

Right or Wrong? Church 'hierarchy'

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Friends say they left church because of its top-down organization and minimal emphasis on spiritual direction. How did we get into this situation? How can we get out of it?

Sadly, the scenario you described is all too common. As a Texas Baptist who believes in shared leadership in Baptist life, I would encourage you to take this matter seriously and begin with an honest evaluation.

Perhaps you could start by asking a few questions: How are decisions made in our church? Does our church have an active committee structure? Is the membership involved in planning and executing ministries and projects? Are there avenues for members to be involved in creating and casting a vision for the church?

Creating a vision

Now ask these questions: Do we leave the role of creating and casting a vision to the staff of our church? Is our membership involved in the important role of managing our resources and selecting our leadership? Are we a well-informed congregation?

The answers to these questions can help determine how you respond to the complaints of those who left your membership. If you are able to affirm the membership actively participates in the work of the church, then perhaps the problem lies with those who left. Early in my ministry, a wise director of missions said, "Those who join your church angry with their previous pastor will, in time, leave your church angry with the pastor."

If, on the other hand, these questions caused you to recognize the direction of the church and its resources are managed by the staff or a few people who are unelected by the membership, it is time to have a conversation.

You have asked, “How did we get into this?” The answer is: Slowly. It is easy for the membership to fall into the habit of letting the staff take care of daily matters. Involvement requires time. Serving the church means time away from work, children’s activities and aging parents, and so we consent to “let the staff take care of things.” One thing leads to another, and pretty soon, the staff possesses the information and makes the decisions.

Difficult conversations

To change from a staff-led church or a church led by a few people, the membership needs to begin a series of difficult conversations. And these will be difficult. People seldom want to give up power.

Conversations should be conducted among the servant leaders of the church, the deacons. Insist that your church have a healthy and functioning committee process, members who are charged with various tasks and responsibilities. This process gives members a chance to invest in the process, to cast a vision, and the responsibility to see it through.

It can be painful when members leave the church. But if the church gives an honest self-evaluation, the future can be a blessing as members invest themselves in the work of the gospel.

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If you have a comment about this column or wish to ask a question for a future column, contact Bill Tillman, consulting ethicist for “Right or

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