

Who's in Charge?

October 22, 2010

Baptist churches across the board agree—Jesus Christ is the head of the church.

But when it comes to ways Christians discern Christ's will for their particular congregation, handle its day-to-day administrative chores and make decisions about budget and buildings, Baptist churches demonstrate remarkable diversity.

Both the 1963 and 2000 versions of the [Baptist Faith & Message](#) identify the local Baptist church as an autonomous body operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation, each member is responsible and accountable to Christ, the faith statements assert.

In his book [The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms](#), Walter B. Shurden of Mercer University linked the Baptist commitment to democratic church governance to the emphasis on the individual.

“Baptists practice democratic church polity not because it is more efficient or more reliable or even more biblical than other forms. They follow it because it accents the role of the individual within community, allowing the greatest freedom for the greatest number of people to have a say. Moreover, democratic church polity is a statement of the equality of all believers in determining the mind of Christ,” wrote Shurden, then-director of Mercer's Center for Baptist Studies.

But how churches exercise their autonomy, carry out democratic processes and give members opportunities to carry out their responsibilities differ—particularly after their membership grows.

Some historians point to the thoroughly democratic practices of early Baptists in the Colonies as influencing early American democratic ideals and providing a model for the New England town hall meeting. Many small-membership congregations still hold similar monthly business meetings where member openly discuss and vote on every decision that affects the church.

However, allowing every person in a 50-member congregation an opportunity to speak publicly regarding an issue is one thing; allowing every person in a 500-member or 5,000-member church the same privilege is another.

So, some churches have chosen to delegate certain authority to smaller groups, whether staff, deacons, elders or committees.

"I've come to believe the polity issue is usually resolved in Baptist churches of varying sizes by virtue of efficiency rather than theology," said Gary Long, pastor of [First Baptist Church](#) in Gaithersburg, Md.

The way decisions are made and the number of people involved in that decision-making process tend to depend in part on the level of trust members have in leaders, he asserted.

"If trust is high, decisions are made more frequently in smaller groups and supported by the larger congregation. When trust is low and anxiety is high, there is more of a call from the congregation for a vote," he said. "Good leaders seem to sense where decisions are along the scale of importance and weigh out when to act versus get congregational input."

Polity also may be determined simply by how busy and involved members are at a particular point, Long added.

"The folk who are busy raising kids, coaching soccer, excelling at career and truly focusing on their own spirituality seem more interested in

volunteering and serving than in leading and deciding,” he observed.

Long, former pastor of Willow Meadows Baptist Church in Houston, noted he has served in a congregation where decisions of various types explicitly are categorized, and the level of congregational input was determined by perceived importance.

“Hiring and firing ministers were A level, for example. Calendar decisions were C level and agreed upon by the staff. Plans for a yearly focus or a new ministry partner were B level and decided by committees in consultation with ministry staff,” he said.

Even so, some level of ambiguity remained.

“Of course there were times when I was left wondering, ‘Is this a B or a C level issue?’ Those were the times when I deferred to the next level up the chain, rather than guessing I had the authority to decide something on my own,” he said.

“It was slow, but I don’t recall ever getting criticized for counting on other church members to help with decisions.”

In some respects, [First Baptist Church](#) in Woodbridge, Va., follows a similar approach. The church votes on major decisions in a church meeting that requires 50 percent of active members for a quorum. Major decisions include budget, incurring debt, hiring a senior pastor and making changes to bylaws or constitution.

At a members’ meeting every other month, the church receives financial reports, grants transfer of membership and accepts new members, approves any mid-year budget changes and votes on hiring any staff other than the senior pastor.

However, the Woodbridge church adds a different approach in terms of

day-to-day administration. Elders deal with matters of spiritual discipline and proper doctrine. An administrative ministry team—which includes an elder—manages the church’s resources. Deacons work in a servant role, alongside dozens of ministry teams.

Ray Bearden, who has been pastor of First Baptist Church in Woodbridge, 17 years led his congregation to institute the role of elder about seven years ago, but he emphasized the elders’ primary role is to provide spiritual leadership. Elders are selected on the basis of already exhibiting the gift of spiritual leadership and as being people to whom the congregation looks for wisdom, he explained.

“They are not ruling elders,” he stressed. “These are people who have spiritual influence already.”

Bearden led the church to install elders in part because was wanted the accountability to a group whom the congregation acknowledged as spiritual leaders. Also, he felt many deacons were operating outside their spiritual gifts. Deacons who clearly had the spiritual gift of service but lacked the gift of administration and leadership were devoting much of their time and energy to “administrative minutia,” he said.

According to the system the Woodbridge church instituted, the congregation has a minimum of five and maximum of seven elders, including the pastor, who is the only elder not subject to a term limit. Other elders are limited to two consecutive three-year terms.

“We meet every Tuesday night for two to three hours, with at least one hour spent in prayer,” Bearden said. “It’s a pretty heavy commitment.”

An elder-selection committee nominated the initial group of elders, and the congregation approved them. Subsequent nominees have been suggested by the congregation, considered and nominated by the elders and then affirmed by a vote of the congregation.

[First Baptist Church](#) in Marshall follows a more traditional Baptist approach to decision-making and day-to-day administration. The church makes significant decisions in general business meetings, and most of the recommendations come from committees.

“When the committee system works well, it provides a shared sense of being given ownership and being involved—that a particular project is not just staff-led or pastor-led,” Pastor Kevin Hall said.

Hall acknowledged some churches have moved toward granting most decision-making authority to a board of elders, to staff or even to the pastor alone, but he questioned the wisdom of that approach.

“It’s more Baptist to have as many of the people making the decisions as possible,” he said. “Granted, it’s more arduous. It slows things down.”

But allowing church members time to work through processes at their own pace also means providing time to build consensus. Objections can be addressed along the way, corrections can be made, and the church can benefit from the process.

A friend jokingly refers to lengthy processes as “traveling at the speed of church,” Hall noted.

“Moving at the speed of church may be slower, but it may be better.”