The Biblical Basis for Relational Networking Among Autonomous Churches

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Introduction

The Independent Bible Church movement in the United States, grew largely as a result of various denominations becoming theologically liberal. Pastors and churches that did not want to be part of those denominations either left or were asked to leave, often at great cost. Because of the potential liberal drift of denominational associations, many churches chose to be independent and stand alone. While some independent churches formed into loose associations for fellowship and encouragement, they generally remained independent in attitude and practice.

While I wholeheartedly agree with the autonomy of the local church, I believe the "independent church" is biblically and practically a misnomer. Is it possible for autonomous churches to develop relationships with other churches that reflect the relationship of churches in the New Testament? Furthermore, would such relationships serve to increase effective, efficient ministry within the churches in order to reach people with the Gospel? Churches must see their goal as ministry, not independence from denominational control or worse yet—isolation from other churches.

The Nature of the Problem

Denominations assist their member churches in a variety of

ways: supervision, counsel, pastoral search, placement, ordination, conflict mediation, church growth, and church planting. Denominations may also have specialists in retirement planning, health care, legal issues, financial planning, building design, and construction. Is it possible for independent churches to enjoy some of the strengths of denominations, yet remain independent?

Independent churches, while rejecting denominational hierarchical structure, are often left like sea gulls feeding on a hodge podge of resources with fiercely competitive attitudes. The independent church mentality tends to isolate a church from interacting with other like-minded churches in a way that benefits all. Autonomy has its advantages, but it also carries inherent weaknesses.

Basic Hypothesis: It is my thesis that the inherent weaknesses of independent churches can generally be overcome by developing networks of churches. Networking is built upon informal relationships of trust, not necessarily upon formal structures. People work best with people they trust; they trust people they know; they know people with whom they spend time.

Stephen Covey suggests there is a Maturity Continuum through which one progresses from dependence to independence to interdependence.[1] The progression model can be applied to individuals and organizations. A church, for example, may begin in dependence upon another church or church planting agency. In that stage, the church says, "*You* take care of me." As the same church matures and becomes totally self-supporting, it could be classified as independent. In this stage, it says, "I make the choices; I am responsible." The church may move on to becoming interdependent as it looks for ways to share with other churches and in turn be encouraged by them. The interdependent church says, "We can learn and do more by combining our efforts."

To be interdependent and to work together, we must trust one another. To trust one another, we must know one another. To know one another we must spend time with one another. It is unrealistic to think that all the independent churches in Wisconsin could relate to each other. Clusters of churches relating to each other are possible primarily within sensible geographical areas.

Wisconsin Church Extension (WCE) is a church planting and

church helps mission of the Wisconsin Regional of IFCA International (formerly Independent Fundamental Churches of America). In order for WCE to encourage relational networking among independent churches, a biblical and theological base must first be established. If relational networking is going to develop *between* churches, it is important to understand that relational networking must also take place *within* churches. The organizational structure map needs to be rethought so the church can function as it should. The key element in the organizational structure is functional, servant leadership. Adjusting the mindset and model of leadership is the first step in changing the cultural mindset of church ministry.

Church Organizational Structure

George Peters, missiologist and former distinguished professor of World Missions at Dallas Theological Seminary, asks a deep, probing question after a powerful statement about church organizational structures.

> At no time, however, has the church seriously sought to structure itself for an all-out *offensive warfare* against paganism and for the evangelization of its total community and the world. What kind of structure will be demanded to transform and mobilize the church into a dynamic, functioning, evangelizing force in a world of radically different peoples and cultures?[2]

Without trying to bash the organizational structures of today, one needs to step back and ask questions about the organizational structure of most churches. Peters asks, "Is church growth actually related to structure and organization"?[3] Any organism has organization. God's Word pictures the church as a body and a vine. Correct organizational structures certainly enhance growth. Wrong organizational structures hinder growth. Many churches may have begun with a structure that was fluid and flexible because the church was small. Generally speaking, small churches thrive on personal relationships. Numerical growth without appropriate organizational and cultural changes can lead the church into becoming a structural statue, paralyzed when it comes to achieving effective ministry. Peters suggests there is an appropriate tension between "functionalism (i.e., organism) and structuralism (i.e., organization)."[4] A corpse has

structure but no functions. A living, functioning body may be subject to uncontrollable motions or uncoordinated motions that render it ineffective in terms of its activity. Effective ministry stops if function or structure are taken to extremes.

Historically, churches tend to be cast into four organizational structures: episcopal, presbyterian, congregational, and brethren. Some churches are organizational mixtures. None of the forms of organization are, in themselves, wrong. The critical factor in any organization is leadership. If the leadership is godly and good, any organizational structure will work assuming general biblical parameters. Peters asks an important question. ". . .is He (God) exhausted in these four forms of church structures when He is the creator of thousands of varieties of birds, fish and flowers"?[5]

As much as today's church leaders might avoid acknowledging it, churches are organized according to cultural, business, and traditional practices. When most Bible school students learn about church organization, they see the typical pyramid, hierarchical structure charts with neat boxes and straight lines (see Gangel's book *Leadership for Christian Education*, 1970, p.56–57 for four such charts). The United States entered the Industrial Age in the 1800's. Organizational forms and structures were developed largely by businesses. Military organizations also contributed to the hierarchical chain of command model. Many of the evangelical and fundamental churches in America that began in the 1930's through 1960's had/have leaders and members who fought in World War II. They worked in hierarchical, bureaucratic businesses where people stayed within their department and they knew who was boss. Some church constitutions are set up with systems of checks and balances similar to the United States government so no one group has complete power.

Since the church is pictured as a body in scripture, why do we not see church organizational charts resembling the body diagrams in the encyclopedia, where all the systems are shown through the help of transparent overlays? Recently I was given an organizational chart of a church. It places the decision-makers at the top of each of the various ministries, but it did not resemble a body in which the functional systems interacted with each other. Since business has the lines of authority in the hierarchical forms, those who organize churches feel compelled to picture the church the same way. It is a cultural mindset.

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The Development of Functional Servant Leaders: vital to relational networks

Through a study of servanthood in the Bible, a person can make the following two simple observations in defining a servant: 1) He is someone who does not have his own agenda. 2) He submits to and works for someone who has the authority to set the agenda. On the other hand, one could say a leader is someone who influences others to want to go in a particular direction and people are, indeed, following his influence. Leaders can be influential both positively and negatively as Nehemiah and Jereboam illustrate respectively. To speak of a "servant leader" is not double talk. The concepts of service and leadership are not on opposite ends of a line spectrum.

Jesus is the model of a servant leader. He modeled servanthood as He repeatedly said, "I came to do the Father's will." (John 4:34; 6:38) Although He served people, Jesus never allowed them to dictate the program. He submissively worked for the Father to accomplish His program. The Father's plan included Jesus equipping and empowering men to carry on after Jesus ascended to heaven. Jesus modeled leadership as He influenced others towards a desire to do the Fathers' will. He accomplished this by the force of His personal character, integrity, purpose, and zeal. Through personal study and interaction with others I have concluded that the biblical servant leader is one who: 1) is secure in his position as a servant (Phil. 2:5ff); 2) understands that he is God's servant, not men's servant; 3) works to carry out God's plan by influencing people toward a desire to accomplish God's goals; and 4) equips and empowers them to do so.

Jesus gives the real key to functional leadership in Luke 22:25–27.

> And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.'" But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? *But I am among you as the one who serves.* (NASV) (Italics mine)

In this pointed statement, He laid down the pattern. Jesus asked a rhetorical question, gave the expected answer, but then

made a monumental change. True greatness is found in following Jesus' example—*"But I am among you as the one who serves."* A great leader is one who is among people serving them. The word "among" moves leadership from mere decision making to functional serving. Leaders serve by casting vision, equipping, correcting, supplying resources, encouraging, and removing obstacles. Leading is done relationally and influentially among people; position, decisions, and edicts do not necessarily do it. Relational leadership makes it possible for a church board to make a decision on Monday night and have it totally reversed by the "informal leadership core" before Sunday morning. Humility, honoring others, and being among people are ingredients of servant leadership.

Members of church boards are considered church leaders, but they are seldom among the people and they often practice reactive leadership. Reactive leadership concentrates on solving problems. Leaders need to be competent enough to set the direction of the church. Monthly board meetings take time. Could it not be said that much of what is discussed in board meetings should be decided at ministry levels? Below the executive level exists the ministry level, which is comprised of the committee or program leaders that actually lead a particular ministry. A couple of elders could be present to give guidance in those ministry meetings. Churches have a vague understanding of the role and function of elders and deacons, but tradition insists they meet monthly to handle the business of the church. Often biblical leadership is not taking place. Men may be committed to their church and its ministries, but their level of competent leadership must rise substantially. Church leaders must be reading and sharing ideas from what they have read to stay current in church leadership. Church leaders must also see the "big picture" of ministry.

Vague thinking also lurks in churches about the role of pastors. Pastors possess different gift mixes. A pastor may be a good pastor/ teacher, a pastor/counselor, a pastor/evangelist, or a pastor/shepherd, but he is probably not gifted in all the areas where his congregation would like him to be gifted. He may not possess the leadership skills necessary to frame the vision and lead the church board through strategic ministry planning sessions. Such churches may be like moving ships without rudders.

Two questions based on principles from Acts 6 may be legit-

imately asked of each pastor and church board member: 1) What are the spheres of ministry in which you are equipped (competent) and burdened (committed) to serve? 2) Will the members of the church board allow one another and their pastor(s) to serve in those spheres without being encumbered by activities that are sure to hinder effective ministry? Some churches have too many ministries without competent leadership for those ministries. **Doing less more effectively may actually result in doing more.** It is the responsibility of church leaders to help one another honestly assess these two questions. The ministry can then be built on the competency and commitment of its leaders. After all, which makes more sense; to have an elder sitting in a four-hour board meeting or to have him among a group of people leading them in ministry?

A pastor may be among his church board, but if he is not treated with respect, genuine leadership will be difficult. Some church boards see their pastor as just "one of the boys" rather than as a leader among leaders. The pastor or pastoral staff generally has two main advantages over church board members: training and time. Very few church board members have had the level of specialized training pastors have had. When it comes to skills and understanding, virtually any man who devotes 40 to 70 hours per week to his business will have an edge over someone who devotes only 10 hours per month. Pastors think "church" all the time. While their leadership skills may be lacking, their assessment of their congregation's needs is generally good.

Leadership is empowering people to fulfill their giftedness to accomplish the common goal. A leader is ". . . able to influence others spiritually only because the Spirit is able to work in and through him to a greater degree than in those whom he leads."[6] Leaders are responsible for 1) the effectiveness of an organization; 2) the preservation of its integrity; 3) the organization's stability and purpose in a changing world.[7] Leaders have the capacity to help their organization move closer to its goals. If pastors and church boards have never formulated a vision or goals, one would have to ask, "Why have leaders since we are not going anywhere?" Ministries without servant leaders become counter-productive. Counter-productivity is identified by the following characteristics: personnel stress and burnout, wasted personal and financial resources, lack of enthusiasm, no recruitment of

new workers, entrapment in programs, mediocrity, and discouragement.

The Point: Church leadership and church organization need to be rethought. The roles of the pastors, elders, and deacons should reflect the need to be *serving among* the people. Leadership can not be divorced from relationships, but it is possible to have organizational structures in place that hinder relationship building. The levels, or groups, in which leaders serve, will vary greatly according to the needs of the ministry. When networking connects leaders with groups or teams of people, decisions can be made, care can be given, and equipping can be done. Networking attempts to put the right people together for the right purposes to get God's work done effectively and efficiently.

Definition of Relational Networking

How does servant leadership fit into relational networking? Networking is a catchall word that can refer to connecting multiple computers or to organizations becoming more interdependent. Simply stated, networking is ". . . the open asking for and sharing of ideas, experience and information. . ." between people and/or organizations.[8] Colin Hastings, in his book *The New Organization: Growing the Culture of Organizational Networking*, describes the four dimensions of networking which I have modified slightly and listed in the following table.[9]

Four Dimensions of Networks

Dimension	Core Networking Process	Purpose
1. Internally driven	Networking *within* an organization	Crossing internal boundaries
2. Externally driven	Networking *between* organizations	Successful partnership
3. Technology driven	Hard networks	Connecting computers
4. People driven	Soft networks	Connecting people

Networking is built on trust in relationships. Servant leadership is first related to dimension number 4—connecting people and then dimension number 1—crossing internal boundaries. Technology enhances communication if the relationship has been established, but technology does not build relationships. Networking can be a way of thinking and picturing relationships.

Gene Getz examined Jesus' one hundred eighty-four com-munication situations in the Gospels. Getz comments that Jesus' ministry was balanced among many groups of people. He then makes the observation that, "In reality He spent nearly 100 per-cent of His time with the twelve."[10] He reasons that as Jesus car-ried out his ministry, the twelve were with him most of the time. The apostles saw, heard, and experienced, first hand, virtually all of Jesus' life, His teachings, His actions, His conversations, peo-ple's conversations, actions and reactions for about three and a half years.[11] Jesus was a servant leader among the twelve, among the disciples, and among the multitudes. *The first step of internal relational networking is leadership among people.*

An Old Testament Example of a Possible Network Model

We tend to picture those in authority as being above the group. While the picture may be correct, it leaves out the person-al relationship dimension of leadership, namely, being accessible among the people. The traditional chain of command tends to place barriers between the levels whether intentional or not. Is it possible to illustrate organization with the network model?

Exodus 18

Moses

Traditional Model

Leader of 1,000 works with 10 leaders of 100

Leader of 100 works with 2 leaders of 50

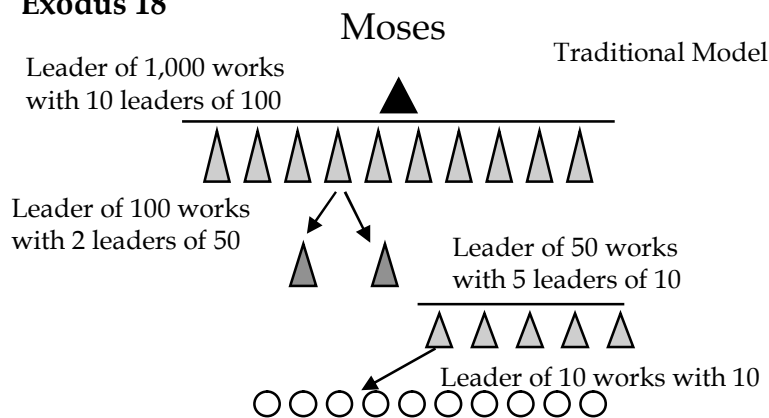Leader of 50 works with 5 leaders of 10

Leader of 10 works with 10

Figure 1

In Exodus 18, Moses was tired from judging the people. Jeth-ro suggested appointing leaders over the people by 1,000's, 100's, 50's, and 10's. Leaders were to be godly and wise men. They were to judge minor disputes while major cases would be

brought to Moses. Deuteronomy 1:9–18 indicates that the men were chosen by the people in their respective tribes and appointed by Moses as leaders. We normally picture the organization as shown in figure 1.

The diagram would have to be multiplied about 1300 times if we assume that there were over 1.2 million adults in the nation of Israel. While there is nothing wrong with the above diagram, it is possible to show the structure with a networking model shown in figure 2.

Leaders among the people, but having wider scopes of responsibility and authority.
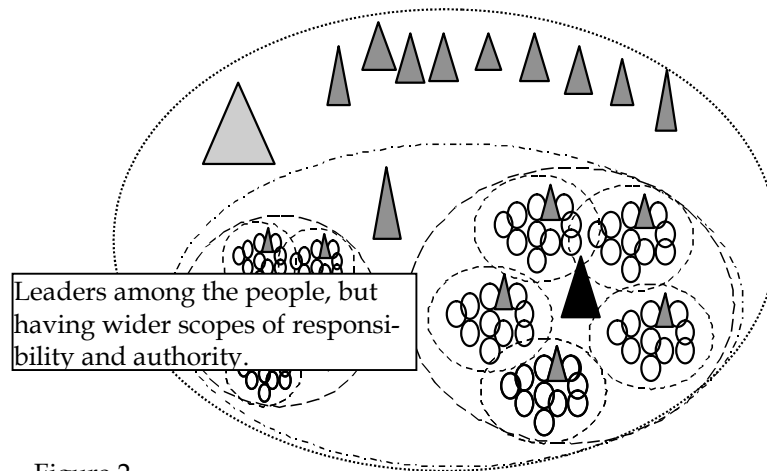
Figure 2

If the leader of ten needed to talk to the leader of the thousand, would he have to go through the leaders of fifty and one hundred first? The Bible does not give enough information. Relational networking cuts across "boundaries." If the leader of the thousand is the one to make the decision, then the leader of ten needs to talk directly to him. The leader of the thousand works with one hundred thirty other leaders: 10 leaders of 100's, 20 leaders of 50's, and 100 leaders of 10's.

The function of these men was to judge between their brethren in disputes. It appears they were *among* the people. At any given time one hundred thirty-one judges were available to handle the disputes of one thousand people; a 1:8 ratio. These leaders were not in administrative positions pushing paper; they were *all* functional. Four people representing the four levels could have one conversation about a dispute and decide it

should go to Moses. If the cases had to be tried at four levels before Moses would handle the dispute, the case backlog would have been indescribable. Jethro was trying to expedite the system of hearing disputes, not build a bureaucracy.

Many organizational charts place leaders on lines above committees or programs. Such charts often portray authority more than they do responsibility, scope of influence, communication webs, and how ministries intersect with each other. The charts may not look as neat without the square boxes and straight lines. The scripture is very clear that leadership is not without authority. Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles, while not downplaying their authority, used the servant leader approach of being among the people to equip and empower them to do God's will.

Relationships between New Testament Churches

Local churches in the New Testament were autonomous, but demonstrate some linkage with each other. Webster's 1973 New Collegiate Dictionary defines independent as, "not dependent, not subject to the control of others, not relying on others, acting and thinking for oneself, not swayed by another's influence, self directing, and not associating with or relying upon a larger group" (p.584). By this definition, the churches were not independent.

David Hesselgrave suggests two types of relationships that bound the New Testament churches together. The first type was authority. The center of authority was in Jerusalem for many years because the apostles were there. The Jerusalem church took the initial oversight to see that things were in order in Samaria (Acts 8), with the Gentiles (Acts 11), and when Paul began his ministry to the Gentiles (Gal. 2). The second type of relationship revolved around *koinonia*—obligations of being in the body of Christ belonged to churches and individuals.[12]

The following sampling of verses and summaries reflect the interdependence of the churches.

- Acts 9:32—The church shared itinerant teachers and apostles. Peter traveled through Judea, Samaria, and Galilee teaching and preaching.

- Acts 11:22—The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas, a skilled teacher and encourager, to help a new group of

believers. Barnabas sought out Paul's help and stayed in Antioch a full year ministering to the church.

☐ Acts 11:29 — Prophets came from the Jerusalem church to the Antioch church. They must have had the general freedom to approach the church and present their message. The church at Antioch sent relief money to the believers in Jerusalem because of a famine. Barnabas and Saul delivered the money to the Jerusalem elders.

☐ Acts 15:1 — Churches from Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia sent men to Jerusalem to debate, discuss, and decide a doctrinal issue with the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church. The churches fully expected that the leaders would resolve the issue of salvation and circumcision, as well as communicate the decision to them.

☐ Acts 15:22f. — Churches were addressed via letter carried by reputable leaders who would explain the letter and the Jerusalem decision orally among the brethren in churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The believers at Antioch who heard the letter rejoiced at the encouragement. It appears that they would be governed by a decision that was made outside the bounds of their local church.

☐ Acts 15:41 — Churches enjoyed the itinerant ministry of the apostles and sent financial support so work could be carried on elsewhere (see Phil 4:15–16).

☐ Romans 16:1; Titus 3:13 — Brothers and sisters in Christ were commended and churches were to assist them with whatever they needed. See also 3 John 5–8 where John commends Gaius for his assistance to itinerant ministers.

☐ Romans 16:23 — The churches sent greetings to one another.

☐ 2 Corinthians 8:19 — Churches appointed men to special tasks beyond the ministry of the local church. These men were well known among many churches, not just within a particular local church.

☐ Galatians 1:1 — Paul wrote this letter to a group of

churches within a particular region.

☐ Titus 1:5—Paul asked Titus to appoint elders in every city on Crete. It would appear that Titus had oversight of a group of churches on the island.

The churches enjoyed fellowship, shared teachers, entertained the itinerant workers, made decisions about doctrine and practice, appointed men to special tasks, contributed money for needs, and communicated with each other via letters. Part of the linkage between churches came from personal relationships that had been built.

The Point: The New Testament churches did not stand as independent islands throughout the Roman Empire. There were identifiable links between them. The links were often through their leaders–the elders and deacons.

Church Planting by Teamwork

Relational networking involves bringing people together in teams to accomplish projects. Jesus said He would build His church (Mt 16:18). The church is God's primary instrument for accomplishing His work in this age. While His two other institutions (family and government) are important, He did not specifically say He would build those. The book of Acts demonstrates that the church crosses all family, cultural, racial, ethnic, geographic and governmental lines.

In the book of Acts, Luke records the planting of local churches in many places. The references below support the team concept.

Church Planting by Teamwork

Location References Planting Team

1. Jerusalem Acts 2:41–47: Peter, the 11, the 120, Acts 1:15

2. Samaria cf. Acts 9:31: Philip, Peter, John Acts 8:5, 12, 25

3. Antioch Acts 11:19ff: unnamed brethren, Barnabas and Paul

4. Philippi Acts 16:12f: Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke

It appears that the New Testament method of church planting is based upon a team ministry not solo effort. While God has

used an individual or a couple to begin a church in their community, the better plan may be to use a gifted team to plant a church.

A team pulls together people with a variety of spiritual gifts. The gifts of evangelist, teacher, leader, helps, pastor, to name a few, would be very helpful in beginning a new church. Since no one person has all the gifts, it makes sense to develop a team of gifted people. A team has personal chemistry between its members. Personal differences can ruin a ministry team, but if used well, they can be a real asset.

Relational networking involves understanding your own giftedness and abilities in an honest way. It moves a step further by saying, "Here is the contribution I can make to this project." The Holy Spirit sovereignly gives gifts to people and moves them into relationships with each other. Teams consist of gifted people who handle the public part of ministry and gifted people who handle behind the scene ministry.

Oversight of a Group of Churches is a Legitimate Ministry

Relational networking moves outside of a local church when the church involves itself with other churches and people. Networks, by their nature, have leaders. Paul instructed Titus to "set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city" . . . on Crete (Titus 1:5). Titus did not set up a denominational hierarchy, but he was involved in the oversight of a number of churches. The phrase "set in order" is the Greek word "epidiorthoo." The word means "to restore what had fallen into disorder or to set right what was defective."[13]

Titus was a part of each church's external network. It is not known specifically what measure of authority he had over the churches. As was mentioned previously, leadership can be positional or influential. Titus exercised his influence through relationships. He provided leadership to the churches that had fallen into disorder. From the rest of Paul's letter to him, it appears he sustained a ministry with the churches after he appointed the elders. Paul exhorts him to remind people of doctrinal truths and to practice good deeds.

Paul traveled with other men visiting the churches to strengthen them through teaching, encouragement, exhortation, and fellowship. The itinerant men were not part of the local churches they visited, but carried on beneficial ministries to the

churches. They were part of the external network. The church at Corinth sent people with a letter to Paul because the church was having problems. Paul had apostolic authority *and* the personal relationship with the people to deal with the problems in Corinth. While recognizing Paul's special authority, it must also be acknowledged that churches in any generation have the liberty and responsibility to turn to wise and godly counselors when they are having problems.

In our generation, churches occasionally fall into disorder because of a variety of problems. Churches may also need help when they are without a pastor. Sometimes they need objectivity or specialization that their own leaders can not supply. Churches do not have to be part of a denomination to benefit by oversight.

A local church simply needs to list godly and gifted individuals outside their church to whom they can and will turn as resource persons when the occasion arises. Obviously, the closer the personal relationship of trust, the more effective ministry can be. Within a given area pastors and churches generally know individuals who can help them. Changing the mindset to ask for help is much more the problem than the availability of helpers.

The Point: The general oversight of a group of churches in an area is a legitimate ministry and it is possible among independent churches. Titus' example and ministry on Crete is a strong argument for someone external to the organization of the local church to have a ministry among local churches.

Local Churches are Systemic Entities

Local churches are often referred to as bodies, but are rarely viewed as systemic entities or as a whole. In this section, *church* will mean local assembly unless otherwise specified. The church is not simply a group of saved people who have gathered together. We tend to see churches as individuals, rather than the community as a whole. Churches have distinct characteristics, personality, history, culture, and life experiences much like people have. R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins present a very challenging systems approach to congregational leadership in their book, The *Equipping Pastor*. One of the principles of a living system is wholeness.

> The principle of wholeness relates to the basic systems idea that the different parts that compose the system form a single organic whole that can be seen as such alt-

hough the parts are still distinguishable. As a whole unit, a family can be described as: humorous, serious, hard working, playful. Similarly, a local congregation can take on a corporate life that can be defined: casual, formal, playful, or wounded. Imagine a formal, super serious and patriarchal pastor trying to join a church that is informal, playful and egalitarian. In joining a church, leaders must attend to the whole and not merely the individual members.[14]

The wholeness or systemic approach of dealing with local churches as whole units is visible in the New Testament. Paul characterized the Corinthian church as carnal. Jesus addressed a variety of systemic behavioral problems in the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. He characterized the Laodicean church as lukewarm, the Philadelphian church as somewhat weak, the Ephesian church as orthodox, and the Smyrnan church as a suffering church.

Churches systemically possess personality traits or characteristics. If given a list, most pastors or congregations could pick out three or four dominant characteristics that describe their church. People also know the reputations and characteristics of churches around them.

The Epistles do not read as a list of directions to individuals. In Paul's letters to churches, he occasionally addresses individuals, but for the most part, he is addressing the church as a whole unit. Steven and Collins aptly describe the work of the apostles and early church leaders in the following contemporary way:

> The function of the pastor-leader in the living system of the church is to direct the whole body to the end that the parts of the church mesh with one another and exercise mutual care and help so that in the interaction the whole body grows. Within the church system, this results in an important paradox: The most effective leader will become increasingly less visible as the functioning of the system becomes more effective and manifest.[15]

Stevens and Collins suggest the passage in Ephesians 4 gives

a systemic definition of church growth: growth into unity (4:13); growth into maturity as a community (4:13); growth into individual theological maturity so the mem-

bers are able to distinguish truth from error themselves (4:14); growth in love-motivated truth speaking (4:15); growth in dependence on Christ the Head of the church (4:15–16) and growth in mutual enrichment (4:16).[16]

We are quick to encourage individuals to use their spiritual gifts and life experiences to benefit the whole local body, but seldom are local church bodies encouraged to use their strengths, gifts, and life experiences for the benefit of other churches. What life experiences do churches go through over twenty or thirty years? The following questions focus on a few church life experiences.

☐ What were the circumstances of the founding of the church? The answer to this question will reveal a proactive or reactive start. It will also reveal why the church is organized as it is. I have contact with a church that was begun as a result of a split from another church. The church organizational structure and initial philosophy of ministry was seriously flawed. About six years have passed since its founding. While the overall ministry is substantially better, the church still walks with a limp that may be correctable over time.

☐ How long have pastors stayed and what has been the search process? If pastors have stayed for many years in a stable ministry, it is likely there is something about the church leadership that contributes to the stability. If the church has a good search process, they are more likely to get pastors that will be "a good fit." The pastoral search process is one of the major weaknesses of independent churches.

☐ Has the church gone through a split? What were the reasons? How has the church recovered? Some churches go through splits and never fully recover. Other churches recover and the ministry becomes very fruitful. But why? A church that goes through a split needs to talk with leaders from other churches who have recovered from a split to learn the recovery process.

☐ What is the conflict resolution process of a church? Every church will eventually go through conflicts. Churches

seldom have a process in place that has been taught to the people by the leaders. Without a process to resolve problems, a church can be like a body with broken bones that have not been properly set. A wounded church is dangerous.

☐   Did the church build a building? What was the process? Most churches, at some point, build their own building. In the process, the people learn things. I presently know of at least four churches that have built in the last two years and three who are anticipating building within the year. When buildings are completed, it is inevitable that those involved in the building will say, "We wish we would have done this or that." While not wanting to make cookie cutter churches, it would certainly be wise for those who will be building to talk to those who just finished. They should find out what could have been done differently before their own designs are set.

Relational networking focuses on church leadership. It would likely be the leaders who could put together the answers to the above questions. It should be the leaders of one church seeking the answers to their questions from other church leaders, i.e., pastors, elders, deacons and others as the case dictates. The men who sit on church boards may be individually mature believers, but their collective knowledge and skill reservoir of how to run a church may be shallow. Some church boards do not look outside of their own church for help for any combination of the following reasons: 1) they lack a teachable spirit; 2) they do not know who to turn to for help; 3) they do not know they can go outside their church for help; and 4) they do not know they need help. It is not a sign of weakness to go to others for counsel, assistance, objectivity, or accountability. At times, church leaders are too close to their own situation to maintain objectivity. Some instances are fully charged with emotions. People who are outside the situation and not emotionally involved are often able to see things quite clearly. Perspective enables people to ask the right questions and give the right counsel.

Each church should develop an external network map. The question is simple: to whom do we go to for _____? There may be only one person for some things, but a variety of people for other things. Maybe an empty chair in board meetings

would remind men that there are people available to be re-sources to them who are not present in their meeting.

The Point: Churches are systemic entities and bear testimonies of their life as a whole unit. If a church struggles, it does so as a body; if a church has successes, it does so as a body. Church leaders need to be intentional about asking for assistance from experienced leaders in other churches who can help them with specific matters. The result would be that churches would prosper in better health and other leaders who have already walked that path would encourage leaders.

In Summary: Changes must be made in order to see pastors and churches develop relational networking. While giving the theological and biblical base, we have also uncovered some of the necessary characteristics that follow:

- Functional servant leadership involves being among the people. Leadership needs a conceptual and practical overhaul in most churches.

- The predominant mental model of organization in churches is hierarchical and bureaucratic. Unless new mental models are adopted, pastors and church leaders will perpetuate that with which they are most comfortable and familiar.

- Another mental model that needs to be addressed is ministry by teamwork and the legitimacy of relationships between autonomous churches.

- A mindset exists within church cultures that says "We are responsible for ourselves and we can handle what concerns us quite nicely, thank you." Some churches develop "functional blindness," a willful ignorance of their problems to the degree that people actually speak of the problems as virtues. Peter Senge, author of the *Fifth Discipline,* says "the eye can not see the eye."[17] In some measure, a church must have someone they trust outside of itself to help the church leaders make an objective assessment and/or help them address needs.

Changing the structure within churches and setting up a program of networking between churches is totally useless, unless there is a powerfully shared vision for what could be ac-

complished and a change in the cultural mindset of pastors and church leaders. The mindset change must move from "island" type independence to becoming a learning organization that is teachable and has something to teach.

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