, directing it himself or assigning functions to others. Another synagogue functionary was the “attendant(s)” or servant(s) whose work included caring for the building, carrying the Scriptures to the reader (Luke 4:17-20), scourging an erring member, and possibly offering elementary instruction. Other more temporary positions included “deputies” and “interpreters” who assisted in the service and “almoners” for collection of money and distribution to the needy.

- c. **New Testament.** Because of their heritage, New Testament leaders likely knew and used the synagogue models for the organization of the church, further supported by models deriving from the Hellenistic world. This might explain the fact that the New Testament gives no historical record of the institution of the eldership as it does with the Seven (Acts 6). Much of the church’s organization is assumed in the New Testament rather than argued. Such an assumption of development would explain Paul’s earlier lack of instruction on deacons (Acts 14:23) compared with his later teaching (1 Timothy 3:8-13). However, development in the church’s organization is found in the New Testament.

(1) **Origins.** Christian elders are first mentioned in Acts 11:30 as an existing institution. It is possible that some of the first Christians were already (Jewish) elders and were continued in a similar capacity in the early church. The office of deacon is generally understood to have originated, directly or indirectly, with the appointment of the Seven (Acts 6) to administer the supplying of food to the Greek-speaking Christian widows. Throughout the Book of Acts the elders are seen to be leaders of the church (Acts 14:23, 15:2, 20:17, 21:18).

(2) **Office/Function.** Although the New Testament shows no absolute distinction between offices (orders) and functions, a relative distinction can be drawn whereby an office is acknowledged to be more generally operational and more permanent. Thus, the early local church leadership was comprised of elders and deacons. A pastor is essentially a ruling elder whose primary ministry is preaching and teaching and who is therefore

worthy of double honor (1 Timothy 5:17).

- (3) **Terminology.** The terms most obviously used to designate office/functions in the local church are: *episkopos* (overseer, bishop, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:2), *diakonos* (servant, minister, deacon, 1 Timothy 3:8), *presbuteros* (elder, Acts 14:23, 20:17, Titus 1:6), and *poimen* (shepherd, pastor, Ephesians 4:11). There are also the participles *proistamenos* (one standing before, 1 Thessalonians 5:12) and *hegoumenos* (one ruling, Hebrews 13:7).

The polity changes made by 2023 General Council allow for each local church to align its polity related to titling with its interpretation of Scripture. Therefore, in light of our commitment to male eldership, churches that understand all pastors to be elders, or object for other reasons, are not required to use the title pastor for a female official worker. Those who see the title pastor and the office of elder as being separate may use the title pastor for a female official worker.

- (4) **Lists of Qualifications.** The lists of qualifications for elder/overseer (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1) stress primarily spiritual and personal qualities but also include teaching abilities related to the edification of believers. These lists are best seen as selective rather than exhaustive and the qualities as overlapping. The qualities are also general, being similar to qualities expected in leaders in the secular sphere, stressing the sort of person who should serve. People with all these qualities in a high degree were as hard to find then as now.

- (5) **Descriptive Passages.** The descriptions of the work of elders include: protecting (Acts 20:28-31), shepherding (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-3), teaching (Titus 1:9), anointing the sick (James 5:14), representing the congregation (Acts 11:30), and making policy decisions (Acts 15:6, 22).

- (6) **Plurality of Elders.** There is New Testament evidence of a plurality of elders in a city (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5), but the evidence is not sufficient to determine whether these functioned as individual leaders of house-churches, as a citywide board, or both. There seems to be in the New Testament a growing pattern of one elder in a community as head of a board of elders (1 Timothy 5:17), something like the pastor of today.

- (7) **Method of Selection.** It is uncertain whether the selection of elders was by election and if so, by whom. The term used in Acts 14:23 originally implied election to office, but the New Testament period had the more general meaning "appoint." Nor is it clear whether the laying on of hands by the elders (1 Timothy 4:14) was essentially election or "ratification" of an

election or appointment made by others. Moreover, it is not clear whether elders were always installed by laying on of hands. Conversely, the principle of popular choice of church leaders is sometimes evidenced in the New Testament (Acts 1:23, 6:1-6).

- (8) **Consecration and Ordination.** Consecrating and ordaining workers is the church's public recognition of the call from God, distinct from human vocational choice, to a person for a lifetime ministry, through speech and exemplary lifestyle, of preaching and teaching the Word of God, protecting God's people from spiritual enemies and doctrinal heresies, overseeing and promoting the spiritual development of God's people, and equipping God's people to fulfill the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations" for the purposes of knowing and glorifying God by obeying His will and building His Kingdom. The occasion for setting men and women apart for such ministry is the church's affirmation of the candidate's faithful completion of preparation for consecration and ordination through approved education, in-service training, field experience with mentoring for a minimum of two years, and examination by a qualified council of peers.
- (9) **Deacon.** The role of the deacon is more difficult to define partly because the word is often used in a very general sense (servant). Traditionally, deacons, thought to have originated with the Seven (Acts 6), are entrusted with ministries of benevolence. They may be considered caretakers of property comparable to the secondary synagogue officials. Since many of the desired qualities are spiritual and personal (1 Timothy 3:8-13), a deacon's ministry is also partly pastoral.
- (10) **Deaconess.** Recognition of the position of deaconess in the New Testament rests primarily on 1 Timothy 3:11. The description of Phoebe in Romans 16:1 is unclear as to whether it refers specifically to an office. It is uncertain whether 1 Timothy 3:11 refers to deaconesses or to wives of deacons. If it does refer to deaconesses, these would be church leaders comparable to deacons and presumably with comparable functions.
- (11) **Amenability.** The New Testament is not clear on the question of the relationship between a congregation and its leaders. Church leaders have both authority over (1 Thessalonians 5:12) and responsibility to serve (cf. 2 Corinthians 4-5) their flock. Similarly, Christians are exhorted to obey their leaders (Hebrews 13:17) but are also instructed to serve the Lord in all good conscience (Acts 23:1, 5:29, Galatians 2:11). The New Testament does not resolve this tension. It is clear, however, that Christ is the Lord of the Church and that He has both provided for the exercise of power by the appointment of church leaders and ordered that such leaders exercise their power in subordination to His Word (1 Peter 5:3).

2. **Prescriptive Nature of the Evidence.** The biblical patterns of local church organization, particularly in reference to its leadership, are to be seen as prescriptive and not merely as descriptive. Generally evangelical interpreters recognize some prescriptive element (spiritual qualifications) so that the matter is better stated in terms of its extent. The position here is that the New Testament prescribes the principles, not necessarily every detail, of church organization.
  - a. Both the nature of the Bible and the nature of the Church would seem to support this conclusion.
    - (1) The Bible is the rule of faith and practice. This fact constitutes a reason to accept its descriptions of certain features of church organization as normative unless there are compelling reasons to feel that they are not. The burden of proof rests on those who hold that the patterns are merely descriptive.
    - (2) The same conclusion is supported by the nature of the Church. Because the Church is a divinely originated institution, one could expect that basic provision be made in Scripture for its effective operation and government.
  - b. There are passages in the New Testament which do, in fact, prescribe features of church government. Titus is told to install elders in the churches of Crete (Titus 1:5). Paul and Barnabas supervised the appointment of elders in every city (Acts 14:23).
  - c. It can be plausibly argued that the reason why the New Testament is not more explicit in regard to church government is that it presupposes, as prescriptive, familiar principles of organization in use in the Old Testament, the synagogue, and perhaps in Hellenistic institutions.
  - d. Finally, the early postapostolic church understood the positions of overseer and deacon to be prescriptive.
3. **Forms of Church Government.** Beyond the principles enunciated in Scripture, the Church has felt at liberty to develop structures which are functional, appropriate to culture, and not in conflict with biblical principles. Thus, there have arisen various historical forms of church government which have attempted to address two concerns: the relationship *between* local congregations and the duties and relationships of leaders *within* a local congregation.
  - a. In regard to relationships between local congregations the issue is the vesting of authority.

- (1) Episcopal: local church is under the control of higher authorities.
  - (2) Presbyterian: local church vests some of its authority in higher authorities.
  - (3) Congregation: local church autonomy is recognized with limited relationship between local churches.
- b. In regard to structures within the local church, the forms of government are distinguished by the number of elders and the way responsibilities are shared.
- (1) In one system there is one elder, called the minister (some Congregational), priest, or rector (Episcopal).
  - (2) In another there is plurality of elders, one of these being a teaching elder or minister (Presbyterian).
  - (3) In a third system there is plurality of elders with none as minister (Plymouth Brethren).

In all systems the elder(s) has control over the spiritual affairs and in almost all cases has oversight in the temporal affairs of the church, which are often then carried out by a lower body. Thus, deacons are charged with administering temporal affairs but sometimes (Episcopal, some Congregational) are entrusted with some spiritual affairs as well.

#### 4. **Form of Government for The Christian and Missionary Alliance.**

- a. **Type of Government.** On the basis of the biblical evidence, historical precedent, and practical considerations, The Christian and Missionary Alliance recognizes a form of government which is a combination of elements of the Congregational and Presbyterian systems. Thus, local churches are not wholly entities unto themselves but are externally related through the district and national organizations and are amenable to these authorities in such areas as the ownership and transfer of property and the calling of a pastor. On the other hand, within definite bounds, there is considerable self-determination. Internally, the government is through elected representatives (governance authority).
- b. **Amenability.** In Christian and Missionary Alliance local churches all committees and organizations other than the Nominating Committee are amenable to the collective oversight of the elders as expressed through the governance authority. The governance authority is in turn amenable to the congregation and the district superintendent as constitutionally defined. Thus, the powers assigned to the governance authority are to call a pastor (in

cooperation with the district superintendent), conduct the affairs of the church between annual meetings, call special meetings of the church, elect two members of the Nominating Committee, and direct the work of the trustees; they may ask for the resignation of the pastor in consultation with the district superintendent. The powers assigned to the congregation are to elect its leadership, transfer property (in cooperation with the district superintendent), elect two members of the Nominating Committee, pass bylaws, and direct the work of the trustees. In addition, certain responsibilities are assigned to the elders: membership, discipline, and care of the congregation. Thus, while the lines of amenability are varied, the main responsibility of the governance authority to the congregation is to fulfill the trust placed in it under the constitution and bylaws.

- c. **Orders of Ministry.** The Christian and Missionary Alliance issues credentials in the following categories:

(1) License

- (a) Consecrated/Ordained Official Worker
- (b) Non-Consecrated/Unordained Official Worker
- (c) Provisional Official Worker
- (d) Lay Minister

(2) Certificate

- (a) Vocational
- (b) Christian Worker

At the local level there are pastors, elders, deacons, deaconesses, and where required by law, trustees.

- d. **Local Church.** All church leaders should satisfy scriptural standards.

(1) **Election.** Church leaders are elected at the annual meeting by the congregation. Their term of office is established by the local church bylaws. The bylaws may also establish whether or not they may succeed themselves in office and whether or not terms of office are staggered.

(2) **Commissioning.** New church leaders may be commissioned through the laying on of hands by the elders.

- (3) **Qualifications.** The qualifications of all officers, elders, deacons, and governance authority members are set out in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9.
  - (4) **Duties.** The duties of leaders are set forth in the Uniform Constitution for Accredited Churches, and the local church bylaws may add to or refine those duties.
  - (5) **Women.** Women may fulfill any function in the local church which the lead pastor and elders may choose to delegate to them consistent with the Uniform Constitution for Accredited Churches and may properly engage in any kind of ministry except that which involves elder authority.
5. **Model Bylaws.** Model Bylaws, which include three different governmental models, are available in this Manual.